

The two crucified thieves

Part 1

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[00:00:00] I'm going to read to you a well-known passage from the Gospel of Luke, Luke chapter 23.

Luke chapter 23 and verse 32.

Luke 23 verse 32.

And there were also two others, malefactors, led with him to be put to death. And when they had come to the place which is called Calvary, there they crucified him and the malefactors, one on the right hand and the other on the left. Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

[00:01:03] And they parted his raiment and cast lots. And the people stood beholding, and the rulers also with them derided him, saying, He saved others, let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God. And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him and offering him vinegar, and saying, If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself.

And a superscription also was written over him, in letters of Greek and Latin and Hebrew, This is the king of the Jews.

One of the malefactors, who were hanged, railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.

And the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds, but this man hath done nothing amiss. [00:02:10] And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.

And Jesus said unto him verily, I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise.

And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst. And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.

And having said this, he gave up the ghost.

I suppose the passage of Scripture that I've read to you embraces perhaps the most familiar of the stories of the New Testament.

[00:03:21] And I want to speak to you very simply and directly, mainly about the words that were spoken by the thief. Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And about the reply of the Son of God, today shalt thou be with me in paradise.

I want to speak about three things, essentially.

Firstly, about the power and the willingness of Christ to save. Secondly, about the marks of those who receive the salvation of God.

[00:04:02] And thirdly, about the immensity of the blessing of God.

And then lastly, two very challenging practical issues. I don't know where I picked up these words, but somewhere in reading over the years, I noted someone referring to this. He said, there is one account of an eleventh hour salvation in the Bible. One that no one might despair.

But only one that no one might presume.

I'd like to say right at the beginning of this meeting, if there's somebody thinking about life in front of them, spent doing their own will, and then buried in the back of the mind the idea that at the end of your days you'll turn to Christ, let me say this, what the writer said, once an eleventh hour conversion that no man might presume.

[00:05:08] There's no better opportunity for you to get saved than tonight where you are. It's the only moment that you can call your own. The opportunity and the moment that you have. And right at the beginning I'd like to say, whilst that moment and opportunity are with you, turn to Christ at this moment. He's able and he's willing to save.

I didn't read the verses to you, but had I read to you a little higher up in the previous chapter, I would have read to you words that puzzled me for many years. Read them for years and could never really get a glimmer of light through them until one day, reading in a phrase that someone mentioned not in connection with that, I thought that's what that verse means. [00:06:02] There's most unusual words.

When the Lord had the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane, he said to them, when I sent you out, did you lack anything? They said nothing.

He said, well, now I say to you, he that has no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one. And he that has no script, go out and obtain one.

For the things concerning me have an end. I puzzled over those words for years. And then one day, a comment directing me in the right way, I thought that's what it means. What the Lord Jesus was saying then, every step of the way down here, the disciples could count on unfailing protection and unfailing provision. There was not one thing they needed whilst he was here. [00:07:01] Hence the question that he asked them, when I sent you out, did you lack anything? But the moment had arrived when the Lord Jesus was not going to use that power any longer. He was not only not going to use that power for the disciples, he was not even going to use that power to shield himself.

One iota of all the terrible punishment that sin entailed.

I could not begin to describe really the things that weighed upon the heart and mind of the Son of God at this moment. Just think of them.

He'd been betrayed.

He'd been betrayed by someone upon whom over a period of years he'd lavished his love. In the heat and the pressure of that night, he'd been forsaken by a number of disciples that had bound themselves to him. [00:08:05] He'd watched the nation on whom so many promises rest, the promises of the prophets of old.

He'd seen that nation refuse him. And in refusing him, he warned them about the days that would come.

I read some years ago the account that Josephus gives of the sacking of Jerusalem, the appalling events. Maybe they don't add up to the kind of thing that happened in the appalling holocaust of the last war. But certainly the accounts of Josephus were harrowing. Do you think the Lord Jesus was insensitive to what the nation of Israel would go through? Must have weighed heavily upon his spirit. And I read words to you that convey an even greater burden that it would be impossible to describe in words. [00:09:07] He knew exactly what sin entailed.

Sometimes we sing a hymn about measuring sin's distance. He knew exactly what lay ahead. I could not begin to describe it. Let me say this.

With all those burdens upon his heart and no one felt like the Son of God, his senses, like ours, were never blunted by sin. They were always perfectly and divinely attuned. But one, one man said, Lord, remember me.

He demonstrated his power and his willingness to save with all those things on his mind. He turned and he met him in his need. And let me say that with all that is within me, that that power and that willingness to save is as great tonight as ever it was. [00:10:02] If it was manifested, then it's available for you tonight. It was what marked him every moment of his life. There's not one person that came to him that went away without being blessed. Someone in prayer tonight quoted part of a verse of scripture, the words of the Lord Jesus in the Gospel of John. No man cometh to me except the Father who has sent me draw him.

My mind went to the words, he says, and him that cometh to me, I will in no wise cast out.

There are many in this world who live having feared rejection or experienced it.

Let me say this tonight. With Christ, you'll never experience anything like that. Him that cometh to me, I will in no wise cast out.

[00:11:02] Two thousand years nearly of the day of grace have witnessed it. We may not see the kind of thing that was seen years ago.

I was reminded of this recently. I didn't know that the city that I live in had a very unique connection

with Wesley. And I think it was last year or the year before was Wesley's 250th anniversary.

And they were having a guided tour around the city, pointing out Wesley's connection. And we stood a stone throw from the cathedral.

And the person who was leading it said, just picture, he said here, tumble down property. Three stories high, families of nine and ten in one room. He said the whole area was a picture of degradation, not just physical degradation. [00:12:05] It was a picture of moral degradation.

And Wesley came, in fact, many, many times a day, hundreds of times a day. People pass about 30 yards from that spot and there's a fountain. And if you go around the part which is not facing the road, you read these words. I may not have the date right, by the way, but it says something like this. It says, on this spot at 5 a.m. on the morning of May the 22nd, 1755, John Wesley stood and preached to 5,000 people from the words, he was wounded for our transgression.

If you read the history of Wesley, it says, many were brought to God the power and the willingness of Christ to save. [00:13:03] And he's powerful and willing to save tonight.

If I could impress upon you one of the imperishable truths of the Gospel of God, it would be this. That he's powerful and he's willing to save at this moment. He died to save you. He's waiting to save you. He's able and he's willing to save at this moment. When I was a boy living in the countryside, I came from a very poor family. We had very little money, so our pleasures were very much homestun ones, very much acquainted with the face of nature. I remember noting as a boy, long before I had any personal knowledge of Christ, the immense variety that God had woven into the creation, particularly with birds. I used to watch birds. [00:14:01] The size of birds, the shape of birds, the colours of birds, the size of their nests, the material that they used, the nesting places, the size, the shape, the colour, the marking of the eggs. Infinite variety.

God's not like men. He doesn't produce stereotype things. Everything is individual with the all varied wisdom of God.

I believe that's absolutely so in the way that people are drawn to Christ. I don't think any one person is drawn to Christ in the same way. I heard of a man who was brought to God by a cow licking his hand. Would you believe? It's an encouragement for those of you who work in Sunday schools. I don't know the woman who was involved, but she had the tiny tots.

[00:15:01] And all she tried to do each time she had the children with them, with her, was to write upon their minds one verse or one phrase of scripture.

And a little boy of five or six was with her one day in the verse that they were learning. I would say an obscure verse, really, but this was the verse. The ox knoweth his master, and the ass her master's crib, but Israel knoweth not.

You might think that's a strange verse to teach children. Let me tell you the sequel of it. The man who learned those words grew up.

He grew up a stranger to God, a kindly farmer, I would think, because when he was about 55 years of age, he was tying the cows up one night, and as he bent down to pick up the chain to put round the

cow's neck, [00:16:01] and he put his hand down, the cow licked his hand, and like a flash there came into his mind the words he'd learned as a child in Sunday school. The ox knoweth his master, and the ass her master's crib.

And he said to himself, the cow knows me, and I'm a stranger to God.

Now I've never heard of anybody being brought to God like that before, and I think if we were to take all the stories of those who've been brought to God in this room, they'd be as varied as the infinite variety that God has woven into the creation.

I'm persuaded of that. But this is true that whilst everybody in quite individual ways are drawn to God, there are milestones they took which are always the same. I've never seen them varied. [00:17:01] I was reading a magazine a little earlier today, and someone was writing, and he said, one of the terribly sad things about the day in which we live is that sometimes preachers try to persuade people that they're saved when they're not saved at all. There's no person will get saved except to some degree he's convicted of the fact that he's a sinner. When Paul writes to a Christian company in the New Testament, the Christian company at Colossae, amongst many things he says to them, he says one striking thing in chapter 2, verse 6 I think, he says, As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him.

And I'm absolutely convinced one of the things that he meant was this, that the people who came to Christ said of themselves, if salvation depends upon me, it's all up, I cannot do it, [00:18:05] in my heart of hearts I'm a sinner, I need to be saved.

I was brought up in the High Church of England, and as a boy I was told that I was brought to new birth by being christened.

Many other things. I thought I was a Christian until from the lips of a Welsh Presbyterian lad when I was doing my national service, and I heard the things that he said, and I'll tell you when I heard them the first time, my reaction was not at all the kind of action which I think would bespeak somebody who's been affected by God the Holy Spirit. I said to myself, who's he to try and tell me? And he said to me this, he said, except you're convinced that you're a sinner, you'll never turn to Christ for salvation. [00:19:01] It took six months for those words to burn into my soul, but I reached a point where I said this, if salvation depends upon me, it's all up, I could not do it. To some degree everybody who gets the blessing of God is convicted of the fact that they're sinners in the sight of God, nothing more than that, sinners who need to be saved. But it's equally true there's another milestone that everybody touches, and the milestone is this, that Christ alone is sufficient. That's what the thief came to. He might have said it was a pretty feeble awe that he put in, but when he heard his fellow malefactor on the cross saying, if thou be the Christ of God, save thyself and us, he said to his fellow malefactor, does not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation, [00:20:02] and we indeed justly, but this man hath done nothing amiss.

Marvellous testimony from one and another, from the lips of one and another, God drew adequate testimony to his own dear son.

The person who gets the salvation of God is convinced of this, Christ alone is sufficient. Remember that, and remember the day, the 13th of February, 1953, convinced that I needed to be saved, and not fully persuaded that he was willing, firmly persuaded that he was able. I said, Lord Jesus, save

me, apart from thee I'm absolutely lost.

It's a milestone that everyone touches, that Christ is sufficient. Mind you, it's a good guideline for the Christian too. I'm speaking tonight to someone in whose heart the love of Christ has grown cold, [00:21:04] the voice of the world has become real, the things of time and sense weave their charm around your heart, let me say to you tonight, Christ alone is sufficient, he's absolutely sufficient.

The immensity of the blessing of God.

I can never escape when the thief said to the Lord Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom, but he was saying substantially the kind of thing that one of the psalmists says, I had rather be a housekeeper, a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord than to dwell in the tents of the ungodly. The idea of getting in on the edge of the blessing, [00:22:04] if I can get in on the edge of the blessing, that's sufficient. I always feel that when the thief said that, that's the kind of thing that he was saying, if I get in on the edge of the blessing, that's sufficient for me, it's not sufficient for God. Just listen, about the time of the blessing, the place of the blessing and the character of the blessing of God, and you have to say it's something that's worthy of God alone. I was doing something down at my son's home about four or five months ago, and there was a doorbell. There was a doorbell. She was very smartly dressed, and I said, yes, can I help you? She said, well, we've come about peace, we're interested in peace. [00:23:03] I said, that's good, I'm interested in peace as well, how do we get peace? She says, the kingdom's coming.

They were Jehovah's Witnesses, of course. And I listened to her, and I said, when is the kingdom coming? She said, well, I don't know, she said, but it's coming, and when the kingdom comes, there'll be peace. And I said, open your Bible, Romans chapter 5, and read the first verse. So she opened it, and she read the words, therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God. I'm absolutely amazed at the false face and the fact that they say, it's all in the future. Listen, the salvation of God is present, it's present salvation. If you turn to the Lord Jesus tonight, it's absolutely immediate. Listen to the words of the Lord. [00:24:02] The thief said, when thou comest in kingly glory, it didn't matter how far in the distance it was, however distance it might be, well, when it comes, when kingly glory comes, remember me, the Lord Jesus says to him, today, right at this moment, it might take your lifetime to begin to exhaust what lies in the salvation of God. But the Bible assures us it's today, it's right at this moment. I can remember getting up off my knees when I turned to Christ. I couldn't say my experience was as deep as John Bunyan's when the burden rolled away, but I knew that I was saved, I knew I had the salvation of God, it was immediate.

The character of the salvation, the thief said to the Lord Jesus, he said to him, remember me when thou comest in kingly glory, [00:25:06] comest into thy kingdom, in kingly glory, I think really is the meaning of it.

Now, I wouldn't wish to diminish anybody's appreciation of that coming kingdom.

Marvellous, when all the sad things which have accompanied human kingdoms are gone and gone forever.

When a kingdom is set up which shall never be superseded, and when everything that men have yearned for, by way of plenty and peace, and no prospect whatsoever of war, when the day shall arrive that swords will be beat into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, and they'll not hurt or

destroy in his holy mountain. [00:26:01] I wouldn't wish to diminish for one moment anyone's appreciation of the character of the blessing of God.

Listen to what the Lord Jesus says to the thief, he says, verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me.

Not just on the very edge of blessing, but right in the very centre of it, with the saviour himself.

And the place of the blessing, the Lord Jesus says, today shalt thou be with me in paradise.

Everything that can satisfy the desires of the renewed mind, they'll be there.

When you take them all up and you begin to add them together, you have to say, how immense the blessing of God. It's something that could only be worthy of God himself, not on the fringe of the blessing, but right in the very centre of it. [00:27:03] The blessing of God, it's a bit like the returning prodigal, isn't it? When he was in the far country, he said, yes, a hired servant, that will be sufficient, a hired servant.

But when he turned, got converted, you know, in the far country, when he was on the very horizon, someone saw him. Marvellous thing.

Scripture says the father ran.

It all started with God, you know, himself. It didn't start with you and me, it sprang from the heart of God. When he reached the prodigal, didn't say anything about what had happened, he said, bring forth the best row. We used to have a brother who visited us sometimes on Tyneside, and he used to take the phrase out of that expression, bring forth the best.

Let me say to you tonight and reiterate it with all that is within me, [00:28:01] God has the best in view for you, the very best, nothing short of that, the immensity of the blessing of God.

It's therefore simple faith.

I ought to have said when I was talking about the characteristics of those who receive the blessing of God, it's a matter of simple faith. Needed faith, didn't it, to perceive what the thief said? The Lord Jesus, hanging by his side on the cross, and he speaks about kingly glory. Lord, remember me when thou comest in kingly glory.

It's a matter of simple faith.

And when simple faith is exercised in the Lord Jesus, the blessing of God will follow immediately. Every one of us here, saved by his grace, would endorse that, the blessing of God is immediate.

[00:29:04] There are two things I want to say, maybe one other thing as well.

Going back to what I said earlier about Wesley, the person who was going round, obviously a believer, and I would imagine many in the company were not believers that night, he said, you may not be surprised, but he said, when the people who lived in these houses received Christ, it made a

dramatic impact.

He said the established church were not very happy about that and they tried to upset his work.

And so they went into the area and they began to oppose his preaching. One day, in a confrontation, one of them said to Wesley, what proof have you got that the gospel that you preach is the gospel of God? [00:30:04] He couldn't argue with his answer. He said, the people who receive the gospel that I preach die well.

Very often we bury those who have believed in the Lord Jesus, but we bury them in the sure knowledge that they've gone straight away to be with the Lord. Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.

Tremendous comfort in that.

Out of all the extremity that often marks people here, out of all the sadness that afflicts them, sometimes out of the ravages of disease, into the immediate bliss of his own presence, absent from the body and present with the Lord. My boss, who's just moved away, was a Roman Catholic, and sometimes when I was talking to him and no one else was around, [00:31:06] I would say to him, Mike, if you died at this moment, where would you go? A dilemma for him.

Not a dilemma for the Christian at all. The words of the Lord Jesus shed a flood of light upon it, absent from the body, present with the Lord.

Two challenging things.

Firstly, the incident that I've read to you says this very plainly.

Some get saved.

And some are lost.

There's a question in one of the prophets. It says, the sinners in Zion are afraid.

Who among us will dwell with the devouring fire?

[00:32:06] Who among us will dwell with the everlasting flame?

I would be dishonest if I didn't say to you that if you pass out of time into eternity without Christ, and the Lord Jesus didn't mince matters at all, he said plainly, there's a hell to be avoided at all costs.

Some get saved.

And some are lost.

And the other thing is this. At this moment, you're a hare-bred maternity.

I'm not saying this just because of experiences like the one that I'm going to relate to you, but there's

another reason why I say it. We live in a world today where people are tremendously conscious [00:33:03] of being healthy.

I'm not saying anything against being healthy. Certainly, it's commended for a Christian, a healthy body wherewith wholeheartedly to serve the Lord. I had a colleague who was conscious of this. He didn't drink.

He didn't smoke.

He didn't eat things that were not beneficial. He walked about half an hour each dinner time, and sometimes I would go with him and I would struggle to keep in his wake. And I can remember us playing as a pike staff the Friday afternoon. He was a great fell-walker.

And this is a year past February. Friday afternoon at 3 o'clock, I used to look after his work when he was away and he was not going to be in on the Monday. He came in about 3.

He said, just had some marvellous news, he said. The snow on the top of Scorfell for the first time this winter. [00:34:05] I can't wait, he said, to get my boots in the snow on the top of Scorfell. And he left me some instructions and he went away. I walked in on the Monday morning and my boss walked in. He said, I have some dreadful news for you.

He said, John died on the top of Scorfell on Saturday at 3 o'clock.

And I spoke later, so somebody was with him. And he said, he put his hand down and he said, I've got a touch of cramp.

And that's the moment he slumped in the snow. You're a hairbreadth from eternity, the destiny of your precious soul. A hairbreadth from eternity. I don't say it in the light of that, life is uncertain. And sometimes with shattering abruptness people are launched out of time into eternity. [00:35:02] I say it particularly in the light of this, Jesus is coming.

If you sit down and enumerate the kind of marks that are spoken in Scripture about his appearing in glory.

In fact, if my memory serves me correctly, it's Edward Dennett in one of his preambles to one of his books who says something like this. I think it's maybe in Daniel. He says something like this. He says, three things to be fulfilled for Daniel 9 to take place. Daniel 9, the prophecy of the 70 weeks, the last week of prophecy that speaks of the appearing. 70 years are determined upon my people to finish transgression, to make an end of sin, to make reconciliation for iniquity and bring in everlasting righteousness, the appearing of Christ in glory. [00:36:03] He says three things. Firstly, Israel has to be back in the land. And mind you, he didn't think that Israel would be back in the land when the church was here. I think he would be flabbergasted to be here tonight when 42 years passed. Israel has been in the hands of the Jew. Secondly, they have to have the temple site. Thirdly, there has to be an ordered system of sacrifice and worship. First to have fulfilled, and if any of you read any of the periodicals that emanate from those bodies that are concerned about the spreading of the gospel amongst the Jews, you'll know that it is reported on pretty firm ground that all the material for the temple is ready, just waiting to be used. The appearing of the Lord Jesus is on the doorstep. If his appearing in glory is on the doorstep, how much nearer is coming for you and for me. [00:37:05] This

moment, time and opportunity are on your side. It's the day of God's grace.

He's powerful and he's willing to save, and we come full circle to that. I'd like to leave that ringing in your ears. He's able and he's willing to save. And whilst time and opportunity are on your side, turn to him in simple faith.