

Good Friday

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Today You Will Be With Me In Paradise

March 29th, 2024

Luke 23:39-43

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

During Holy Week we have the opportunity to revisit the central narratives of the Christian faith and of course there is nothing more central to Christianity than the story of Jesus dying on the cross to save sinners. That is the heart of the heart of the heart of what we believe. The Apostle Paul said:

“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.” (1 Timothy 1:15 ESV)

Can you say amen to that this morning?

Amen.

Jesus Christ came into the world to save SINNERS – of whom I am the foremost. That is my testimony; that is my faith and that is the faith that is remembered and celebrated in the story we have just read from Luke’s Gospel. I want to zoom in on one aspect of that story in particular that highlights this central tenant of our faith. It is a story you know well. We often refer to it as the story of the Thief on the Cross, but of course, it is really a story about Jesus. Hear again verses 39-43 of Luke 23:

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” 40 But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” 42 And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” 43 And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:39-43 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Well, as I mentioned earlier, this is a well-known and MUCH-LOVED STORY, but it can also be a DANGEROUS STORY in the wrong hands. There is a certain sort of person who will see in this story a justification for living a life of rebellion only to make a death bed profession of faith in the final moments of life. They’ll see in this story a way to “have your cake and eat it too” – as Grandma used to say - getting the most out of this life while still qualifying, albeit by the skin of your teeth – for the world to come. There may be people who try to do that, but is that what is going on here with the thief on the cross?

There are several details in the story that require us to reject that interpretation. Let me take a moment and walk you through them.

How Can We Know If His Conversion Was Authentic?

First of all, there was an observable change in this man’s behaviour.

1. There was an observable change in his behaviour

In Matthew’s Gospel we learn that earlier in the day the thief on the cross had been joining in with the all the other people who had been mocking and reviling Jesus. Matthew 27:39-44 says:

And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads 40 and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” 41 So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, 42 “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we

will believe in him. 43 He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” 44 And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way. (Matthew 27:39-44 ESV)

The thief on the cross began the day as a scoffer. The Bible has nothing good to say about scoffers. The Book of Proverbs says:

“Scoffer” is the name of the arrogant, haughty man who acts with arrogant pride. (Proverbs 21:24 ESV)

The devising of folly is sin, and the scoffer is an abomination to mankind. (Proverbs 24:9 ESV)

A scoffer is the worst type of human – according to Proverbs. A scoffer is that person who doesn’t DO ANYTHING but they are experts at mocking and criticising others. Scoffers tear down – without ever building anything up. Scoffers sniff out mistakes and weakness but they are BLIND to all that is good and noble.

That’s who this man was at the start of the day – and then God opened his eyes and he saw Jesus! And SEEING JESUS he was marvellously CHANGED. He did a complete 180. He went from MOCKING JESUS TO DEFENDING JESUS. He began to REBUKE those who were REVILING THE LORD. He said to the OTHER thief on the cross:

“Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” (Luke 23:40-41 ESV)

That is a remarkable change! In the space of a couple of hours this man went from DERIDING JESUS to DEFENDING JESUS. He went from WAGGING HIS HEAD in SCORN to BOWING HIS HEAD in worship – a change like that DEMANDS an explanation. A change like that strongly argues that this man had been touched by the grace of God.

SAVED PEOPLE CHANGE!

Not SOME saved people, not MOST saved people – ALL SAVED PEOPLE CHANGE. The Apostle Paul said:

we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18 ESV)

The best evidence that a person has been truly saved and filled with the Holy Spirit of God is CHANGE by one degree of glory to the next into the same image as Jesus Christ. This man obviously didn't have enough time to manifest MULTIPLE DEGREES of change, but in the few hours of faith that he had the change in him was observable and remarkable – thanks be to God!

We've got an an observable change in this man's behaviour and ALSO a clear conviction of sin – and that too argues for the reality of his conversion.

2. There was a clear conviction of sin

Look again at verses 40-41:

“Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” (Luke 23:40-41 ESV)

Do you not fear God? Are you not thinking about the fact that in just a few hours you will be standing before your Maker to give an account for how you have lived your life? Is this really how you want to go out? Do you want MOCKING THE MESSIAH to be the last thing recorded in the logbook of your life?

Wake up man! And think about the future!

Clearly, the thief on the cross was experiencing the inner conviction of the Holy Spirit. His sins were being HELD UP before his eyes. That's part of what the Holy Spirit DOES in order to work salvation in a human soul. Speaking about the ministry of the Holy Spirit Jesus said:

“when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8 ESV)

One of the surest signs that God has begun to STIR SALVATION in you is when you begin to think seriously about sin, death and judgment. Now, often, in terms of our experience, it is sickness, disease and impending death that opens the windows of our souls, as it were, to the action and influence of the Holy Spirit – and that’s what we see here. Hanging on the cross has opened the windows of this man’s soul and the wind of the Spirit has blown in and all of the sudden he is seeing ALL HIS SIN. Like a movie that he can’t turn off he is seeing ever crime committed, every careless word, every blasphemous utterance – and he feels the WEIGHT of those things. He feels himself CHAINED TO A MILLSTONE that is about to be cast into the sea and he is calling out for GRACE and MERCY!

But the other man is not.

The other man dies a scoffer.

The other man never comes under conviction – and there is no salvation without conviction of sin.

The Gospel is not the message that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. I don’t know what that is. At BEST that is moralistic, therapeutic deism – but it’s not Christianity. It’s not the Gospel. The Gospel is the Good News that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the foremost. If you don’t KNOW THAT – if there was never a moment where you felt that – then you are not saved. The Gospel is GRACE and RESCUE FOR THE DAMNED.

Do you know that?

One man did and one man didn’t in this story – which one are you?

And then thirdly; we’ve got a noticeable change, we’ve got a clear conviction of sin, and we’re also seeing here a remarkable faith in Jesus.

3. There was a remarkable faith in Jesus

Listen to what this man said as he hung next to Jesus on the cross. He said:

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” (Luke 23:42 ESV)

JESUS – remember me when you come into your KINGDOM! Think of how much FAITH has to lie behind a statement like that. When you and I put our faith in Jesus we have the benefit of knowing how the story ends. We know that Jesus died on the cross. We know that he was buried in a borrowed tomb. We know that on the third day HE ROSE FROM THE DEAD! We know that he ascended to the Father’s right hand and we know that one day he will return to judge the quick and the dead – we know the WHOLE STORY. We’ve sung the songs and recited the creeds. But all this man knew was Christ on the cross – and YET. Seeing Christ there he knew that this would not be the end. After the CROSS would come a KINGDOM.

That is a REMARKABLE depth of faith.

This was no “death bed conversion”; this was not a man trying to have his cake and eat it too; this was not a man trying to CON his Creator, this was a man going ALL IN WITH JESUS. This was a man standing with Christ in his darkest hour – knowing that there would be life and light on the other side.

This was real.

This was authentic.

This was TRUE and SAVING FAITH – thanks be to God!

So what is the significance of this story for us today? That the faith of the thief on the cross was REAL is of course, GREAT NEWS for him, but why does it matter for us?

What Is The Significance Of This Story For Us Today?

I think it matters for a couple of reasons. First of all it matters because:

1. It reminds us of the simplicity of saving faith

Think of all the things this guy didn't know:

- He didn't know about the Virgin Birth.
- He didn't know about the Trinity.
- He didn't know about the Great Commission to gather in the nations.
- He'd never heard the Great Commandment to love one another.

He didn't know about any of those things, all he knew was that Jesus was clearly from God, he was innocent, he was righteous, he was not up on that cross for any of his own sins, and he would somehow conquer death and establish an eternal kingdom.

That's all he knew and yet Jesus turned to him and said:

“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43 ESV)

That seems wildly significant to me.

Now, I don't think it means that all of those doctrines that he didn't know about are therefore unimportant. And I don't think it means that you can DENY important doctrines and still be saved. If the Bible SAYS IT, you can't REJECT IT and be saved, but REJECTING something is different than not knowing something. This man knew hardly anything and yet he was ASSURED of salvation by no less an authority than Christ himself – that HAS TO affect us in some way.

There is an old saying: Christianity is like a lake that is shallow enough for children to wade in and deep enough for elephants to swim in. Have you ever heard that one before?

I feel like this story is VALIDATING that statement. This story is reminding us to KEEP THE SHALLOW END OPEN. It is telling us not to raise the BAR for entrance any higher than we see Jesus doing here.

Now it isn't telling us to LIVE in the shallows – but it is telling us that people have to start somewhere. It is reminding us to keep the front door open. We're not to try and force people to enter the kingdom through the window on the third floor. We're to let them come in at street level. We're to welcome them as BABES in the faith. We're to feed them on spiritual MILK before leading them on to DEEPER and MEATIER things.

I think that is a message we need to hear, here at Cornerstone Baptist Church. I think we pride ourselves on being a church of elephants. We're deep-water people. We're doing a preaching series right now on what? BIBLICAL ANTHROPOLOGY. That's elephant territory is it not? And that's perfectly fine! In fact the Bible REBUKES people who don't leave the shallows to go on to deeper things. The Book of Hebrews REBUKES a bunch of Christians who spent WAY TOO MUCH TIME splashing around in the shallow end of the pool. Hebrews 5:12-13 says:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, 13 for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. (Hebrews 5:12-13 ESV)

“What in the world is going on with you people?” he says. “By this time in your Christian life you should be LIFEGUARDS but you're all splashing around in the sand with your plastic shovels and your water wings. ENOUGH. Put on your big boy and big girl pants and get out there and do some good in this world. Grow up. Go deep. And get useful.”

That's what he says, so the Bible is NOT telling us to live in the shallows, but it is reminding us that the shallows are not to be despised. We need to FEED the LITTLE ONES and grow the BIG ONES. We need flannel boards, Veggie Tales and VBS and we need B1, B2 and B3. We need Going Deeper Groups and Leadership Development.

Christianity is a lake that is deep enough for elephants to swim in and shallow enough for children to wade in – and so must be our church. God help!

Secondly, I think this story is helpful because:

2. It reminds us that faith comes from contemplating Christ on the cross

There is no salvation without contemplating Christ on the cross. You can't be saved merely by wondering over the majesty of creation. You can't be saved merely by appreciating the depth and beauty of the Scriptures. All of that is wonderful, all of that is great, but if you do not GRAPPLE with the VISION of Christ on the cross, you can not be saved. It is only THERE that the full extent of God's righteousness and mercy are displayed. The cross is the TRUEST depiction of who God IS and what God has done to secure our salvation. If you have never wrestled with the CROSS then you are not a Christian.

This is where faith happens.

This is where people are born again as sons and daughters of God.

Jesus said that. In John 12:32 he said:

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” (John 12:32 ESV)

The cross is MAJESTIC; the cross is MARVELOUS and the cross is MAGNETIC!

When we look there – when we see Christ on the cross – we see the RICHEST TRUTHS in all creation. We see the holiness and righteousness of God. Paul said:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward

as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. **This was to show God's righteousness**, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:21-26 ESV)

Paul imagines that up in heaven there might have been angels looking down on sinners and being aware of God's intention to save them and thinking: "How is this going to be fair? Those people are terrible sinners! Those people deserve death. And God is just going to let them into heaven? He's just going to forget about everything they've done? He's just going to wave away their sins as if they never happened? Is that what's going on here?"

The cross is God's answer to those questions.

NO, I am not going to wave away their sins as if they never happened!

NO, I am not going to forget all the terrible things that have been done.

I SAID that the wages of sin is death and SO IT IS. Behold the body of Christ upon the cross! That is how serious I am about sin! That is what I consider a just and fair payment! That is how I will be JUST AND the JUSTIFIER of the one who has faith in Jesus!

And every mouth in heaven, on earth and under the earth was instantly SHUT.

After seeing the body of Jesus on the cross no one could ever dare to question the righteousness of God.

Do you see that today?

Do you see the holiness and the justice of God?

And do you see his mercy?

Do you see the lengths that he went to to offer you a way home?

Take a minute now and behold his hands, his feet and his side. Take a minute now and BEHOLD the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

That's how much God loves you. That is his mercy. This is his grace. That is his offer of forgiveness and restoration – praise the Lord!

And then lastly, the story of the thief on the cross – and the story of the Saviour he trusted in, reminds us that there is life, glory and goodness beyond the grave.

3. It reminds us that there is life, glory and goodness beyond the grave

The thief on the cross – just moments before his death – pledged his allegiance to Jesus and Jesus replied unto him saying:

“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43 ESV)

TODAY!

Brothers and sisters, you need to understand, there is no SOUL SLEEP for the believer. When you close your eyes in death, you open your eyes and see the Saviour. The early believers did use the term “falling asleep” to describe those who had died in the Lord – but they did that to make the point that death was not the end. We LAY DOWN in death and we ROSE UP in the presence of the Saviour. So the term “sleep” was meant to communicate a temporary state – but it was not intended to communicate a lack of consciousness or awareness. Our BODIES sleep in the ground, awaiting the final resurrection, but the Bible is VERY CLEAR that to be ABSENT from the body is to be PRESENT with the Lord. In 2 Corinthians 5:8 the Apostle Paul says that death is not something we need to be frightened of, as believers. He says:

“We are confident, *I say*, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.” (2 Corinthians 5:8 KJV)

Brother or sister, when you leave your body in death, you ENTER the presence of the Lord – immediately. As in TODAY. TODAY you will be with me in paradise. And note TOO that Jesus doesn't just say: today you will enter into paradise, he says more than that, he says:

“today you will be **with me** in paradise.” (Luke 23:43 ESV)

So we're not just going to be conscious immediately in heaven, we're going to be conscious immediately in heaven WITH JESUS!!

Heaven wouldn't be heaven without Jesus would it?

There are going to be a lot of good things about heaven, brothers and sisters – the absence of pain, death and sorrow, the enjoyment of our friends and loved ones forever, the restoration of our bodies and our youth at the final resurrection – all of that is going to be marvellous! But none of that compares to the joy and privilege of seeing JESUS. Jesus is our highest glory. Jesus is our greatest gift. Jesus is the Gospel.

If you have not put your faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour then I invite you to do that today. You don't need to have it all figured out – the thief in this story knew next to nothing. But he had contemplated Christ on the cross and he had thought about the judgment that was coming and on that basis he called out to Jesus for mercy and salvation – and you can do the same. You can do that now. You can do that TODAY. And if you do that, then when you die you will be with him – that very day – in paradise.

That's a promise – not from me – but from the only One who is eternally and entirely faithful – thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

Our heavenly Father, we thank you for this story and we thank you for the promise that it represents...