

THE REPENTANT CRIMINAL RECEIVED INTO THE HOUSE OF THE FATHER

“One of the criminals who were hanged railed at Him, saying: are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us! But the other rebuked him, saying: Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward for our sins; but this man has done nothing wrong. And he said: Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom, And He said to him: truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise”.

(Luke 23: 39-43)

Whenever we remember the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, we must understand that He does not want our sympathy or our tears for His extreme suffering. He said Himself to those who bewailed Him on His day of execution, “Weep not for Me, but weep for yourselves and your children” (23: 28).

He does not want our tears. Don’t cry for Me, congregation. What He wants is our confession of sin. What He seeks is our profession of faith. We are not going to re-enact His suffering and walk the *via dolorosa*; but we must hear the testimony of Scripture concerning His work as our Messiah and Mediator.

This is also the case when we look at this passage of Scripture. We’ll focus the spotlight of our attention on the fact that Christ was not the only one crucified on Good Friday. We read in verse 33, “. . . they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the left and one on the right”. There were three crosses that day, a fact mentioned by all the evangelists.

THREE CROSSES

Three crosses. Recently when we were travelling through the states of West Virginia and Pennsylvania, I noticed on many hills three crosses, a large one in the middle (signifying Christ’s cross) and two smaller ones on each side (signifying those of the two criminals crucified with Him). I thought, on the one hand, that this is a wrong presentation of reality: there is no reason to believe that Christ’s cross was any larger or higher than those other two. On the other hand, I thought, it is true, for those two crosses are meant to highlight that one cross.

Being crucified in the middle, between others, certainly means that Christ was considered the most serious criminal. It is clear from the Gospels that all the attention was focused on Christ and His cross. He was the target of all the mockery and derision. Yes, even those crucified with Him mocked Him. The anger and frustration of those two men also was poured out over Him who was hanged between them.

But it is precisely here that we notice a remarkable development. Luke is the only evangelist who specifically notes that one of these two criminals underwent a noticeable change of heart. You might call it “a last minute conversion.”

LAST MINUTE CONVERSION?

What are we to make of this “conversion”? There are those who warn us to be very careful with death-bed conversions. It is a proven fact that more than one person who called upon God in a time of need turned away from Him when the need passed. So we should not use this text to conclude: well, I can always repent just before I die. Do not forget that the other criminal, in the same position, also facing death, did not repent. Why did the one turn to Jesus and not the other?

It should also be asked to what extent this one criminal really and knowingly repented. Can we deduce from his words that with his whole heart at the last hour he turned to God?

One thing is clear. These two criminals, crucified alongside Christ, serve to shed more light on the ministry of Christ as our Mediator. We are not really interested in those two fellows as such; we are interested in Christ, for He is our Lord and Saviour. But inasmuch as God uses these two crosses to show us the greater significance of that one cross, we are interested in them as well. And we note that the Lord Jesus reveals Himself on the cross as our true Mediator by receiving the repentant criminal into the house of the Father. We will give attention to the clear confession of this criminal, to his humble petition, and to the certain promise that he receives.

JOATHAS AND MAGGATRAS?

We do not know a great deal about these two men who were crucified that day with Christ. That is not really much of a loss, since these two men are not the focus of attention. Perhaps that is why the Bible does not give us many details about them. I may mention that some manuscripts give the names of these two as Joathas and Maggattras, but the sources are unreliable.

Joathas and Maggattras. If these were their names, what was their crime? What had they done to deserve such a penalty? There are explainers who follow a glamorous exegesis and see in these two men Judaist Zealots. As you know, the Zealot party wanted to liberate the land of Israel from Roman occupation, and they formed cells of resistance fighters who did not hesitate to use force. These Zealots, then, were devout Jews who ardently expected their great Messiah and who had meanwhile begun cleansing the promised land. Call them guerilla freedom fighters.

If that was indeed the case with these two men, it was a timely execution from Pilate's point of view. Crucify some real rebels along with their presumed leader, Jesus; that would really annoy the Jews. Jesus, the king of the Jews hanging between two of his soldiers. That might also explain the fact that these two men themselves join in the mockery of Jesus. Does not one of them say, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" (verse 39). These men would be offended and angered at having to hang on the same hill as an impostor like Jesus. They had at least tried to save Israel and were giving their lives, but Jesus had done nothing.

ZEALOTS OR THIEVES?

I wrote that this is the more "glamorous" explanation, especially today, from a "liberation theology" point of view. But in fact the Scripture itself does not at all lead us in such a direction. Matthew and Mark use the expression "two robbers." A word is used there that indicates violent robbers, those who would not hesitate to take a life in order to enrich themselves. It could be taken to mean common thieves or murderers, even pirates or gangsters. Luke uses the word "criminals" (verse 32), and it says literally "evil-doers." This suggests at the very least that these men are hardened offenders, who have made it their profession to rob and steal. Rather than freedom fighters, they may have been terrorists, who killed and

plundered. For such criminals Roman law prescribed crucifixion.

It appears that we must think here, then, of hardened criminals, in whose company Jesus did not fit at all. We see here a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 53 that Christ was numbered among the transgressors, the criminals, who deserved their just reward. These men were gangsters who preyed on the weak and the innocent. It is remarkable that such men escape the wrath of the multitude while Jesus must undergo the taunts of everyone.

CALLOUS SOULS

Now at first both these men reviled Jesus along with the others. This means that they, too, took some evil pleasure in His lot. They, too, rejected Christ's claim that He was the Christ, the Son of God. They mocked with the others: if it is true, then come down from the cross, save yourself and us in the process. This shows you something of the character of these men. To mock someone who is being executed alongside you, while you both face death, is terrible. Only bitter and callous souls act in such a way.

These men must have heard of Jesus and His works. After all, Christ was well-known, and they undoubtedly knew His name and the allegations against Him. But they did not put any faith in Him. They considered Him to be a joke. One of them, it says in this text, railed at Him. Literally it says: he blasphemed Him. This means that he made mocking suggestions about our Lord's claim of being the Son of God. You? Son of God? You, our Messiah? If you are the Christ, save yourself and us.

It seems that these two men kept up the mockery for some time and that one even came to blaspheme the Name of God in the process. But it also is clear that the other in the course of time came to a different conclusion. We read in verse 40, "But the other rebuked him, saying, Do you not fear God since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we justly; for we are receiving the due reward for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong."

A CHANGE OF HEART

What to think of this change of heart? It is in any case a very clear confession. The blaspheming of his companion has brought the man to a sharp rebuke. He says: man, do you not fear God? You are under the same sentence of condemnation. Soon you, too, will be dead. And then you will have to face the righteous Judge of heaven and earth. Instead of reviling this man here, why not humble yourself before God? Prepare to meet your Maker! Fear God, that is, submit to Him, call upon Him for His mercy and grace. Instead of reviling this man here, prepare to meet God!

And he adds something very important when he says: and we indeed suffer justly, for we are receiving the due reward for our deeds. These words prove that these men were indeed criminals and not Zealots, for a Zealot, who did not acknowledge Roman authority, never would admit to being condemned justly for

his rebellion. But this man admits it: we deserve this condemnation. We are guilty as charged, and soon we must face God Himself with our sins.

His final testimony is even more significant. He says, “But this man has done nothing wrong.” These words will have cut through the air, and all who heard it will have been stunned. This man vindicates Jesus as being completely innocent, as undeserving of the charges against Him. To revile an innocent man and to refuse to acknowledge your own guilt is the greatest crime. Do you not see the truth? he asks. This Jesus here is innocent!

I consider this to be a clear confession. Some explainers take this man’s words with a grain of salt. At this point, they argue, the man was no longer thinking straight; he may have been slightly delirious already. And it is true, in themselves his words do not really constitute a confession of guilt before God. But Christ’s answer makes clear that the man indeed fully meant what he said. Christ accepted this confession as truthful, so why should we question it?

You see here what constitutes true repentance, what is the evidence of conversion. Someone who has truly repented will always rebuke a fellow sinner who hasn’t repented. You cannot confess your sin and then tolerate it in others. Someone who has truly repented, will confess His guilt before God and men. What is more, he will acknowledge the sentence as being wholly just. It is an unrepentant sinner who does not accept the penalty as being completely justified and who will insist: I do not deserve this.

Is it not a remarkable contrast with the man’s earlier attitude and the attitude of all around him? Everyone mocks and blasphemes the Lord Jesus, but this man has come to a different point of view. And in the light of Christ’s innocence, he sees all the more the gravity of his own sin.

SILENT STRENGTH

What brought about this change of mind? Wouldn’t you like to know? Many explainers say that it was especially Christ’s composure on the cross that made this man stop and think. He heard Christ pray for his executioners, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Who has ever heard such a mediating prayer before? Most criminals when being executed curse their executioners to hell. But here is one who prays for them. And the man has also observed how Christ did not revile in return, but remained silent and calm. He sensed Christ’s *peace with God*. Even at that crucial point, with his life draining away, silent strength exuded from the Lord Jesus Christ and enveloped this criminal beside Him, so that the man became observant and full of wonder.

All these things may have contributed to the man’s conversion. Ultimately it is the power of God, the work of the Holy Spirit, Who uses this man and his conversion, and He does it to vindicate the Son of God. This conversion is a mysterious and mighty work of God which highlights the perfect mediatorial work of Christ. At that moment, as the darkness of Golgotha sets in, there is a light

beginning to illuminate one heart. Christ even on His cross, in His dying, snatches one from the jaws of eternal death.

Now the sad part is that it had to come to this point for the man to repent. For the other fellow it was apparently too late. He, too, saw and heard what the first man saw and heard, but it did not lead him to repentance. We should not make this last minute conversion into the rule, for it is an exception. And what is more, we who know of the truth of the saving work of Christ and the reason for His death, may never postpone repentance or cling to sin. Instead we should learn to walk humbly with our God every day.

A REMARKABLE PETITION

Having said what he did, the man turns to the Lord Jesus, and asks, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” What do these words mean? Is it really a sincere petition for help? Or is it a last-ditch attempt to escape God’s wrath?

It is clear that this man knew something of Christ’s teaching concerning the coming of the kingdom of heaven. He had also read the sign, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.” He knew that the death of Jesus, which was as imminent as his own, did not mean the end for the Lord. It could not mean the end, for will God not vindicate the innocent and the righteous?

What did the man mean when he spoke about Christ coming in or into His kingdom? The expression means that he did expect Jesus to appear again in glory. “Coming into the kingdom” must mean something like coming to power and into the glory which accompanies that power.

Where had the man heard about the coming of this kingdom? Well, it had been a major part of Christ’s teaching. He had spoken everywhere publicly of the kingdom of heaven. This preaching, in fact, had started already with John the Baptist, and it been continued by Christ to the end. Christ’s last teaching in the temple had been about the very fact that the kingdom of heaven was near (Luke 22).

Christ had consistently taught that the kingdom of heaven had come in *Him* and would be perfected by Him over all the earth. Do you think that this criminal had not heard of these things? He may not have understood everything about it, but he evidently – as his words show – knew that Jesus would come “into His kingdom,” that is, would achieve glory and honour from God in heaven and from out of heaven.

NO RIGHTS

Now the man does not presume to have any rights to entering into that kingdom. It is not a kingdom for criminals who have been justly executed for their horrid crimes. But the man does turn to the Lord with a petition, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He doesn’t know when Christ will receive this honour and glory. But he doesn’t doubt either that it will happen. He doesn’t claim to have any rights to sharing in it. But he nevertheless seeks access to it in true humility.

He says “Jesus, remember me.” These words are a plea for mercy. The words “remember me” are *covenantal* language. They are words which Israelites directed to God. I think here of what we find in Psalm 106: “Remember me, O LORD, when Thou Thy own with favour didst endow”, or of what we read in Psalm 74, “Remember Thou Thy people in Thy love.”

“Remember” does not mean to think of someone occasionally, but it means to consider in grace, to turn to someone in mercy, to restore and to forgive. “Remember me” is a humble petition: please, look down upon me in mercy and forgiveness when you come into your kingdom. For you are righteous and without blame. *I am guilty and condemned.*

This man has no hope left in this life. He is at the end, and realizes the dismal failure. But he has now one hope, one plea: remember me, Jesus. This is the prayer which one would direct to the God of the covenant who always remembers His mercy.

NEVER TOO LATE

The people who stood around the cross heard this. It was a word that was passed on to others. It was passed on to Luke many years later and he recorded it in the Gospel for our instruction and comfort. It is never too late with God. He can form a humble petition in a person’s heart in the hour of death.

Here it is clear that this petition is directed to Jesus. No one comes to the Father except through Him. This is made evident also as He hangs on the cross. Jesus is the only mediator between God and men. Oh, I know, it is true, as some explainers point out, the man does not confess Jesus as Christ or Lord. He does not say, “Lord, remember me” or “Christ, remember me.” He simply reads the sign and says, “Jesus, remember me.” But the name “Jesus” means Saviour, does it not? Is it too meagre a petition? Would you have wanted more from the man?

Well, be prepared to give more yourselves. We who know more are indeed required to give more. We must ask in even greater humility for God’s mercy and grace in Christ. We must do this *throughout* our life; we must *thrive* on the grace of God in Jesus Christ. We must also know in even greater measure that we can come to the Father only through the Son, because of His one, perfect sacrifice on the cross. And we must set up our lives accordingly. So that we can pray in full trust and utter peace on the day of our death: Jesus, remember me! and then depart in faith in the certain promise of Christ.

AN UNEXPECTED ANSWER

The climax of this history comes in the last verse. The spotlight – if I may use that word – falls completely on Christ. Listen to what He answers. “And He said to him, truly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”

Christ’s answer will have been totally unexpected to this man, and shocking to all the crowds who stood around. For it is an authoritative declaration of the

Lord Jesus. It is a promise so certain that it is introduced with an oath, with the word amen: “Truly, I say to you.” Christ puts His full authority as Mediator and Saviour behind what He is now going to say. It is true and certain, anchored in the promises of God.

He says: *today* you will be with Me in Paradise! The man said: whenever. . . But Jesus says: not whenever, *today*. The man says; when you come into your kingdom, but Jesus says: in *Paradise!* Jesus answer is richer than the man could ever have imagined, greater than he would ever have expected. That is usually the kind of response God gives to sincere and humble petitions: beyond imagination.

Paradise. Why does the Lord Jesus here use the word “paradise”? Is that not a vague and obsolete concept? It is not found often in the New Testament. The apostle Paul uses it when he speaks about the fact that he was in the spirit taken up into heaven: “this man was caught up to paradise.” And John uses it in Revelation 22 when he writes about the tree of life which is in the paradise of God.

The man on the cross spoke about the day when Christ would come into His glory. But Jesus says: there is already a place where the glory of God is manifest in full measure. Call that place: paradise! Call it heaven. It is the place where there is no sin or grief but only perfection and joy. One day that paradise will cover the entire new earth. But already today you will be with Me in paradise. Today you may enter heaven.

With Me. The man cannot enter on his own. Only in Christ. Only with Christ. Through Christ alone he has access to the house of the Father in heaven. The promise given to His disciples at the last passover – I will take you to Me that where I am you may be also – is extended to this man as well. Access to the Father’s house. *Immediate access*. Today, the day you die. Have we not worded this beautifully and properly in Lord’s Day 22 of the Heidelberg Catechism, where we confess that my soul, after this life, will *immediately* be taken up to Christ, its Head?

If Christ promises this man access to paradise, entrance into the Father’s house, it can only be because his sins are forgiven. He is a criminal no more. He is redeemed from guilt; his dying is an dying unto sin and an entering into eternal life.

PARADISE AND HELL

When Christ said these words and made this promise, He knew that He himself would have to pay for it. He would have to undergo the agony of hell. This man can only go to paradise if Christ first goes to hell. That is the consequence. But our Lord knows – as the darkness falls over Golgotha – that His suffering of hellish agony will bear rich fruit. Here already one is snatched from the jaws of eternal death and promised eternal life.

We must give attention here not first of all to the piety of this repentant criminal, but to the faithfulness of our Lord Jesus Christ, to His solemn promise: truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise. We see His willingness to go into hell so that this man may enter into heaven.

This whole event on the cross brings out to everyone, then and now, the truth: Jesus Christ reveals Himself on the cross as the true Mediator. Whoever comes to Him He will not cast out. He does not say to the man: sorry, too little, too late. It is even so: the first will be last and the last will be first. The miracle of the kingdom is that every repentant sinner is joyfully received. He says: enter into the glory of My Father. It is Good Friday after all!

He said this while He was on the cross. How much more can we rest in His promise today, now that He is glorified in heaven and seated at God's right hand. This is the true comfort of every Christian. The forgiveness of sins leads to the life everlasting. Life in paradise. When we die, Christ will take us to Himself. Immediately, the very same day.

But we are like wood pulled from the fire. And there is one major difference between that repentant criminal and us. We are not (yet) in the hour of our death. We are still in the midst of this life. We have the time and the duty – as long as we are here – to show that we have been saved by Jesus Christ. That is the consequence for us. Otherwise the criminal on the cross will testify against us that we did not do what we knew we should do.

Yet the final word of every Christian life is to plead on God's grace in Christ. Remember me, O LORD, a repentant sinner. Remember Thou Thy people in Thy love. Our final act is to trust in God's sure promise, made by His Son on Good Friday: I will remember you. Throughout our life and at its end. He will lead us to paradise, to the tree of life.