

Don't Waste the Opportunity

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[0 : 0 0] turn with me please to the passage that we read in Luke's Gospel, Luke chapter 23, Luke 23 and reading verses 39 to 43. Then one of the criminals who were and blasphemed him, saying, If you are the Christ, save yourself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds. But this man has done nothing wrong. And then he said to Jesus, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And Jesus said to him, Assuredly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.

Well, this has been a few moments this evening. I want to focus on this very well-known story with you, this story, this narrative about these three crosses and the three figures that we find on these crosses at Calvary, at Golgotha. And I hope and pray that this will be an encouragement for every one of us here, whether you came here tonight knowing and rejoicing in what it is to be one of the Lord's people, or whether you came here tonight still a stranger to grace.

And to God. We're going to look at this passage under three headings. I'm someone who falls into the sin of alliteration. I love alliteration, but I don't fall into that sin as much as some other ministers who I'm not going to mention by name this evening. But there are some who make a real habit of it. But I do find alliteration a good way to hang thoughts on to. So we're looking at the passage under three headings. The antagonism, then the appeal, and finally the assurance.

The antagonism, the appeal, and then the assurance. First we have the antagonism. That's in verse 39. And here Luke records the first criminal's words of antagonism. The words of antagonism or hostility. At the beginning of verse 39 we're told a number of things about this man. Luke tells us that he was a criminal. Matthew and Mark both use the Greek word *lestes*. This word can be translated a thief or a robber or even a political insurrectionist. This man is a problem that the Romans wanted rid of. Luke also tells us that he was hanging or crucified beside Jesus. Verse 32 we see that these two criminals had been led away at the same time as Jesus. Verse 33 we see that they came to the place called the skull and there they were nailed to crosses of wood on either side of Jesus.

And Luke tells us that this particular criminal proceeded to rail against Jesus. He proceeded to blaspheme the name of Jesus. If you look at verse 35 the religious leaders had scoffed at Jesus as he hung on the cross. Then down verse 36 the Roman soldiers had mocked Jesus as he hung on the cross.

[3 : 1 7] And now in verse 39 this wretched criminal adds his voice into the chorus of derision as he hurls abusive Jesus as he hangs on the cross. In order to breathe this man would have had to push himself up on his nail pierced feet and once he catches that precious breath he uses it to hurl insults at Jesus.

The little energy that this man has left is used to belittle Jesus. It is used to mock Jesus. It is used to ridicule Jesus. It is used to rail against Jesus. It is used to blaspheme Jesus.

It is the climax of the humiliation of Jesus. And then in the second half of verse 39 Luke records what this criminal said to Jesus. He begins by saying are you not the Christ? Are you not the Christ? As we go through the gospels we see that the Christ was God's anointed king. God's appointed king. God's promised deliverer.

God's agent of salvation. God's bringer of blessing. And now this criminal mocks Jesus as he asks the question are you not the Christ? He's joining with the religious leaders who said in verse 35 if you are the Christ. Joining with the Romans who said in verse 36 if you are the king of the Jews this man is full of jokes. He's full of sarcasm. Full of ridicule. And clearly has no belief that Jesus really is the Christ. But he continues if you are the Christ then save yourself and us. He doesn't believe that Jesus is the Christ. Doesn't believe that Jesus is God's promised savior. But he does lay out the conditions which if met will cause him to believe that Jesus is the Christ. He says get yourself off that cross. And then once you've gotten yourself off that cross then get me off my cross and then I will believe that you really are the

Christ. This criminal wants Jesus to prove himself in a spectacular fashion. He's like the person who says Jesus if you are there then give me a car. If you are there give me a job. If you are there give me a clean bill of health. If you are there give me a husband. Give me a wife. Give me a boyfriend. Give me a girlfriend. This man doesn't see that Jesus offers a different kind of deliverance. A different kind of salvation. He doesn't see that Jesus is hanging on that cross so that sinful people can be saved from judgment and for eternal life. He is fixated rather on the present and only cares about salvation from his cross not salvation from his sins. This man is unconvinced. He is unconcerned. He is unconverted. He is unbelieving. This man is a lost man. This man is a man who dies as he had lived. Hardened and blinded to the beauty. He is a man who dies as he had lived. He is a lost man. He is a lost man. A man full of antagonism. Now friends it's very important that we focus on this man because I think there's often a great danger that we immediately focus on the second criminal and the theme of 11th hour conversions.

[6 : 57] Now I'm not denying for one minute that a person can be converted on their deathbed. I'm not denying the reality of the poem that many of you will know. Between the saddle and the ground was mercy sought and mercy found. But friends I want us to remember that this man in verse 39 was dying right beside the saviour of the world and could only respond to him with bitterness and contempt.

He is on the brink of a lost eternity and it doesn't move him one bit. And that is the sad and solemn reality that many find out to their cost. They console themselves with the thought that they'll get right with Jesus later. They console themselves with the thought that they'll have some sort of deathbed experience. Some sort of 11th hour conversion. They console themselves with the thought that they'll live by their own rules. They'll have their fun. They'll enjoy their life and there will always be time for them to come to Jesus. They console themselves with the thought that they'll get serious about Jesus and serious about the gospel and serious about salvation and serious about heaven and serious about hell at a later date.

And then they eventually find out to their order that it's too late. So many, so many who said later to Jesus find that later never came. They may not have been given a quiet deathbed on which to come to Jesus.

Or like this criminal, they find themselves wasting that final, last, ultimate opportunity. And I'm not exaggerating. Because I meet people. I visit people. I sit by their beds. And I try to bring the gospel to them.

Because they know and I know that they have weeks, they have hours, they have moments to live. And it doesn't move them. Now, I'll hear from Jesus. I know and I chat on the contrary to Jesus.

[9 : 11] Because I really ask you gosh, I want to encourage you to live together. And you say no, I'll hear you. But yet, in this case of herself there, I want to show you some days in the past. But in this case I want to have to encourage you, thank God, for blessing you down south of the hell. to waste that opportunity. It might be your last. You are not guaranteed to see tomorrow. You know, it really struck me that I'm finishing off a series right now and part of Luke's Gospel in our own congregation.

It's a series that's not taken too long. It's about three months and yet there were those who began the series with me back in August and they have passed from time into eternity as I'm finishing off the series right now. It is solemn, friends. The Lord has said, my spirit will not always contend with a man.

And so if you are conscious that the Lord is speaking to you right now, then act on it. This brings us second then to the appeal, verses 40 to 42.

And here Luke records the second criminal's words of appeal. Verses 40 and 41, we hear the rebuke of the second criminal. We can begin by noting that he rebuked his companion.

Matthew tells us in his Gospel that both criminals had mocked Jesus. But now this man is in a change of heart and we can listen into what he says.

[10 : 40] He begins by saying, don't you fear God? This second criminal clearly fears God. He knows that God has power over life and over death. He knows that God is sovereign over heaven and over hell.

He knows that it's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. He knows that it's appointed for man to die once and after that the judgment. And now he says to his companion, on the brink of eternity, friend, are you still so unconcerned about your eternal soul?

He is saying to his companion, are you still making light of God? Are you still making light of the things of God? As the jaws of eternity are opening before you.

Don't you fear God? And he goes on, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation and we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds.

This man knows that he's under condemnation. He knows that he's under Rome's condemnation. Knows that he's under God's condemnation. And he knows that he's deserving of both. He knows that he's a sinner who deserves to die.

[11 : 49] But he goes on and says, but this man, this man that you are pleasantly mocking, this man that you are belittling, this man that you are ridiculing, this man has done nothing wrong.

Verse 4 of this chapter, Pilate says to the chief priests, I find no guilt in this man. Verse 14, Pilate says, I didn't find this man guilty of any of your charges.

Verse 15, Pilate reports to the crowd that Herod had found that nothing deserving of death had been done by Jesus. Verse 22, Pilate himself claims, I have found in him no guilt deserving of death.

And now we hear this criminal adding his voice to the chorus who are saying that Jesus is innocent. He literally says, this man has done nothing improper.

He has done nothing out of place. He is righteous. He is blameless. He is kindless. He is flawless. He is the one who has done all things well. But he's not finished.

[12 : 56] Because he goes on to make the very last request of his life in verse 42. And he begins verse 42 by saying, Jesus.

I know some of your versions may have the word Lord, but there are other versions that have the word Jesus. And I think that's very significant. Because throughout Luke's gospel, Jesus is referred to as Lord.

He is referred to as teacher. He is referred to as master. But this is one of the few times where he is actually called by his first name. And how appropriate that is.

Because you remember what the name Jesus means. You remember what the angel said to Joseph. You will call his name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.

That's what Jesus means. It means the Lord saves. The Lord is salvation. And this criminal knows that he needs salvation. He knows that he needs the Lord to save him.

[14 : 01] And so he says, Jesus, remember me. That is the simplicity of this man's faith. Remember me. He may not have much, but he has the root of the matter.

He knows that his whole eternal destiny hangs on Jesus. He doesn't have confessions of faith memorized. He's not been baptized. He's not received the Lord's Supper.

He's never been to a prayer meeting. Probably never heard of a prayer meeting. He's done no good works. He can make no restitution for what he has done. All he can say is, Jesus, remember me.

Jesus, would you please act for my good, for my welfare, for my blessing. And he says, when you come into your kingdom. What a confession.

It's up there with Peter's confession. You are the Christ and the Son of God. It is up there with Thomas' confession when he is confronted with the risen Christ. You are my Lord and you are my God.

[14 : 59] But this criminal, this criminal sees Jesus in a very different way to how Peter saw him and how Thomas saw him. This criminal sees Jesus at his weakest, sees him at his most lowly, sees him at his most vulnerable, and yet he believes that Jesus is a king.

And he believes that Jesus is a king who possesses an eternal kingdom that not even the curse of death, of crucifixion, will be able to undermine or destroy.

And his great hope, his great longing, is that he will be gathered among this king's people, in this king's kingdom, for all time. Now, how did this criminal come to have such a great faith?

How did he come to have a faith that we might say is greater than the faith of Peter? How did he come to have a faith that seems to be greater than the faith of Thomas? Well, he's heard the prayers of Jesus.

Look at verse 34. He's heard Jesus pray, Father, forgive them. They know not what they do. But there's more. He's heard the testimony of the religious leaders and the Roman soldiers who have mockingly spoken of Jesus being the Christ.

[16 : 12] Verses 35 and 36. And maybe in the back of his head he's thinking to himself, well, maybe it's true. And not only that, he's read Pilate's evangelistic tract that has been placed above Jesus' head and translated into Hebrew, Greek and Latin that proclaim this is the king of the Jews.

But you know, his unbelieving, unconverted, unconvinced, unconcerned companion had also seen and heard and read all these things.

And so all we can say is that a miracle of grace has taken place in this man's life. Jesus says in John 6, No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.

No one. And now we can see that the Father has drawn this criminal to Jesus so that he can say, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

A divine, sovereign miracle, a miracle of grace has taken place in this man's life. Well, friends, as we look at this second criminal we can see the evidences of a conversion experience.

[17 : 39] This man is concerned over his companion soul as he asks him, as he challenges him, as he rebukes him, don't you fear God? This man acknowledges his own guilt and the fact that he is a sinner who deserves to die.

This man confesses Jesus to be innocent, to be righteous, to be holy, to be blameless. This man declares Jesus to be an eternal king with an imperishable eternal kingdom and he cries out that this Jesus would save him, that this Jesus would remember him for good when he enters his kingdom.

And today, tonight, I want to ask you, friend, do you share the faith of this man? Do you? Do you share the faith of this man?

Are you confident, friend, that all you need for eternity, all you need as you face death, is for Jesus to remember you? Friend, have you appealed to Jesus saying, there is nothing that I have done, and not only is there nothing that I have done, there is nothing that I am presently doing, and not only is there nothing that I am presently doing, there is nothing that I could possibly do or would hope to do that would qualify me for your kingdom, but would you please remember me?

Would you please act for my good? Have you appealed to Jesus? Are you able to say with the hymn writer, Jesus, thou art the sinner's and as such I look to thee.

[19 : 15] Now in the fullness of thy love, O Lord, remember me, remember thy pure word of grace, remember Calvary's tree, remember all thy dying groans, and then remember me, thou wondrous advocate with God, I yield my soul to thee while thou art pleading on the throne, dear Lord, remember me, and when I close my eyes in death and human help shall flee, then, then, my dear redeeming God, O then, O then, O then, remember me.

Have you appealed to Jesus' name? And this brings us finally to the assurance in verse 43. And here Luke records Jesus' word of assurance.

Remember what we've seen in verses 39 to 42. We've heard the antagonism of the first criminal, verse 39, if you are, if I save yourself, and thus. We've heard the appeal of the second criminal, verses 40 to 42.

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And now we come to the assurance that Jesus gives in verse 43. Jesus assures this man that he will not forget him.

Listen to what he says. Truly I say to you, assuredly I say to you, Jesus uses this phrase six times in Luke's gospel, and now Jesus uses it as he speaks to this dying man.

[20 : 45] It is a phrase that emphasizes that what Jesus is saying is both important and not only important, but true. And Jesus says, truly I say to you, you will be in paradise.

paradise. Now many would have looked at this dying man and they would have said to him, well you rejected the way of God in your life and now you'll go to hell and you're dead. You've wasted your life.

You're a write-off, but not Jesus. He tells this man that he will be in paradise. The word paradise is used to refer to the gardens that belong to Israel's kings.

We see that in 2 Chronicles 33 and in Song of Solomon chapter 4. It's also used to describe the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve enjoyed the presence of God, the protection of God, the provision of God in Genesis 2.

It's also used to describe the wonderful environment, the new creation in which God's redeemed people will live in Isaiah 51 and Ezekiel 20. It's used by Paul as he speaks about being caught up in a heavenly experience in 2 Corinthians 12.

[21 : 52] And finally it's used by John in Revelation 2 to describe the place where those who remain faithful to the end will inhabit. Paradise is the glorious realm where the righteous, the Lord's people, are gathered.

And that is what Jesus promises this dying criminal. He is the Saviour who is able and willing to save to the uttermost. Oh, you know, friends, think of the unworthiness of this criminal.

Think of his lack of promise, his lack of potential, his lack of pedigree. The world looked at this man and would have said he's getting what he deserves and he would have agreed with an assessment and he would have said, I am getting the due reward for my deeds.

He has nothing to offer to God. He's not going to become a deacon. Not going to become an elder. Not going to become a missionary. He's not going to be able to give a tithe to the church.

He's not even going to be able to give a cup of cold water to someone who's suffering. You're never going to hear this man praying an eloquent prayer at the prayer meeting. And yet, friends, he receives a place in paradise.

[23 : 06] That is mercy. That is grace. That is Jesus' one-way love, his goodness to the undeserving. And he goes on and he says, you will be in paradise with me.

How often do we tend to read Jesus' words as, you will be in paradise with me. But Jesus says, you will be in paradise with me.

With me. Being with Jesus is the definition of paradise. In Philippians 1, Paul said that his desire was to depart and be with Christ, which was far better.

Jesus is the hope of heaven. He is the promise of heaven. He is the reward of heaven. He is the joy of heaven. Jesus is what makes heaven heaven. John Piper writes, if you could have heaven with no sickness and with all the friends you ever had on earth and all the food you ever liked and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven if Christ were not there?

Christ did not die to forgive sinners who go on treasuring anything above seeing and savouring God. And people, listen to this, friends, people who would be happy in heaven if Christ were not there will not be there.

[24 : 40] The gospel is not a way to get people to heaven. It is a way to get people to God. And Jesus says here to this man, not only will I remember you, not only will you be admitted into paradise, but I will take you to be with me forever.

And Jesus says, today you will be in paradise with me. What a promise.

That morning, this criminal had breakfasted with the devil on earth and that night he stuffed with Christ in glory. That morning he had stood before the bar of earthly justice and was found guilty and that night he stood before the bar of divine justice and was acquitted.

That morning he went outside the gates of Jerusalem to the Jews of the onlookers. They wanted nothing more to do with this man. He was a write-off, he was finished, he was cut off from the covenant community.

But that night the gates of paradise opened wide to this man and the angel sang with great rejoicing as this prodigal son who had come to his senses came home.

[26 : 02] This man had a saviour who had died just a few hours before him and was waiting for him on the other side ready to introduce him to his father.

And you know I sometimes wonder and it's pure speculation but I sometimes wonder if this man was the very first token, the very first trophy, the very first treasure that Jesus presented to his father on account of his finished work.

The very first one that he presented to his father wholly, blameless and above reproach on account of his finished work.

Moody Stewart in his commentary on the Song of Solomon has this lovely image where he speaks about Christ being the one who gathers the lilies from his garden and he says that is what Christ does when a believer dies he gathers the lily to himself and then Moody Stewart puts this very emotive, evocative image before his readers as he says and even at Calvary Christ took this one token, this one lily, for himself.

Note however though that nothing is said to the very first criminal that there is only this fearful silence. Perhaps Jesus gave him one final pitying gaze but there is no word for him, no promise for him, no hope for him, no assurance for him.

[27 : 38] You know Jesus didn't need to speak to this second criminal. this man clearly had faith and faith was enough but Jesus speaks to him to assure him.

You see Jesus wants his people to be confident of their place and standing with him. Jesus wants his people to be assured and secure in their faith.

Jesus wants his people to know the joy of being loved in him, accepted in him. Jesus wants his people to know the reality, the glorious reality that there is no condemnation in him and that is why he says to this man as he breathes his last, truly I say to you, today you will be in paradise with me.

You know so many people struggle with assurance. They struggle with believing that Jesus has really accepted them. Perhaps there are some even sitting here tonight who are wrestling with that assurance.

you don't know whether you're a Christian or not. And my friend, if you have that problem, look at verse 42. Have you appealed to Jesus?

[29 : 01] Have you cried out, Jesus, remember me, I need you to save me? And friend, if you have appealed to Jesus, then the assurance of verse 43 is addressed to you where Jesus says, you will be with me in paradise.

the appeal is always met with the assurance. What an encouragement, what a comfort, what an assurance for every trembling heart and soul tonight that Jesus will not forget those who ask him to remember them.

Listen to these words from Jeff Thomas. In Christ you are ready. You are as ready this moment sitting in that chair as the moment you die.

You are as ready as if you had served and suffered for Christ as Paul had through his 30 years. You are as ready for a glorious entrance into heaven as anyone whose faith is in Christ.

If your faith is as thin as a spider's thread, as long as it is lodged in Christ, you are safe. it is not great faith that makes us ready for heaven.

[30 : 28] It is a great saviour who saves us. Our salvation depends not on our good works but on God's delight of the Lord Jesus and his perfect work.

For Jesus' sake, God washes us and takes us to himself. It is his joy to open heaven for all of us.

God is not God God how's your faith tonight friend? Maybe you're sitting here thinking my faith is barely as thick and sturdy as a spider's thread.

And if it is lodged in Christ you're safe because it's not great faith it saves it is the great saviour who saves and what an achievement that should be for every trembling heart.

Amen.kk Thank you.