



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Luke 23:32-43

“The Dying Thief”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] We are studying some of the leading characters in the passion and suffering of Christ. And so we are looking at some of the outstanding events and men and people of the last days of our Lord's earthly life.

Today we look at the crucifixion account itself and begin our Scripture reading with verse 32 of Luke chapter 23. We have studied Pilot, we have studied Caiaphas, and we have studied some of the other of the important characters of these last days. And today I'm sure as we read through this you will anticipate our subject.

“And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death. And when they were 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. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots, (now you'll remember that this text does not really mean, 'Father forgive them,' but rather, 'Father, let them go, give them an opportunity to reverse this decision that they are making, give them a day of grace.' Now this is really a prayer for you and for me and this prayer of our Lord Jesus has now stretched out into nineteen hundred years of grace; that is, opportunity to accept Christ as personal savior. Otherwise there would have been

immediate judgment when Jesus Christ died.) 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. And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If Thou be Christ, save Thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not Thou fear God, seeing Thou art in the same condemnation? (Let me interject one note at this point, this malefactor also railed on our Lord Jesus in the early stages of the crucifixion. This represents a change of attitude on his part.) And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. 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.”

May God bless this reading of his inspired word. Let's bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Our gracious God and heavenly Father, we are so grateful to Thee that we are able this Sunday, the Lord's day, to come together in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and listen to Thy word which Thou hast preserved for us. We are so grateful to that we have an opportunity on a day such as this to listen to the voice of God. We thank Thee Lord that this word is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of the soul and spirit, of the joints and marrow, and as a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And it is the word with whom we have to do, for all things are naked and laid open before its eyes.

And as we listen to the voice of our God through the Holy Spirit and through the weak and fallible servant may, oh God, we discern the futures of the personal work of

our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We know, Lord, that the answer to the problems and perplexities, the puzzlements and the difficulties and the tragedies of life is found in a right relationship to him. And so today as we reflect upon the word and as we reflect upon our own lives may, oh God, our lives come into conformity with the plan which Thou hast for us. And may also they come into conformity with the individual plan which Thou hast for each one, unique to each of us.

We thank Thee for every one present in this auditorium, for the young people who are here, for the children who are here, for the interest that has been shown in God's word. And we pray that this may continue and that they may be built up into faith. For the others, Lord, we ask Thy blessing upon them spiritually. We pray again for all who are proclaiming the word of God today. May this be a day of wonderful gathering in of believers into the body of Christ, the true church. We commit our meeting to Thee, the singing of the hymn of praise. May Jesus Christ be honored in that which is said and done. For his names' sake. Amen.

[Message] The subject for today is “The Dying Thief, or Saved by Grace Alone.” In our series of studies which have been designed to consider some of the outstanding characters, in the last days of our Lord Jesus Christ upon the earth it is impossible that sooner or later we should not come to a study of the dying thief.

Today, really, the story which we have to discern from God's word is the story of one of the noblest theologians of Jesus' day. A man who knew more than Peter and who saw more than the one who saw visions, the Apostle John. He was a criminal, he was a thief. When Christ came into the world he lay amid the shepherds, amid the magi, amid the venerable guests of the temple in Jerusalem. When he seemed to be passing out of the world he lay amid the bandits and this man was one of them.

There are two sides to this scene. There is the side of man and there is the side of God. From the side of man Pilate is prominent. He is still ignoring the moral problem,

after all he has been very much convinced of the innocence of the Lord Jesus. He has said concerning Jesus, “I find no fault in him at all.” And at the same time he has yielded to the whims of the Jewish people under the leadership of their cunning high priests, Annas who was the real high priest though not the legal one, and Caiaphas who was practically his tool and son-in-law.

Pilate has yielded to the whims of the Jews and is now giving over against his own conscience our Lord Jesus to them. And yet at the same time there is the divine side of all of this and God is moving. In fact, God is the one who is moving this Roman puppet, this Roman mannequin if I may use a current term. God is the one who has allowed Pilate to become his instrument and it is, of course, Pilate’s responsibility but ultimately God has allowed our Lord Jesus to fall into the hands of the Jews and to fall into the hands of the gentiles and together they have crucified him.

They have taken him and they have associated him with bandits. Somewhere, a long time ago, I read that this was his inevitable company. And, of course, it is for, you see, when he dies upon the cross at Calvary he must die as a representative of you and me. And therefore it is inevitable that he die on the cross at Calvary in the midst of criminals and thieves. It is inevitable that he should die in the midst of bandits for, we are such.

Now in the story at the point at which we are to look at the history of this man we are in the midst of the terrible experience of Roman crucifixion. As you know, crucifixion was a terrible, terrible punishment. As a matter of fact, it was so terrible that when men were finally placed upon the cross they cursed their God, they cursed the judges, they cursed their friends, they cursed their foes, and their maledictions were usually so great and so strong that occasionally their tongues had to be cut out or their mouths gagged in order to prevent the people who were standing about from hearing the things that they were saying.

And so you can imagine the men as they hang upon the cross Jesus in the midst and the two bandits on the side, our Lord Jesus an exact opposition and contradiction to them. We are struck by the reticence of the biblical narrative often. I've mentioned this in our study of Simon of Cyrene. We'd often like to know a great deal more about these characters, they are so interesting and so vital and at the same time they are so interesting in the light of the characters who live today in the 20th Century; that is, you and me. For they seem, so often, to be epitomes of us in our character in our own experiences.

We are struck by the reticence of the narrative about this man, the dying thief who repented and believed in our Lord Jesus Christ. Tradition supplies us some of the details. Some of the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament give the names of these two men. One of them is supposed to have been named Zothan and the other one Comatha or Comata. In another tradition the names are different. One is supposed to have been named Desmas and the other Gestes or Gestas. And then in another, a tradition states that their names were Titus and Dumachus. Now I think you can see that these traditions which are self-contradictory are not to be relied upon. We really do not know a whole lot about these men. We are struck, I say, by the reticence of the narrative but we are not puzzled. The evangelists are not interested in facts that we might be interested in. They are moved by the one central feature of the purpose of the narrative that they are writing. And that is, of course, to present the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Have you ever looked at a football game and have you ever noticed as you watch the football game that you are really concerned with action in a very limited sphere of that field: at least I am. When I am in the Cotton Bowl I am interested in the sphere of action which, of course, is located only in a certain part of that field most of the time. AND I am kind of oblivious to every thing else that is going on. Now my companions at the game are not always that away.

About twenty years ago or twenty -- well I better not say exactly -- my wife and I and a very close friend of ours and his wife in Birmingham, Alabama went to a football

game. We were young, we were very much interested in football, my friend and I. In fact, we spent many an hour watching the Crimson Tide of the University of Alabama and both of us were frequently in danger of heart attack, I am sure, from the excitement that we had in the games. Well one night we decided we would go out to a game and we went and we took our wives. I still remember one particular play, a man broke loose, I think he was a halfback, he raced about sixty-five yards for a touchdown and we were jumping up and down in the stadium and I turned to Mary in order to share with her some of the excitement and thrill and I just caught these words as she was speaking to the other young lady with us, “Blanch, have you ever seen a hat like that woman has over there on?” [Laughter]

Most of the time, however, we are interested in the action at a specific place and the evangelists of the New Testament are interested in the action that concerns the ministry of our Lord Jesus. And so men like Simon move on the scene and move off the scene and there are many questions that we would like to ask. The dying thieves move on the scene and move off the scene and we'd like to ask a lot of questions about them. Barabas moves on the scene and then he moves off the scene and we would like to know a whole lot about him. Tradition, I say, supplies us with details about almost all of these characters. It's the natural human curiosity. And so someone wants to meet human curiosity and supplies details which, of course, are not found in God's word. And almost all of the tradition is unreliable.

There is one other thing about this account and I suggested it a moment ago but I'd like to kind of develop it for just a moment. These scenes are typical. Now we have seen how Simon of Cyrene is a typical character. He illustrates a certain type of individual. We have seen how Barabas illustrates a certain type of individual. And so the characters move on and off the pages of holy Scripture but each one leaves us with the impression that the Holy Spirit has brought these characters into the story in order that we might see human life as it really is and as it is down through the centuries.

Now here we have the Lord Jesus upon Mount Golgotha and he is in the midst of the bandits. This, I say, is designed to show us that that is where he really belongs when he bears our sins. For, you see, he stands for us who are bandits and who are criminals. And so to have him upon the mountain in the midst of bandits and criminals is not an accident. God has arranged this in order that you and I might get the message.

And so the scene is typical; the men are typical. On the one hand we have one individual, a thief who did not repent in our Lord Jesus Christ. He died and so far as we know, so far as the record is concerned, he passed into an eternity separated from Jesus Christ. The other thief, just as guilty as the first, in faith turned to Jesus Christ and passed after our Lord Jesus Christ's death into paradise to be with him. In the central part of the picture is the Lord Jesus.

Now teaching children is a big thrill. Almost anyone who has ever taught children has used the blackboard and has used diagram. And this, of course, is one of the best stories to teach children because it pictures so wonderfully what Jesus Christ did for us. And usually at one point or another in a story such as this the teacher turns to the blackboard and he draws three crosses: one in the center, perhaps a little higher than the others, the two on the side. And he may do this, it is often done: he may put above one cross in and on; and then in the center cross; on, not in; and then on the third cross; in, not on. And the reason that the teacher does this is in order to stress the relationship that each has to sin. In the case of our Lord Jesus, no sin is in him but sin is upon him for he bears our sins; and so on, not in, over the cross of Jesus Christ. He's the sin bearer but he is no sinner himself. In the case of the thief who believes in our Lord Jesus sin is in him, for he is a sinner, but sin is not on him for sin is on Christ; and so in, but not on, over his cross. Then the other thief in whom there was sin does not believe in Jesus Christ and consequently the sin which was in him and on him is in him and on him as he passes into eternity because he has not believed in our Lord Jesus Christ.

So this is a typical picture. It is designed to show us visibly and pictorially the facts of the ministry of the Lord Jesus. Now I say this is very simple and I would imagine that probably the great majority of you who are in this auditorium have not been told anything new at this point. Now I'm going to stress this, of course, as we study this man today. But I want to also add something else. I think this man was one of the noble theologians of the apostolic age. And my opening remarks were not made in order to simply startle you. I think this man was one of the noblest theologians of Jesus' day and a man who knew more than Peter when he died and who had seen more than the Apostle John who was noted for seeing visions when he died. And I think that when we finish if you don't agree with me at least you'll say that there is something to me be said for his viewpoint.

Now the men are on the mountain, Jesus was no doubt placed upon the cross first. The other two had an opportunity to observe him and being bitter with life, bitter at their executioners, bitter at the leaders, bitter at anything that might be nearby, they no doubt railed at our Lord Jesus. In the other accounts the statement is made that the thieves, plural, railed on him; and so apparently at the beginning of the crucifixion both of these thieves had blasphemed God by railing upon our Lord Jesus Christ. The text states that these men were malefactors. We read in verse 32, “And there were also two other malefactors led with him to be put to death.” John, or rather Matthew, states that they were robbers; so they were robbers, they were malefactors. The word for malefactor is our word for criminal. We would say they were criminals. They were robbers.

Their background, of course, is not told and we are left to guess. I'm going to take a guess and this is my guess. I believe that these men were probably arch patriots. It's kind of striking to me that Barabas is also called a robber. The very term that is used of Barabas is used of the two men. It is not impossible that the three were compatriots and that when Barabas had been taken these two were taken with him, but Barabas had been released. It's just possible that Barabas was standing by the side of the cross and

was observing the death of the two and reflecting upon the fact that had it not been for the man in the center he would have died with them.

So they were robbers and they were criminals. And I kind of think, as I say this is a guess, that they were arch patriots. They were Jews who were very interested, nationalistically, in the history of Israel and consequently they were opposed to Rome. They did everything that they could by undercover plot and otherwise to defeat the Romans interests in the land, but the time had come when the long arm of Roman law had reached out and took these two young Jewish ruffians and had put them in prison and they had been sentenced to die by crucifixion. And so they were patriots, fervent patriots. They probably, because they had been sought by Rome, had to live by means of plunder and thievery, and possibly even murder. At least they were insurrectionists. And as a result of this the biblical record is true when it speaks of them as thieves.

I believe, and this again is a guess, I think in the light of this noble affirmation of faith that this young man makes that he must have been a man of tremendous talent. He must have been a man of great ability. I think that when he grew up all in the community must have known that he had unusual talents. There is a Latin proverb called *corruptio optimi est pessima*, the corruption of the best is the worst. And I think that this man had tremendous talents and tremendous gifts and tremendous abilities but of course he had wasted them on a lost cause. And as a result of this had not only been guilty of a false decision of trying to resist Roman authority, but had added to that other criminal acts. And he had become hardened, and hardened, and hardened and finally was ready to die upon the cross.

These two men are with Jesus. They have seen him raised upon his cross and they now are raised upon their crosses. And so they rail upon him. Everybody on Mount Golgotha is railing upon the Lord Jesus. The people are standing by. The rulers are deriding him saying, “He saved others, let him save himself if he be the messiah, the chose of God.” The soldiers come to him and they mock him, I assume that they

probably make profound salaams before the king and they say, “If Thou be the king of the Jews, save Thyself.” And over the cross there is the superscription, “This is Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews.” In the midst of it one of the malefactors rails upon our Lord Jesus and says, “If Thou be the Christ, save Thyself and us!” utterly oblivious, of course, to the real meaning of what he was saying. For, you see, it was an impossible suggestion. Jesus Christ could not save the dying thief if he saved himself. He can only save the dying thief and other thieves and criminals such as you and I are by not saving himself. It is because Jesus refused to save himself that he can save us. But this man does not understand that, he blasphemes and says, “If Thou be the Christ, save Thyself and us!”

These men hear this remarkable person who hangs in the midst of them say, “Father, let them go, for they know not what they do.” They notice this man who does not revile when he is reviled. For as Peter said, “When he was reviled he did not revile in return.” They noticed this strange characteristic about him and one of these men is especially moved by the activities, or lack of activity, of our Lord Jesus upon the cross. That is our second thief.

And finally, as he reflects upon what is transpiring before his eyes and as he looks upon the holy face of the Lord Jesus, the heart of this great, long bound man of magnificent intellect is finally beginning to stir. He’s a man, I think, of piercing perception. A man of keen and incisive speech, a man of great courage, and a man of brilliant foresight, and his heart begins to stir for the first time as he looks at our Lord Jesus. I think it must have been just as the great Arctic snows finally begin to move when the summer sun begins to set its rays upon the snow. And finally this man, who has been throughout his whole life, a hardened criminal is finally touched by our Lord Jesus Christ. And I want you to notice now the steps in this man’s conversion because I think you can see them in the word itself.

The first thing that comes over this man is a testimony to the fear of God which has come to him from the life of Jesus. Finally he cannot stand it any more as his heart has been moved by what he has seen he turns to the other criminal and he says, “Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?” The Old Testament says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” And here is a man who has finally been touched in his heart by the fear of God as he’s riding out to go out into eternity there has come over the heart of this great man a sense of the fear of that which he could not control. This man who was not fearful of Rome, who was not afraid of Caesar is now beginning to feel over his heart and spirit the fear of God. And that, of course, is the first step in his salvation. And it’s the first step in the salvation of many, to realize that ultimately you and I must face God. We must step out of this life. And we must step into eternity. And we must ultimately come face to face with the God who sits upon the throne.

Iago said of Othello, “He hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly.” And I think the dying thief, as he looked at the holy beauty of our Lord Jesus Christ has taken also a look at himself and he realizes now that judgment is soon to come to him. “Dost thou not fear God?” And then there is a next step. He goes on to say, “And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds.” In other words, his conscience had now awakened. He confesses his guilt and his just judgment. God and conscience, these two great, eternal facts we have to deal with. We have to deal each one of us with the fact of God. We may like to push him out of our lives and say we don’t believe in God any more, he will not be pushed. You may try all of your stratagems, you may try philosophy, you may tray rationalism, you may try indifference, you may try hardening yourself by acts of sin against God. But you cannot get rid of God. You may think you can but you cannot. He will intrude himself into your life and he will stay there. And you will ultimately have to face up to the fact of God.

Now when the Holy Spirit comes into our lives and has moved into our consciences so that we sense our just condemnation before God. A second great step along the way to salvation has come, for God and conscience are two facts with which we must deal.

There is another step in this man’s life now and this, of course, is the greatest of all. He has said, “We indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.” He has been convinced that Jesus is innocent. He has seen, somehow or other, the holiness of the Lord Jesus. As he has observed him under the Roman judgment and under the Roman punishment he has not found anything in the life of this man with which he can find fault.

Now I would imagine from this that this man must have known something about Jesus’ reputation or else he has heard something about him recently. At least he seems to have an idea that this man Jesus has lived an innocent life. And as he observes him on the mount he has become convinced that what he has heard is surely true. This man hath done nothing amiss. And so now he turns to the Lord and he says to him, “Lord,” now I want to stop here for just a moment because I don’t think we realize what a tremendous thing this was for the dying thief to say. “Lord,” where did he discover a term like this to apply to the Lord Jesus? Why, the term kurios is the term that a Jew used to refer to the covenant keeping God of Israel. He used the term Lord to refer to the Jehovah of the Old Testament. He used the term Lord to speak of the one who led Israel out of Egypt into the Red Sea and into the wilderness and ultimately into the Promised Land. He used the term Lord to speak of the one whom they worshiped through the ritual of the tabernacle and the temple. He used the term Lord to refer to the God whom the prophets had spoken of, whom the prophets had preached. “Lord,” where had he learned something to apply this term Lord to our Lord Jesus?

Well now, if you’ll notice the context of the railing upon our Lord Jesus. Rulers had come and said, “If he be the Christ, the chose of God, let him save himself.” The

messiah, the chosen of God; he had also looked up and he had seen the superscription “This is Jesus of Nazareth the king of the Jews.” He had heard the other thief say, “If Thou be the messiah, save Thyself and us.” And as he reflected upon that which was written over the cross of our Lord Jesus, as he heard the rulers use the expression, “The chosen of God,” as he heard the term messiah used with regard to him, there had come into this man’s heart the conviction that he was in truth the Lord, the kurios. And so in this tremendous leap of faith, a leap of faith by the way that reversed the judgment of the people about him, he spoke to our Lord and he said, “Kurios.”

Now I want you just to reflect for a moment how much of a reversal this was of the opinions about him. He reversed the judgment of the court. The court of the Jews had said, “He’s a blasphemer.” He reversed the judgment of the high priest, the leader in Israel; he, too, had said he was a blasphemer. He reversed the judgment of the mob; they had mocked him and they had said king of the Jews, ha ha ha, that kind of a king. Not only that, but he had reversed the judgment of the friends of our Lord Jesus. For when the chips were down Peter ran. And when the chips were down the other apostles left, they would not have dared, apparently, to stand upon that mount and say, “This is the Lord Jehovah. But the dying thief does. He says, “Lord,” and he says it, apparently, so all can here, “Lord, Lord.”

There isn’t anything more you can say about Jesus than that. Paul says, “No man calls Jesus Lord except by the Holy Spirit.” Paul says in Romans chapter 10, in verse 9, “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth, Jesus as Lord, and believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead Thou shalt be saved.” Here is a man who has looked off to Jesus and in the presence of a great company of witnesses has said, “Jesus is Lord.”

He said in the midst of this, “It’s not dereliction, it’s not desolation, it’s the Lord God of Israel. He’s the King! And I see God reigning from a tree.” Calvin said, “I think this is the greatest example of faith in the New Testament.” If it’s not the greatest, Thomas’s may be the greatest: my Lord, my kurios, and my God. This is, “Lord.” And

you know, I think this was the Father’s comfort for the Lord Jesus. He’ll have, going with him, into paradise one of those thieves. The chief of the apostles has turned tail and fled. But to take Peter’s place of testimony there is the dying thief. Now of course it’s great to say Lord, but that isn’t all this man says. He says, “Lord, remember me.” Why, this man has come to the certainty of life after death.

I often hear theological professors stand behind the pulpit and say, “Now in the Old Testament everything is kind of hazy and dark and we don’t have any clear pictures of whether there is such a thing as life after death or not.” I’ve even stood or sat in funeral services and listened to men say that we cannot be sure of life after death at all. This man didn’t believe that. He thought that was nonsense.

He said, “Lord, remember me when Thou comest in Thy kingdom.” He was sure of life after death. He fearlessly faced the shadows. That’s not all. He said, “Lord, remember me when Thou comest in Thy kingdom.” He had already seen that true blessedness is not to be taken down from that cross to return to this life. But true blessedness is to keep company with Jesus in the life to come. Most of us think that, why the greatest blessing that could come to the dying thief would be to be released and to spend his life on earth as he pleased. Not so, not this man. Perhaps it was hopeless, but at least he realized that true blessedness is related to our Lord Jesus Christ. And it is, you know. You may think it’s wonderful to be a success in this life, I hope every one of you is. I often pray, by the way, for the men that they do make a success in this life. But the greatest thing that can happen to you is to put your trust in Jesus Christ, give a good testimony to him, and keep his company throughout eternity. That’s the important thing.

May I stop for just a moment and ask you a question? I’m not sure of some of you in the audience. I don’t really know about you. I wonder if you were to drop dead in our audience at this moment just exactly where you would go. I hope it would be to the presence of our Lord Jesus. Everyone who believes in him goes immediately into the presence of the Lord Jesus. But I’m not sure of everyone in this auditorium. Of course,

in the ultimate sense we can never be sure of anyone until we get there. I think we're going to be surprised. I'm quite sure I'm going to go up to someone and say, “Well you know I never would have thought you would have made it.” [Laughter] And I don't anticipate that no one will come up to me and say, “I'm surprised that you got here.” I've made some enemies of life that I'm sure wonder if I ought to be there. And in fact, if I'm going to be there they're not so sure they want to be there. But seriously, I'm really not sure about some of you and I want to say as solemnly as I can that the most important decision that you can ever make is to turn to our Lord Jesus and call him Lord, as Paul and as this man have exhorted us to do.

But that's not all: you know, he said, “Remember me,” as if Jesus could do something for him. Why, this man had become convinced of the saving power of the Lord Jesus. Somehow or other he felt that this holy man who was now in the hands of the Roman authorities and subject to them and who apparently was the victim was in the final analysis the real victim. He saw that ultimately he was not condemned but he saw that he was the condemner, and he was the real judge and Pilate was not.

And finally, I want you to notice this, he said, “Remember me when Thou comest in Thy kingdom.” This man requests a place in the messianic kingdom of our Lord Jesus. Now this is why I think he's such a noble theologian. This is why I think he's so much in advance of his time. I don't think the Apostle Peter and the Apostle John understood what he understood. I don't think that they really reached the level of the faith of this man; they did not understand all that he understood. I'm almost inclined to call him the noblest theologian of those who lived in the days of our Lord Jesus before the cross. He reaches this tremendous affirmation of faith in the person of our Lord and even has an understanding of the messianic kingdom to come. In fact, he seems convinced that Jesus is to come again in his kingdom. The Greek text says most likely -- and I'm taking another reading, men, not found in the Nestle-Aland text for those of you who are scholars or sitting as scholars in the audience -- I think that rather this statement should be

translated, “Remember me when Thou comest in (not into),” but, “When Thou comest in Thy kingdom.” In other words, “Give me a place in that kingdom which is sure to come.” And so we have this tremendous affirmation of faith in the Lord himself.

Oh, we talk about the great theologians of the Christian church, we talk about Augustine after the apostles. We talk about Calvin and we talk about Knox, and we talk about Luther, and we talk about Zwingli and we talk about Wesley and we talk about others. Why, this man deserves to be ranked with all the great theologians for the insight that he possessed.

May I just for a moment tell you a story? Some of you who are in the home Bible classes will remember this story, and I’ve also told the story once here. But some of you haven’t and it’s so appropriate. You know, all of this gives me the impression that the hand of God is in these events. In fact, as I study these accounts I’ve become more and more convinced of the fact that what I am reading is the word of God. And furthermore, this plan of salvation which is set forth in God’s word is so appropriate, it is so coherent, it so fits the status of man and it fits his needs and it so is tailored to him that I am convinced in my heart that it can only be of God. And I believe that the Holy Spirit as the word of God is preached and as we proclaim Jesus Christ that he, too, brings this word up to bear upon the hearts of men. And he shows them deep down in their hearts that this is God’s truth. And we have that conviction. I believe that there is a holy stillness that comes over the soul of man and I believe it’s upon your soul at this moment. Every time the gospel is preached the Holy Spirit testifies, powerfully, this is God’s word.

Many years ago a missionary by the name of Hedley, his son is now a Professor of Religion, a semi-liberal in Mills College in California. His father was a missionary to China. Mr. Hedley was telling the story of the gospel back in the interior of China in a little village by the side of the Grand Canal. And he was telling the story of the cross, and he was flashing pictures on the wall. And he was using the old magic lantern: there are a few in the audience who remember the magic lantern, the stereopticon. And these

pictures were very, very coarse and crude, Mr. Hedley said as he told the story. But he was just a child but he can still remember that they were crude pictures. And finally the three crosses were flashed on the wall. And Mr. Hedley's father was expounding the cross. And when he finished expounding the cross of how on the one thief, sin was in him and on him because he rejected Christ, on the other thief sin was in him but not on him because in Jesus' case there was no sin in but all sin was upon him, and Mr. Hedley said, “I can still remember an old woman getting up in the back of the audience and stumbling forward with her feet all bound up and saying, “I always knew there must be a God like that!” You see, there comes to the heart of men, no matter where men are, the sense of the appropriateness of the truth of Christianity. The appropriateness of the person of Christ, the appropriateness of his salvation, it's a God.

How about you? Have you responded? You've heard his voice, I know. Have you responded? Have you turned off in faith to the Lamb of God who took away your sins and have you said, “Lord, remember me when Thou comest in Thy kingdom?” Who can honor the faith of this man enough? Well Jesus can and that's what he does. Did you notice Jesus Christ's answer to this man's cry? “And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.”

Now I'm not going to say one word except this about that abominable punctuation of this passage in which we are supposed to read the text, “Verily I say unto thee, Today, thou shalt be with me in paradise ultimately.” This is used by many of our false cults to deny the fact that when a man dies he immediately may go into the presence of the Lord Jesus. I don't think I've ever read a more inane translation than, “Verily I say unto thee, Today.” For goodness sakes, upon what other day was Jesus speaking than today? What does that add? Often through the New Testament we read, “Verily I say unto thee,” never do we read, “Verily I say unto thee, Today.” Who has to say that? I don't have to say, “Now I'm saying to you this morning.” I often do it, by the way, but I don't have to. I think you have enough intelligence to realize it's this morning. And

furthermore, what a tremendous weakening of the text, for this man had said, “Remember me when,” and in the Greek text it’s somewhat indefinite. “Remember me whenever you come in your kingdom, I’m not sure of the exact time but I know you’re coming.

Remember me whenever you come in your kingdom,” and Jesus answers and says, “Verily I say unto thee, Today. Today I’ll give you a little anticipation of it.” Notice he said, “Verily I,” that’s a promise with an infallible basis.

Now my wife is a very wonderful person. I think I trust her word more than the word of any other living person. If she tells me something I can almost be sure it’s true. I would trust her word than any other person’s word except Jesus Christ’s. My wife can make promises that she cannot fulfill. Jesus is not only truthful, but powerful. “Verily I say unto thee,” there is an infallible basis to this promise. Not only that, this is a promise for this man of immediate blessing. No purgatory on the way. “Verily I say unto thee, Today. Today.” I think that Jesus died first. That seems plain from the record. I think the man who welcomed this man into paradise was our Lord himself. Today, Today: and then paradise. The place where the blessed dead are. Communion and conscious communion, “Thou shalt be with me in paradise.” I think it was Bousset who said, “Today, what speed, with me, what companionship, in paradise, what rest.”

Was there ever a man who had a stranger pilgrimage than this man? That morning he had awakened in a damp and dank Roman prison. He had awakened to the certainty of death. Soon he had heard the Roman soldiers coming. He got up, he heard the clanking of the chains, he heard the key in the door, he heard the door squeak open, the Roman soldiers came in and took him and his companion out, they took their crosses, they made that long journey toward Mount Golgotha carrying their crosses. Finally their hands were pierced and their feet were pierced and they were placed in the hole and they were hanging upon the cross. And there he faced eternity. But that night he was in paradise with Jesus. Why, the journey that this man takes makes you almost dizzy. Our spacemen make dizzying flights and you wonder, of course, what it’s going to be like

ultimately to take a trip to the moon. This man took a trip that was even more remarkable. From a Roman prison to a paradise in one day, what a journey.

The riches of grace in salvation are never told in the New Testament more clearly than in this. Here was a man who wasn't religious. He was irreligious, but he was with Jesus at the end of the day. Here was a man who did no good works, he had no works to present to God, but he's with Christ. Here is a man who has not been baptized; he didn't have time to undergo any kind of right whatsoever. Here was a man who was not cultured, he was a criminal. Here was a man who did absolutely nothing with which to commend himself to God, absolutely nothing. If ever a man deserved to go to a Christ-less eternity under the judgment of God this man did. There is one thing that this man did, he turned off in faith to the Lord Jesus and he said, “Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.” He acknowledged that he was justly condemned and he cried to Christ. There can be no clearer expression of God's plan of salvation than this.

If you are sitting in the audience this morning with good works and hoping by them to make your way into heaven you shall be greatly disappointed and surprised. If you are sitting in the audience thinking because you are cultured and educated that you shall get to heaven on the basis of these things, oh how astonished you shall be. If you are in the audience thinking because you're a member of a lovely church and have been baptized and have been taking the Lord's table, that you shall get to heaven on the basis of your religion, oh the terror of facing the living God who judges in vengeance because we have rejected Jesus Christ.

Here is a man who is the undeserved recipient of the free grace of God. This is the only way a man can be saved, the only way. No other way. If you are sitting in the audience thinking that for one moment anything that you have is a value before God, as far as your standing is concerned, you are standing on the brink of hell. Salvation is by grace through faith. Jesus topped each one of these man's requests. He said, “Lord, remember me.” Jesus said, “You shall be with me.” He said, “Lord, remember when you

come into your kingdom.” He said, “Today, thou shalt be with me.” He said, “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He said, “Today you shall be with me in paradise.” Not only a kingdom, but paradise: not only remembered, but with him: not only remembered, the recipient of some benefit, but shall be in his presence. I’m overwhelmed; I’m absolutely overwhelmed by this man, by this man’s faith, by this man’s salvation. But I’m overjoyed; I’m overjoyed because I know this is the only way I can get to heaven. I don’t have anything with which to commend myself to God. I’m a hypocrite. I’m not righteous; I’m unrighteous. I’m a liar, I’m a cheat, I’m a criminal. A criminal, that’s what I am. That’s what I am in the sight of God, that’s what he tells me. That’s what he tells all of us. We are criminals. Down in our hearts we know it’s true. We are. But there’s hope for criminals. There is hope for cheats. There is hope for liars. There is hope for the irreligious. There is hope in God, in the Lord. What a wonderful Lord we have. How wonderful it is to turn off to Jesus and say, “Lord, remember me when Thou comest in Thy kingdom,” and know he answers us and says, “Today, today. If it should be time to depart you shall be with me.”

May God speak to your heart. If you are in this audience this morning and you have not yet believed in Christ do not waste one moment. As we close the meeting in prayer this morning immediately in your heart say, “Thank you Lord for dying for me. I take you as my savior.” May we stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for Thy word, for the assurance of the presence of the Holy Spirit in its application. And oh Father, if there is one person here this morning who has not yet believed in Christ, oh may they be turning in their hearts now and turning to our Lord Jesus and saying, “Lord, remember me, I thank Thee oh God for Jesus Christ who loved me and gave himself for me.” And now Lord, as we face this week and realize that judgment is just around the corner, oh give us no rest nor peace until we bring others to know him and to know his life eternal. For his names’ sake. Amen.