

The dying thief

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[0 : 0 0] Turn with me now to the Gospel by Luke chapter 23 at verse 42. Luke's Gospel the 23rd chapter verses 42 and 43 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 on the morning of the day when Jesus was crucified there were three robbers in custody in Jerusalem it may be in the same prison but by nightfall these men were as far separated from one another as human beings could possibly be each of them was in a different sphere of existence one the robbers was alive free and among his friends as the day advanced the other two were crucified one on either side of Jesus probably equally near to his cross and so it happened that in the providence of God looked at from a human level at least and they had both one last opportunity of obtaining mercy little as they may themselves have realized it at the outset one was unable to see and grasp this opportunity the other remained unbelieving unchanged and unsaved so one of the thieves when the day closed was with the saviour his spirit was among the spirits of the just made passionate the other had departed from this life the other one was to enter into that sad and awful fellowship of those for whom there is neither mercy nor hope in store it has been said that one man obtained mercy on the brink of eternity that none might despair not only one of these two lest anyone might presume that it would be safe for her or for her to leave the matter of making peace with God the hour of the approach of death we are not concerned with the thief who perish we are to think for a little of the story of the man who obtained mercy and in particular of two things first some of the influences behind the man's request lord remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom and then secondly

some implications behind or some implications of i should say the savior's response first then some of the influences leading to the man's requests now we know very little about this man we have no information beyond what the gospels tell us of the circumstances of his death of course many commentators have been busy trying to make up for our lack of knowledge by the use of imagination some suppose that this man has been brought up in a godly jewish home where he was taught to reverence and obey god and to look forward to the fulfillment of the promises that god had made in connection with his people as he grew up he supposed that he became interested in the zealous thinking that through their activities his hopes and the hopes of the nation might be realized that he fell in ultimately with a left wing of the zealous who were more concerned for the gratifying of their own interests than the furtherance of god's glory which they professed to see and so he became reckless his character deteriorated he indulged in foolish acts of violence and at last was arrested and brought to justice some of that may be true none of it may be true we do not know it may be that he was an ordinary brigand of the type that made the way from jericho to jerusalem and jerusalem to jericho such a danger to the passersby or those who traveled either way that it came to be called the way of blood that is the background of the parable of the good samaritan as we call it but it has been pointed out by one good exegete that those who go in for imaginary construction of this man's past history seem to be commentators or exegetes who are unwilling to believe in sudden conversions now sudden conversions may be rare comparatively rare but not to believe in the possibility of a sudden conversion is surely to be guilty of limiting the holy one of israel surely if nothing is impossible with god that is in keeping with his character and his purposes then it is wrong to suppose that he cannot be so purposes and so desires bring a man from a graceless state to a state of salvation and fit him for the kingdom of glory in such a short period as this man may have been called and fit and so rather than do anything of that kind we shall confine ourselves entirely to the facts that are available to us in god's word it is never very safe if at all safe to base any conclusions in preaching on things that lie outside the record of truth well then confining ourselves to the we are told what may we gather about some of the influences

that led to this request lord remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom first there was the realization of his plight it is very likely that this man like many of his kind who went to the place of death with a show of courage and boldness whatever he may have felt perhaps with an attitude of defiance he would doubtless have received the medicated wine which christ refused to drink and that may for a period have dulled his senses somewhat it was for the purposes of acting like a kind of anesthetic to dull the sense of pain on the part of those suffered by those who were crucified at any rate when he began to was actually crucified and began to take stock of things around him he was aware that a considerable amount of abuse was being directed to the person who hung on the central cross in which his companion was shared and it appears from matthew's record that he himself joined in him for a time but then as the anesthetic the effects of the anesthetic may have been wearing off pain and physical distress became more acute and these thoughts were turned in upon himself he may well have been in many a desperate plight before from which he was rescued either by his own ingenuity or by the help of his friends but here he was upon a cross before him was a guard of roman soldiers lingering around were the civil heads of the community and the religious heads of the community the community it was a forlorn hope that any further attempt would be made to rescue he was dying death was not far away and with the thought of death came the thought of god perhaps god had not been in all his thoughts for a long time past but with the thought of death came the thought of god he thought of god and was troubled troubled to the extent that when he heard his companion in affliction joining in abuse directed to jesus he rebuked he said does not thou fear god seen we are in the same condemnation he thought of god and was troubled he realized that he was dying the thought of death brought to his mind in some way or at some degree his accountability to god he knew that he was not at peace with god he thought of god and he was afraid he was afraid of death in one way or another and perhaps less reserved in dealing with the subject than there was in the past that may be the impression gained from literature and music and art and perhaps even in song but of course from the media and elsewhere death is often treated in a superficial manner

yet some would have it that there is an interest in death that didn't used to be among people in general and an interest if even to be seen in the interest in the occult and in spiritualism in what may lie beyond death and it may be as some would claim that there is a special opportunity here for those who present the biblical message to present that biblical message to people who are thinking about death in some way or another that they didn't use to but we should always remember that the only reliable account of the true significance of death and what lies beyond death is to be found in the word of god and we are in a measurelessly more favored position than this thief upon the cross walls for we have the full record of the of the revelation that god has given us all the lights of the new testament along with the old has brought to bear on the subject of death the clear statement of the word that it is appointed unto man once to die but after this the judgment the clear teaching of the word that the issues beyond death depend on the relation to god in which the sinner dies the truth is whether he be at peace with god or whether he be unforgiven upon that will hang his eternity his destiny of blessing or of woe and all of us have death ahead if the lord carries and the question arises what preparation have we for going on to death and to meeting of god in judgment here was a man taste of his with death he thought of god and was troubled because he knew he was unprepared to meet death and far away as we may like to put it it might be just round the corner health hold upon life is very tenuous at the best a realization of his plight but then there came a readiness to admit his desert it was not at all a common thing for men like this when they were brought to justice to admit their desert as guilty persons today will plead to the last that they are not guilty and will attempt to defend themselves and to make out that the sentences passed upon them are unjust so it was common in ancient days and many in this man's position remained on crosses for days and as long as they could speak they called down the wrath of heaven of whatever gods there might be upon those who had brought them to justice and suspended them on crosses but here was a man and he hadn't been many hours there and he was prepared to admit his ill deserved he said we indeed justly for we receive the due reward of our deeds he was willing to admit that he was receiving at the hands of men the due reward of his deeds and that was surely on the road to acknowledge at any rate that if god dealt with him in judgment he was but receiving the reward of the life he had lived his forgetfulness of god his disobedience to his commands all the evil he had done and thought readiness to admit his ill desert now that this is that is the common progress of the teaching and dealing of the spirit result of the deep teaching and dealing of the spirit when a person is awakened to a sense of his guilt in the presence of

god a realization of his plight as an unforgiving sinner going on to death and then brought to the position where he will plead nothing in his own favor for he realizes that if god is to deal with him in judgment and cast him up forever he is but receiving what the word of god teaches and what his awakened conscience will teach him is the due reward of his deeds here he is on the road to the position where a sinner before god will not dare to plead anything of his own in his favor he has nothing to plead but like the public and god be merciful to me a sinner so it is not altogether remarkable that a man who had some knowledge of god from his background his jewish background some knowledge of sin some knowledge of god's judgment upon the sinner that he should in this position of this man experiencing what he was experiencing knowing that death was not far away have come to be afraid of the consequences of dying unforgiven have come to recognize that he was receiving the jew reward of his deeds but the next day the next influence which i am going to mention is far more wonderful it is a recognition of the character mission and destiny of jesus now we must remember where jesus was he was crucified beside him to all intents and purposes he was dying a criminal's death that is what he had been sentenced to do he was being treated as a common criminal the thief whether he could read or not probably gathered sufficient about jesus and the reason why he was there to know that he had been regarded as either intended insurrection against the romans or to have been involved in profit taking part of it in something in it in some way he knew also it was quite clear to him that the religious leaders of the nation were all against and were mocking here was jesus in the midst of those who were apparently his enemies and seemingly helpless in their hands here is a man that so far as we know had paid little attention to anything he may have heard of jesus in the past and yet he comes to the conclusion first of all that jesus was suffering unjustly we said receive the just reward of our deeds but this man has done nothing amaze how have you reached this conclusion well keep him to the little we know about him let us see what we can gather from it it may be that on the journey to calvary he had been sufficiently near jesus to hear his address to the women of jerusalem it's some selfishness and it's concern for them in view of the future judgment that was coming upon the city remarkable words he must have thought them for a man in his position he could scarcely but have heard the prayer of jesus when he was nailed to the cross father forgive them for they know not what they do how very different from the kind of utterance that he or his time would make at such a time or summer craft here was somebody altogether unique and then again he heard all this torrent of abuse and he saw he understood the dignity and restraint with which jesus bore it all [20 : 18] who was peter says later who when he was revived revived not again he threatened not those who abused him he was aware of the person on the central cross he was convinced that this could be no ordinary person and he was convinced too as time went on that it was managed that prompted all this abuse that it was injustice that had nailed him there so far he was convinced that he was a judge person a man of good character who had done nothing on his a man of unique and gracious dignity but then you see he could have learned a good deal about the gospel from the enemies of jesus dr stewart called in a sermon somewhere about the gospel according to jesus enemies and there was a good deal of it here for he heard them saying if this is true if this is true obviously quoting things jesus had said if thou be the son of god if thou be the christ if thou be the king of israel and suppose he knew nothing about him in the past he would have realized that he must have claimed to be these things or something like he might must have claimed that he had a kingdom or was concerned with a kingdom he must be the son of god he must be the messiah and this all was in harmony with what he recognized of jesus from his observe what he had heard him say and his observance of his demeanor observing his demeanor and then something wonderful happened to him one of the poets you may remember the scribes attained on a dark night when everything was concealed in absolute blackness and then there came a great flash of lightning and lit up the whole bay across which he was looking so that he could pick out easily every detail and he goes on to say that so may truth be flashed out with one blow and so it is sometimes in the experience of those who are taught by the spirit a great truth breaks enough on the signal of darkness as it is as it were in one instance perhaps it happened to this man just like that i wonder had he heard it is quite possible there was so much still about it of jesus last great miracle in the raising of lazarus it is quite possible it was all jerusalem was full of it at the time of jesus death this is why the high priest was so concerned to hurry him away to death before anything more would be done that would deprive them of all authority with the people and that they would all go after jesus perhaps he had heard of that we do not know if he did it might have encouraged him to offer this prayer he suddenly realized something of the greatness and the mission and the character of the

person who hung beside him and then there came the dawn of a great hope a dream of hope that if anywhere at all there was help and hope for him here and he did it to thank you to thank you to thank you to christ think of the little he knew about christ at the best think of all that we know by way of contrast from the new testament record think of the little excuse there is for us to remain unbelievers to remain at a distance from christ

the little excuse that we have by way of comparison with this man and what have we done with our knowledge are you trusting christ tonight friend have you awakened up like this man upon the cross although you are not on the cross as the word of god that has been preached so faithfully and so long in its congregation that you have sat under it's been blessed to you by the holy spirit that you have come to know your need as a sinner you need a preparation in view of life's duties and life's way not to mention death ahead how often the savior has been held out to you in the gospel preached and in the word read and in the family worship at home perhaps and are you here tonight still unbelieving still unsaved think of this man and think of the venture he made on the basis of the little information he had lord he said remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom what tremendous faith this man got that led him to appeal to jesus at such a time and when jesus was in such circumstances as to one who could deliver him who could somehow or other for he believed he had a future he had a destiny that somehow or other christ was coming to his kingdom despite his crucifixion he couldn't tell how but he believed it was true and perhaps he might share in it think of the leap in the dark as we may so put it that this man took well then let us pass and very briefly touch upon the implications of the savior's response now i want you to notice particularly as the background of what i'm going to say that hitherto since he had offered the prayer on behalf of those who crucified him jesus had remained silent upon the cross he neither rebuked those who abused him nor did he appeal to them or condemn them he had remained silent and perhaps this poor thief would not have been surprised if he made no response to his prayer we might not if we may reverently say so have been surprised if jesus had said to him it is too late you remember how he taught the parable that spoke of the master of the house rising up and shutting to the door you are like he might have said you are left too late your opportunity is gone he might have said i have many things to think of apart from you you see the distress i am in you know something of a little of it but something of it from your own condition hanging there upon a cross in misery and pain i can do nothing for you now but instead he said this today shall thou be with me in paradise what a tremendous amount is enclosed in these few words now until this thief had said this man has done nothing amiss no one had uttered a sympathetic word or a word in jesus favor since he was crucified it came first from this unexpected source this man has done nothing amiss and then from the same source this further encouragement for the savior in such a flight that here was one given to recognize in the midst of so many unbelievers and enemies who he was in some measure he recognized who he was what his mission was and what he could do

now jesus had not yet entered the deepest phase of his suffering it was approaching and here i think was a special encouragement from his father before he entered the deepest phase of his suffering here in the midst of all his enemies where he had didn't appear to have a single friend who was prepared to utter a word in his favor was from an unexpected source comfort sympathy recognition evidence that he wasn't dying in vain for had he not fed himself all that my father fall that the father giveth me shall come unto me and here he recognized one given him by the father in an unlikely place in unlikely circumstances and a most unlikely person a tremendous proof that he wasn't dying in vain given him to deliver from the very verge of hell and to prepare for the paradise of glory on the basis of the sacrifice which he was at that time offering there were special encouragements from stage to stage the future of jesus preparation for death the trial and when he hung up on the cross the angels sent to comfort him and get ceremony probably that vision of the future that was given him when he stood before the high priest of which we may be thinking tomorrow and here upon the cross the appeal of this thief here he recognized one given him by the father in the time of his suffering it was encouragement to him and with all we can see here the assurance that jesus possessed regarding the future today he said shalt thou be with me in paradise so often before he died before he was arrested he had predicted his suffering he made repeated predictions to his disciples and seldom did he stop at his death he went through to the resurrection and said on the third day he shall rise again he was confident of the issue and while for a time his mind and spirit seemed to be overshadowed in gethsemane he came from gethsemane with calm self-possession and compulsion he was sustained by good hope for the future who for the

joy that was set before him endured the cross the shame and although he knew that he was at that time approaching the depth of his sufferings he said he today shall thou be with me in paradise he had no doubt whatsoever how the thing would end however grievous the sufferings that lay between it would be but a short time within the compass of that day he would be beyond death and suffering forever beyond suffering forever and in a short time beyond death and its effects and this savior is able to give comfort good hope through grace to his people in the midst of suffering a sure hope that beyond the suffering lies the glory the rest the peace the deliverance from all the walls of earth which he has reserved for his which he is preparing for his people and the father has promised to them and that he himself had special help in the midst of his suffering special tokens of god encouraging him so he can give to his people songs in the night grace sufficient to uplift them above their sufferings

that they may rise superior to them and get profit to their souls and become in the midst of suffering this is one of the paradoxes of the christian life that was noticed by the early church and has been noticed since that we have in the epistles of paul and elsewhere this peace and sense of joy in the midst of tribulation which christ has made possible for his people he was not without it himself even in the depths of his suffering and here was an occasion of joy there is joy he said in his teaching among the present in the presence of the angels of god over one sinner that repents have you gladdened the heart of god and of christ by coming in penitence to christ here was a man that certainly given uplift i believe to the savior spirit in the midst of his suffering the encouragement he experienced the assurance he possessed and then the power at his command surely this answer implies that he was exercising the same power here as he exercised when he said to the man sick of the palsy son be of good cheer thy sins are forgiven he had power to give pardon and peace and hope a new light to this man and think of the mercy that accompanied he told him also when he said today shall there be with me in paradise that he was soon to get relief even from his physical sufferings it was common for people to linger on crosses for several days in misery fear was a man who was to be relieved that very day it happened to be a particular day that the jews were not anxious that body should remain upon the cross the following day and so the soldiers to gratify the jews came and broke the legs of this of the thieves to hasten her death that and so came about that his physical sufferings were soon terminated and then he had assurance as to where he was going today this very day shall thou be with me in paradise he was going to be in the very highest company he was going to be with the savior where was paradise certainly not purgatory word occurs three times in scripture in the new testament once paul speaks of being caught up into paradise where he heard unspeakable words not lawful for a man to utter certainly in the nearer presence of god and then we have one of the promises made to him that overcomes in the book of revelation that he should eat to the tree of life that is in the midst of the paradise of god going back to the imagery of eden but referring to the blessedness and satisfaction of heaven so here is a man who was to be at the end of his suffering in the best of places in the best of company in the most satisfying of circumstances that very day think of the power and the mercy exercised by the savior in the midst of his sufferings and this same savior is tonight exalted at god's right hand he has at his disposal all authority in heaven and in earth he takes pleasure in those that hope in his mercy and those who betake themselves for refuge to him and he is both willing and able to bring the sinner from a state of ungodliness and unbelief into the kingdom of grace to prepare him for every duty and service that he requires of him in this world and to fit him for the kingdom of glory and if you are concerned about your duty tomorrow and your unfitness as any true believer must be ever concerned with his unfitness to serve god acceptably especially in dealing with holy matters remember the mercy and the power and the grace at the disposal of this savior he died that he might be able to dispense it freely satisfyingly and fully and he loves to see his people come in making rich demands on his mercy and grace and trusting to himself for the grace that fits for the grace that strengthens for the grace that prepares for the grace that will enable you to get good from the means of grace yet profit from the sacrament and that will enable you to go on in strength of god the lord serving him and your fellows according to his will while you continue here until you enter in the abundance of his grace and mercy into the place which he is preparing for his people let us pray oh lord our god we thank thee for the wonder of this story we have but touched a little upon the fringe of the things that are implied in it we thank thee for the glory and grace of the savior we thank thee that he is mighty to save and able to save them to the uttermost that he has said to his people i will never leave thee thee nor forsake thee that as they look back they will be able to say with joshua not one good thing has failed of all that the lord our god has promised grant then that

they may be that each and all of us may be unable to look to him as it is said look unto me and be ye saved all the ends of the earth and looking to him may we be unable to put our case in his hands that we may have all the deliverance from sins guilt and sins consequences in heart and life that we need and all the help that we need that we may glorify his name and do his will and follow on to know him take us in safety to our homes be with us throughout the approaching night remember all for whom we are concerned may they and we be bound up with the lord god in the bundle of life fit us for thy will and service here and prepare us for thy glory hereafter for jesus sake amen