

Mercy in death's crisis

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- [0 : 0 0] Now for a little while we turn our attention to Luke 23 at verse 39. Luke 23 at verse 39.
- 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?
- 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. Now as we approach our own season of communion, which will be next month, we thought it might be a good thing if we concentrated our attention on the events that took place at Calvary these 2,000 years ago.
- And last time we were talking about the first of the sayings of the cross. Father, forgive them, they know not what they do. We come now to the second sayings of the cross.
- [1 : 2 7] You know, there are many within the borders of our own church. I'm not talking about any other church. I'm talking about the Free Church of Scotland. And there are many within our borders who believe in God.
- I have no doubt they would all say, Yes, I believe in God, otherwise I wouldn't be here. And if you were to go on asking them questions about the afterlife, they would say, Oh yes, I do believe in an afterlife that once you die you go to meet your judge and you either go to heaven or to hell.
- And yet these same people, if you were to quiz them about their personal relationship to Christ, they wouldn't say that they had committed themselves to being Christians for one reason or another.
- But of course if you were to go on talking to them, they would tell you that they are living in hope that they will one day enter paradise.
- And they are hoping perhaps that it's on their deathbed that everything will become serious for them and they will make their commitment to our Lord Jesus Christ.
- [2 : 5 0] And maybe some of them might say, You know, I have great comfort from that story about the dying thief. How he got saved in the last moments of his life.
- And if he got saved in the last moments of his life, then surely there is hope for me. You know, that's a revelation to us of the awful depravity of the human heart.
- This idea of procrastinating. This idea of leaving things off and hoping for the best. Who told you, or who has told me, that I'll have time to think things out on my deathbed?
- I've often had occasion to visit people on their deathbeds and I find it extremely difficult to speak to them about these things simply because they are so involved with their illness and so involved in death which is coming for them and taking them that they haven't time to consider what I'm trying to say to them.
- You know, there was another thief who died alongside of Christ and let me say it very bluntly, that thief went to hell.

[4 : 15] There we see him. His body is fevered.

He is wracked by pain. He is slowly succumbing to death. And you would think, wouldn't you, that surely if anything would lead a man to repentance, it is when his body is in pain and when he is succumbing to death that he would cry out to Almighty God for mercy.

And yet, instead of that, we read about that thief that he died, a hardened sinner. Yes, a hardened sinner. And he died reviling and rejecting Christ.

It's a staggering story. Oh, we are so thankful to God that in the case of the other thief, he was penitent. But, you know, it wasn't his pain, nor was it his suffering that led him to Christ.

What was it that led him to Christ? It was the sovereign grace of God working in his heart. And it's a marvelous thing when the sovereign grace of God begins to work in a man's heart.

[5 : 37] You see, the one thief was only interested in getting relief from his sufferings in this present world. The other thief was only interested in relief from the eternal sufferings in the life to come.

As good old Matthew Henry puts it, one departs with curse, the other with a blessing. Well, let's consider for a little while the past lives of these men.

And it's at the cross that we see how they had lived. How had they lived? They had lived lawless lives.

It's Luke who describes them here as malefactors. That is, they were evildoers. Evildoers, these two men.

They were energetically involved in creating and in doing evil. It's Matthew and it's Mark who describe these men as thieves.

[6 : 52] I suppose that in all probability they lived in the mountains in Palestine. And all of a sudden they would descend from the mountains upon unsuspecting pedestrians as they made their way through the passes of the mountains.

You know how our Lord Jesus describes for us the typical methods of these men. You and I think, oh, this is a terrible age we are living in. The age of thieves. The age of men of violence.

The age of awful things happening to us. But let's think of what it was like in the days of our Lord. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, you remember how he tells us that the man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, what happened to that man?

He was stripped of his raiment. They wouldn't even leave a stitch of clothing on the poor man. They had to steal it. And not only did they steal everything he had, which was on his person, but Jesus tells us how they brutally beat him up and left him at the roadside almost for dead.

That's what was happening in the days of Jesus. It's not unlike the day, the present day, is it? The Good Samaritan put him on his ass, took him to an inn, told the doctors there to look after him.

[8 : 22] Now, as far as these thieves who were on these crosses were concerned, they had taken a wrong turning in life.

And in taking that wrong turning in life, it led to their total ruin and to their disgrace. You see, what happened to them was this, they had left God out of their lives.

And when you leave God out of your life, it's not surprising that you become hardened. This is what's happened to so many people in our present day.

Hard men, hard women, they are hardened in sin. And the reason why they are hardened is because they have excluded God. God has no part in their lives.

And it's not to be wondered at that they live the way they do. But these men discovered this to their cost, as all will, sooner or later, who go on like this.

[9 : 34] They discovered to their cost that sin doesn't pay. As we are told by the apostle, sin, when it is finished, brings forth death.

And men may seemingly prosper for a time, but you know, it doesn't last when they leave God out of it. Isn't it David who puts it like this, and we were singing his words together just before the sermon.

He says this, I have seen the wicked, and we are seeing it today. I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green bay tree.

Ah, but listen, and this is how David goes on with his words of song. Yet he says, he passed away, and lo, he was not.

Yea, I sought him, but he could not be found. That's the way of the wicked, you see. They have their day. And it's a very short day as well.

[10 : 45] And it will soon be passed for them. And after death, the judgment. And we also see at the cross how hardened in sin men may become.

When our Lord was being mocked by those who came to witness his death, it's recorded in the Gospel of Matthew that the thieves cast the same in his teeth.

And it is Mark who says, and they that were crucified reviled him. It's terrible, isn't it? Men who are dying, and they are reviling the Son of God.

And so it would appear that to begin with, these two thieves joined the graceless multitude in insulting the Son of God.

But you see, one of these men is soon to become a trophy of grace, a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. The other, however, he continues in his evil way, and he dies as he has lived.

[11 : 57] How does he die? He dies deep in his sins. See, my friend, that you don't die deep in your sins.

I think it's a tragedy of a major order. For any man or any woman to die deep in his or her sins.

And this man on this cross, he dies deep in his sins, reviling and rejecting Christ, the only Savior. You know, sin can blind and can harden us in so many ways.

There was the rich farmer, and he lost his soul. How did he lose his soul? By becoming preoccupied with his barns.

I will build more barns. I will put more into these barns. Oh, he was going to become a fabulously rich and wealthy man.

[13 : 07] You see, he had excluded God. And when the end came, as someone has put it, he only needed six feet of ground, not all the acres, for his crops and barns.

Or take another example. For instance, the rich man and Lazarus. We call the rich man dives. That's the Latin name for him. He was so engrossed, you see, with his luxuries, his purple, the good things of life, everything that was luxurious, he had it.

But you see, the poor man forgot about death and the reckoning that comes after death. And that's what happened to this poor thief on the cross. But we notice the faith that awakens a response in the heart of the Savior.

Because one thief, he has lapsed into silence for some time now. He's not saying a word. And then suddenly, as we linger around that cross, we hear his broken cry.

It must have been an effort for him to speak, to even lift his head. And the pains that were shooting through his body must have been excruciating.

[14 : 46] But we listen to him and he is suing to Jesus for mercy. Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.

And as you and I consider that penitent man on the cross, we notice that there has been awakened in him what? There has been awakened in him the fear of God.

Isn't it the book of Proverbs which says this, that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom? And here is this man and now he is expressing a tender conscience about his sin.

And he is also expressing a real regard and fear with regard to the eternal consequences that await him. And to his companion he manages to say this as he listens to him still cursing and still throwing insults at Jesus.

He manages to say to his companion, dost not thou fear God? Are you not becoming afraid of God, man? Look at you.

[16 : 10] You are in the same condemnation as myself. And here we are fast posting into the presence of Almighty God and there you are cursing and swearing on that cross at God's Son.

You see, God had become real to this dying thief and he began to see God in terms of his ultimate judge.

And the next step you see in this man's faith was his acknowledgement of his sin. He looks over his past life for how long I don't know or how much of his past life suddenly came before him I don't know.

but what we do know and that is this that his past was offensive to him and that the punishment that was being meted out to him on this cross for his crimes was just.

Or when you come to the cross you know there is no pride about you because at the cross you look back and you see your past and what a past it is and there is nothing to be proud about your past.

[17 : 31] If you are honest with yourself and if you are going to be honest with me here today and I say to you look back over your past can you honestly say you're proud of it?

If you really see yourself for what you are you can only see how at the cross there all your past merits just condemnation.

But there is also this about this poor thief at the cross he makes his confession of Christ's righteousness. His eyes you see have been opened and he begins to see the wonder of the character of Christ.

He had never seen it up until this moment and he suddenly says to his companion this man that you see in the center cross this man has done nothing amiss.

he sees you see Christ now as the Lamb of God who has come to make an atonement for sin.

[18 : 49] He now sees Christ as the one who did no sin neither was guile found in his mouth who when he was reviled reviled not again when he suffered he threatened not but committed himself to him that judges righteously.

Oh he sees Christ in his purity. He sees Christ in the wonder of his person. He sees Christ now and he's beginning to see him more clearly in his saviourhood.

And so he finally makes his prayer Lord he says remember me. And in his prayer we have a remarkable evidence of his faith.

As Plummer the commentator puts it the Anglican commentator puts it some saw Jesus raise the dead and didn't believe.

The robber sees Jesus being put to death and yet believes. we don't know if he ever heard Jesus preach or teach.

[20 : 02] But what we do know for sure and that is this he heard the magnificent plea of Jesus when he was nailed to the cross and when the cross was raised in its upright position.

He heard that magnificent plea coming from the cross Father forgive them for they know not what they do.

And as this thief is now dying and as the sweat is pouring from him in death suddenly he is recalling it all Father forgive them and he says to Jesus put me in your intercession and remember me when you come to your kingdom oh I can see the poor man can't you I can see him in his desperation he's only got a few moments left maybe an hour or two at the most or whatever it's not long and in these final moments of desperation he says Lord remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom oh he had heard the mocking taunts of that crowd about Jesus being a king if thou be the king of the Jews save thyself come down from the cross

I have no doubt that maybe he was able to raise his head just a little in spite of the pain and there above the cross of Jesus is the inscription the king of the Jews written in the three languages that were then used Hebrew Greek and Latin and surely he could read one of the inscriptions be it the one in Hebrew or the one in Greek or the one in Latin because they were all used these languages but you see as he looks at the inscription and as he hears Jesus being sick being taunted as king he sees beyond death and he sees this man on the center cross and he is going to his kingdom where he will be ruling supreme and he doesn't ask for any honor he doesn't ask for anything great he just asks

Jesus remember me I'm a poor broken man I've lived the life of a wastrel I've taunted you but now I'm completely and utterly broken remember me do you feel like that sometimes that's a great way to feel that's when there is a response and the response was quick and speedy and Jesus although he is on that cross and he is there in conflict with the powers of darkness and he is bearing the sins of his elect people and he is now feeling the chastisement of God resting upon him for our peace yet he's not too preoccupied to hear the cry of this man and he responds immediately and he says verily and that means it's it's absolutely certain verily amen he is putting to it his word to it verily he says

[24 : 14] I say unto thee today shalt thou be with me in paradise he gives the man complete assurance with regard to his salvation you know this man hadn't time for anything that people sometimes insist on for example the sacraments there are some people and they almost compel you to believe that unless you are baptized you won't get into heaven it might be that the Roman Catholic Church teaches this for example through their doctrine of baptismal regeneration and it's absolutely essential for the priest even if this child is about to die for the priest to baptize it even if it is dead he has to baptize it still the same because he believes in baptismal regeneration that this is the only way the child will get to heaven through baptism thank god we don't believe in that and then

I know that some of my Baptist friends I used to be very friendly with so many of them when I was a young man and they used to almost insist on me being baptized through the waters of immersion oh unless I went through the waters of immersion I was missing something I wasn't really just completely saved as it were have you come across that well here was this poor man he hadn't time to be baptized but Jesus says to him you'll be with me in paradise nor had this man any time to sit at the Lord's table and participate in the sacrament there at the table of the Lord Jesus says to him today before the day is out you and I will be together in paradise and you know there was to be no state of unconsciousness after death as the

Jehovah Witnesses state there will be there was to be no soul sleep as some believe immediately that man would die on that cross he would step over from time into eternity and there would be Jesus to welcome him and say enter into paradise what is paradise in the garden of Eden there were the trees and among them there was that mysterious tree and it was a mysterious tree wasn't it the tree of the knowledge of good and evil paradise is the place of life paradise is where death is excluded and isn't it the apostle Paul who tells us of an experience that he had when he was caught up into paradise and when he heard unspeakable things which it is not lawful for a man to utter in other words human language couldn't describe the glory and the sacredness of paradise paradise means an enclosed garden it's called by the Jews the place or the bosom of Abraham the place of security to be in the bosom of Abraham for the

Jew was heaven there his mighty arms put round about you which meant security rest comfort that's what paradise is it's a place of security it's a place of rest it's a place of comfort it's the place where Christ is it's a place of matchless beauty of unsurpassed joy it's the place where the redeemed spirit goes to after death it's the place where our Lord is and here is Jesus saying to that poor poor man today you'll be with me in paradise and the pain will be over and the awful agony that you are suffering will come to an end and this fevered body of yours on that cross will be left behind isn't it

Paul who puts it this way in his letter to the Corinthians where he says we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved we have a building of God and house not made with hands eternal in the heavens and he goes on to say this to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord you know between our death now and the morning of resurrection when our bodies will be raised I don't know how many years will pass maybe hundreds maybe thousands of years will yet pass before Christ comes and before the resurrection takes place but in paradise there will be my soul and that's where the soul of this dying thief is at the present moment it's in paradise still it is with Christ it'll be wonderful to be with

[30 : 30] Christ won't it my dear friend see that you're not out of Christ see that you are in Christ believing in him Lord remember me and he will remember you if you cry like this what lessons then in this with this I close what lessons do we derive from this incident well the first surely is that true penitence on the part of a sinner will always awaken a response this man was washed and cleansed through the blood of this other man whose blood was being shed you know Jesus is able to save them all them to the uttermost that come to God by him seeing he liveth he ever liveth and maketh intercession for them and this dying thief found that

Christ was able to save him and Christ is able to save any sinner you if you feel so I if I feel so and we learn too from this incident that at the moment of death the Lord's people immediately entered into the blessedness of heaven it never ceases to be a wonder to me when I'm watching a dying Christian and I see them coming to the end that the very moment that they breathe their last is the moment that they appear in the presence of the Lord this dying thief thought in terms of some future away in the distance and he cries out remember me when you come whenever that will be and Jesus says it's not a case of waiting but it's today before the day is over you and

I will be together in paradise and you know thank God that Jesus Christ our Savior is in the midst of the world to redeem just as he was between two thieves on Calvary and just as then so now his cross is there it's a savor of life unto life to them who believe a savor of death unto death to those who don't believe to the one the cross of Jesus is foolishness to the other the cross of Jesus is the power of God to salvation and I ask you what is the cross to you is it a savor of life or a savor of death is it to you foolishness and to you the power of God let's listen to the words of the old hymn writer who expresses it so well the dying thief rejoice to see that fountain in his day and there may I though vile as he wash all my sins away oh my dear friend and I thank God for Jesus

Christ I wouldn't be without him would you let us pray our gracious God we give thee thanks for such a saviour as thy dear son who came forth in the fullness of time to seek and to save the lost may we be among those who have been found by him take away our sins in his name we ask it amen to