

Luke 23:39-43  
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Hampton Baptist  
Charles R. Smith

### *Seven Last Words of Christ Series*

“Today, You Shall Be with Me in Paradise”

At one point early in Julius Caesar's political career, feelings ran so high against him that he thought it best to leave Rome. He sailed for the Aegean island of Rhodes, but en route the ship was attacked by pirates and Caesar was captured. The pirates demanded a ransom of 12,000 gold pieces, and Caesar's staff was sent away to arrange the payment. Caesar spent almost 40 days with his captors, jokingly telling the pirates on several occasions that he would someday capture and crucify them to a man. The kidnappers were greatly amused, but when the ransom was paid and Caesar was freed, the first thing he did was gather a fleet and pursue the pirates. They were captured and crucified . . . to a man! Such was the Romans' attitude toward crucifixion. It was to be reserved for the worst of criminals, a means of showing extreme contempt for the condemned. The suffering and humiliation of a Roman crucifixion were unequalled. (*Today in the Word*, November 23, 1992) Only the vilest of criminals were crucified. As we turn our attention today to the second saying of Jesus from the cross, we find a story of grace.

The conversation of the two criminals and Jesus is recorded only in Luke. As I mentioned last week, there were *two* criminals on that Judean hillside, with Jesus separating them. The criminals were called thieves elsewhere in the gospels.

Jesus had faced the humiliation of scourging during his trials with Herod and Pilate. He had been rejected by his closest friends. The pain of the crucifixion was excruciating. The soldiers, religious rulers, and others were mocking him by saying, “Save yourself, if you are the King of the Jews.” Now even one of the crucified says, “Hey aren't you supposed to be the Christ, the Promised One of God? Don't you realize that we are dying? Save yourself and **us**.” Earlier taunts did not include *personalized* assistance. The only satisfaction received from the statements made from the foot of the cross were justifications of malicious contempt. But this criminal was not only *haughty*; he was wondering what was in it for *him*.

His request was self-centered; he was certainly more interested in saving *himself* than in Jesus being safe. Insulting someone is not a way to win friends and influence people. I sometimes find it intriguing how some think that personal insults will win points in the long run.

The first criminal to speak had to turn his head for Jesus to hear him; his words also traveled in the direction of the other criminal. Before Jesus responded, the second criminal said, “Don't you fear God? Even when you're dying, don't you have any regard for an afterlife?” The second criminal provided a reality check. The fact was they *all* were dying.

He continued, “*We* are getting what we deserve. Our punishment is just; his is not. Didn't you hear what he said awhile ago? He asked God to forgive these same people that nailed him to the cross. This guy is faultless. He is a good man who has done nothing wrong.” His words passed Jesus' ears. To speak to the other criminal, he would also have to turn his head. Jesus was hearing everything.

The criminal confessed that he was guilty. Sinners cannot experience salvation until they first admit their guilt. All of us are sinners. An addict cannot get help until that person realizes that he/she has a problem. All of us have to admit that we are sinners, that we have fallen short of God's intention, that we have missed the mark, before God can restore a right relationship with us. Recognizing our sin, acknowledging that we have faults, is the first step in recovery and reconciliation.

The focus of the criminal switched from the other criminal to Jesus. I imagine that he pushed up on the saddle, that piece of wood on the vertical beam of the cross, and inhaled a deep breath. Instead of continuing his rebuke of the other criminal, he addressed Jesus by name. The name *Jesus* is a derivative of the Jewish name *Joshua* which meant "Jehovah is savior." "Jesus, remember me. Jesus, save me."

Aren't you glad that Jesus will never forget *us*? Aren't you glad that at our faithful cry, Jesus will enter into relationship with us? The very act of Jesus dying on the cross was the supreme example of love. There is nothing that God will not do to restore our relationship; God's only Son will even die to prove how much love God has for us. God is in the relationship business. Reconciliation, meaning mending broken fences between us and God, is what God desires.

"Jesus, remember me when you enter your kingdom." What a statement of faith! This King of the Jews is obviously dying. The Middle Eastern heat is taking its toll on the crucified body. The trauma of the beatings has had an irreparable effect. The same type of spikes used to crucify Jesus were used on the two thieves. The criminal actually felt Jesus' physical pain, because it was the same. Knowing that Jesus was dying, he still asked for Jesus to remember him.

Do you find it a bit ironic that someone would ask a dying king to remember him when he enters his kingdom? It just doesn't make any sense . . . and neither does faith. It is illogical to believe in something that we cannot see, touch, hear, or smell. Some would even say God is not *real*, because no one has ever seen God. Faith does not make *sense*; it never has. Faith is abstract, not concrete. God cannot fit into a scientific or mathematical equation and be verifiably proven. Believing in what we cannot see requires faith.

Upon reflection, I can certainly see how some believed in Jesus *after* he performed miracles. After all, seeing a miracle would marvel any crowd. But in this scenario, the battered and bruised Savior was dying. It's like expecting help from a drowning lifeguard. The religious folks were belittling him, but the penitent thief had tremendous faith!

Notice the prayer the criminal offered; it wasn't long or complicated. The thief did not jump through a bunch of religious hoops. He simply asked Jesus to *remember* him; he simply believed there was an afterlife; he simply had faith and prayed to God for acceptance.

The thief did not understand a great deal about God, except that Jesus cared enough for his detractors that he prayed that God would forgive them. Understanding the gospel is a *part* of salvation, but you don't have to have all the answers to become a Christian. What he *did* understand led him to faith in the Savior. Some still say, "I'll make that decision when I'm better informed." I will never know enough about God; God is simply too vast. Yet I will still believe in this God of love who loved us so much to send Jesus into this world.

The dying thief did not deserve to be saved, which he admitted. He confessed that he and the other thief were receiving their just reward. He gave no excuses and offered no alibis. He simply confessed that he was a sinner who deserved to die. Jesus heard the man's cry and saved him by his grace. Grace is simply the undeserved favor of God. You can't earn it, buy it, or work for it. You can only receive grace as a gift.

When a person works an eight-hour-day and receives a fair day's pay for his time, that is a wage. When a person competes with an opponent and receives a trophy for her performance, that is a prize. When a person receives appropriate recognition for long service or high achievements, that is an award. But when a person is not capable of earning a wage, cannot win a prize, and deserves no award--yet receives such a gift anyway--that is a good picture of God's unmerited favor. This is what we mean when we talk about the grace of God. (G. W. Knight, *Clip-Art Features for Church Newsletters*, p. 53) This is what happened to the thief on the cross. He received the wonderful

matchless gift of God's grace.

Jesus said, "I tell you the truth. Today, you shall be with me in Paradise." Don't worry. You *deserve* justice; I'll give you grace. "Your faith has saved you," was a statement that Jesus made on other healing occasions. The faith of the criminal was miraculous. The faith of the criminal saved him.

Yet what did he *do* to gain the favor of Jesus? Did he read his Bible everyday? Give to the church? Have a perfect attendance record? Did he volunteer to help the needy? Go on a mission trip? No. Did he keep the Ten Commandments? Live a good life? No, as a matter of fact, the thief didn't even get baptized—immersion or sprinkling wasn't an issue. He simply had faith. His faith plus God's grace equaled salvation. What he needed was grace, not law. Relationship not rules. Jesus was sent to this world to disclose God's character more fully. Jesus could've told the thief that he shouldn't have committed the capitol crime that resulted in his execution. Jesus could have reprimanded him for waiting until the last minute. Instead, Jesus said, "Today, you shall be with me in paradise."

If we consider this scenario, we see that death is now presented in a new light; *both* Jesus and the thief **had** to die for *them* to be in paradise. Death is not defeat. Death is not the end. Instead, death is to be interpreted as entrance into God's presence, both for Jesus and for those who believe in him.

Some say they can wait and have a deathbed confession. The difficulty with that line of thinking is not everyone has a deathbed. Accidents occur and unexpected heart-attack or strokes are realities. Besides, going to heaven should not be the primary reason we believe in God. We should have *relationship*; God desires relationship not just some "life insurance policy." Wouldn't God feel used if the relationship was only about what God could give? Ever have a friend like that—where your friend was only interested in what you could give them? Fair-weather friends flee when they cannot have their own needs met. Willie Nelson sings, "If you got the money honey I got the time. Bring along your Cadillac, leave my old wreck behind, If you got the money honey I got the time." Who wants to have a relationship like that?

How is your relationship with God? Are you waiting until later to change your ways? Have you accepted the grace of God or are you still trying to work yourself into heaven? If you think you can get to heaven because of what you do, I hope you will read our Gospel Lesson again. There is absolutely nothing we can do to merit God's love. And as difficult as it may seem sometimes, we are to trust God and continue to have faith. The faith of the penitent thief was *incredible*, especially when you consider that he was watching the King die, and he still asked to be remembered. When your world is crashing, can you still trust and place your faith in God? When hardship visits you, barricades block your journey, and dreams go unfulfilled, can you still believe in God? I hope so, because it is a question that will eventually settle your eternal destination.