



Speaker:
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A Calvary Conversion

11/20/2023 (MON) | Bible: Luke 23:39-43

It was almost exactly 2000 years ago. The place was a spot on the outskirts of Jerusalem. For whatever reason, the location was called “the place of a skull” by the locals. And at that time, it was used as a place of execution.

Three trees had been cut down, shaped, and partly sunk into the ground. They may have been plain, upright trunks, or they could have included a crosspiece to form a T shape or even the shape of the crosses some people wear as jewellery.

What we call a “cross” wasn’t a Roman invention. But they employed these, as so many others in history had, as instruments of execution. They tied or nailed criminals to these great crosses and left them to die. Any who survived longer than expected would be finished off by a soldier.

Of all the millions of crosses erected to kill people, these three stand out; because on the central cross of the three was hanged Jesus of Nazareth. There may have been a number of Jews from Nazareth called Jesus but:

- This one had been hailed as the Messiah
- This one had performed miracles which couldn’t be refuted
- This one had taught as one with authority
- And this one had received the endorsement from Jehovah himself, who declared Jesus to be none other than his very own son.

On the two other crosses were criminals. One on the right hand of Jesus, and one on the left. They were both from a similar background to each other. They were both most certainly guilty of crimes against the state. But the two were predestined to very different futures in eternity.

On one side, criminal number one [left]. Putting aside his offences against the empire, he was determined to live his life to the very last second independently of God, and this is the greatest of all crimes. Like all the proud in this world who want to live without God, and die in that state, nothing but retribution lies ahead of them.

On the other side, criminal number two [right]. Although he was no less of a rebel against God, he had been elected from eternity to be forgiven of his sins. During his life, he could never have known that God would break through into his soul and save him when he was just a few hours from death.

This man was privileged in that he was the only redeemed man in history to die alongside his saviour, redeemed by the blood of the one just a few feet away.

At some point, he was an object of Holy Spirit attention. Inwardly, he experienced the great spiritual change of regeneration. We call it an inscrutable work of God, because precisely when it happens is a mystery to us.

But we do know it took place here, because the man’s behaviour changed dramatically in a God-ward direction. At first, it appears he joined in with his criminal friend’s taunting of

Christ. But in this very short space of time, he changed. God saw to it that it was an accelerated change. This man had very little time left, and it was ordained that he have a saving encounter with the saviour of the world before they both died.

I wanted to look today at these few words spoken by the repentant thief. Not only is it strong evidence of his genuine conversion, but I want to argue that his expression was an example of those good works which come naturally from a saving work of the Spirit of God.

It must have been a surprise to that first thief to be rebuked by the felon he was being crucified with. But what a rebuke! What a doctrinally full outpouring it was! Let's take this apart and see what we can find.

V40: THE FEAR

A true knowledge of God must come by way of **fear** of him. At the core of the gospel itself is the principle that the sinner is in danger from God. Now if an individual doesn't fear God, why on earth would they repent and ask for mercy? Fear of the consequences of sin must be present, so that will obviously include fear of the one who *brings* these consequences.

Don't you fear God? he asks the other criminal. They were both going to die very shortly, just like the Lord in the middle. What more appropriate attitude could there be in that situation than a full awareness of God's almighty and just nature?

I spoke to you only recently about the necessity of a fear of God, so I'll try not to repeat myself too much. But I maintain that the notion of fearing the God of heaven is missing from far too many pulpits. For many, it's become a toxic doctrine, too negative for a modern audience.

I strongly suspect another major reason for its absence in evangelical preaching is the mistaken idea that fear is not something a believer should feel. We now have a loving relationship with a heavenly father, and his wrath is spent.

That's all true. When God converts us, there *is* a monumental shift in the relationship between us and God. However, this doesn't change his innate character. **He is still the all-glorious God of heaven and earth. He is still the God who will bring down judgement on their heads of sinners with great heaviness.** We continue to fear God. It's just that the nature of the fear has changed for us, being mixed with genuine affection in both parties.

I've had the privilege down the years of preaching in the open air with many brethren, including a number of the men who've preached here. And these fellas don't hold back from speaking about the fear of God. I've also heard a great many other people preach in various cities. And in almost every case, exhortations to fear God are absent.

If you think I'm being too critical, let me be clear. **The avoidance of speaking about the fear of God leads to a way of preaching which is largely alien to that which was carried out by Jesus and the apostles.** In other words, people who frown on the idea of fearing God will invariably avoid other vital issues like sin, righteousness and judgement.

Perhaps they all should join us in listening to the surprisingly wise words coming from this criminal!

V41: THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Referring to their condemned status, our thief continues. He reminds his former criminal accomplice of their guilt. They'd broken the law of the land, and now they were receiving the punishment which was due to them. Remember, the Romans weren't engaging in some random acts of cruel retribution. Whether we agree with it or not, the law promised the death penalty for certain crimes. And this pair, knowing the risk, went out and committed crimes anyway.

It's one thing believing you're guilty of something but another to openly admit it—to acknowledge you deserve punishment, and that the punishment is fair.

Given the revelation from God which this guy had experienced, can we not read more into his confession? Yes, it takes integrity for a person to openly agree that they're guilty of breaking the law of the land. But we should at least consider that here this thief understands that he has contravened a higher law—the law of God.

When a sinner is baptised by the Holy Spirit of God, they get a much clearer view of who God is. And the fear of God we've spoken about always extracts a confession from the sinner. Just as fear of God is a necessary part of true repentance, so is a full and frank confession of sinfulness.

Sin is defined using the Law of God. People either act in a way they're not supposed to or *don't* act in a way they *are* supposed to. We can avoid contentious discussion about what the Law of God is which men are expected to conform to by using the two commandments Jesus gave. Men are to love God with their whole being and they're to love other people. By that standard, "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God."

The repentant sinner is to express to God both their guilt and the fairness of the eternal condemnation which their guilt brings.

V41: THE INNOCENCE

The thief had told the other man they were both guilty.

But not this man. He's done nothing wrong. Maybe he didn't have a fully-fledged doctrine of the sinlessness of Christ. But he knew enough about him. The perfect consistency of Jesus's good behaviour was evidence enough for this man to say with confidence that he was wholly innocent.

This man wasn't the first, and wouldn't be the last, whom Jesus made this powerful impression on. Just taking the few hours surrounding Jesus's death, we find several testimonies to his innocence:

- The governor, Pilate, told the Jews he **found no fault** in Jesus.
- Pilate's wife urged him to not get involved, because Jesus was a **righteous man**.
- And in the moments after Jesus died, a hardened Roman centurion confessed him to be **innocent**.

Whatever this repentant thief understood about the nature of Jesus the Christ, his clear statement about this innocence serves to remind us of this important doctrine. As the son of God, Jesus is divine. And although there are elements of the incarnation which are mysteries, we can confidently say that, as God, **Jesus is sinless**.

As a sinner is targeted by the Holy Spirit in a saving way, he sees Jesus as the innocent Lamb of God killed for sinners. As he considers the high characteristics of Jesus, he begins to realise the supreme suitability of him as saviour of the world.

V42: THE CALL

“And he said unto Jesus, ‘Lord’”. This man on the cross was undergoing a dramatic change. God was changing him from a lost sinner to a redeemed child of God. And this latest convert finishes his rebuke of the other man and turns to Jesus.

He directs his gaze towards the man in the central cross and calls him “Lord”.

If we took this one title of “Lord” as used by our condemned man, and considered it in isolation, it’d be fair to say it could mean nothing more than “master”. However, the very same Greek word used for common-or-garden rulers is also used when referring to the God of heaven.

Taking this section as a whole, my guess is the man on the cross was addressing Jesus as Lord based on his belief that this was the son of God.

In a quite proper fashion, the man addresses Jesus before making his petitions. This is what we do, isn’t it? When we pray to God, we address him at the outset. I’d not make a doctrine out of this, but to me and probably you, it’s our way of showing respect to the Lord. So we begin “Heavenly Father”, or “Lord in heaven”, or “Almighty God”, and so on.

The most important point, though, is that he called on God. You might remember from a few weeks ago, when I was preaching through the book of Joel, we came across this powerful promise. It said “all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved”. The apostle Paul quoted it, reinforcing its importance.

All who wish to receive forgiveness of sins must take their plea to God. They must call out to him in the confidence the Scriptures give them, the confidence that he’ll listen. And if theirs is a prayer of sincere repentance, their calling out to God will result in their salvation.

What a promise! What little excuse those have who die in their sins. They have but to call out to God in humility, acknowledging the greatness of their sins and the greatness of God’s ability to forgive those sins.

There’s another detail worth mentioning here before we move on. In Romans 10, Paul makes a logical argument about the necessity of preachers of the gospel. He says we need preachers to deliver the message. Why? So the people will hear. Why do they need to hear? Because they can’t call on a saviour if they don’t hear about him first!

But this logical progression begins with the question: *How can they call on him in whom they have not believed?* It would seem, friends, that when our man on the cross called on the Lord to save him, he already *had* belief. It wasn’t a natural realisation of his guilt which prompted him to call on the Lord. **The whole sequence of events which led to his deliverance began with a work of God**, and we do well to always remind ourselves that salvation is of the Lord.

V42: THE REMEMBRANCE

“Lord, remember me”. What a strange thing for someone to say to a person who in a short time would be dead!

The plea makes sense only if we accept that the man believed this was not the end for Jesus. He may not have known how this event of the crucifixion would end for his new master, but he knew this wasn't the final chapter. He knew there was a future for Jesus Christ after this day.

With the availability to us of all that's been recorded in the Scriptures, we have full confidence that the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ was far from the end of the story. We see this as just another stage in his mission to save his people from their sins.

It's hard to imagine that this former thief had spent a great deal of time with his head in the Bible! But maybe he did, as a youth, before going off the rails. Who knows.

Many well-educated Jews had spent their *entire lives* with their head in the Hebrew Scriptures yet remained blind to the emergence of their own Messiah. And this reminds us of the need for illumination by the Holy Spirit. “These things”, says the apostle Paul, “are spiritually discerned”. Intellectual energy will get you only so far in understanding the truth of God.

But the Scriptures do prophesy about Jesus being raised from the dead. A good example's found in the Psalms. In the sixteenth Psalm, David's written words aimed at God are also ascribed to Jesus. And these words form a prayer of Jesus in which he confesses to his father his full confidence that he'll not be left in the grave to rot. In other words, **he'll be raised from the dead.**

For the sinners we plead with, it's needful for them to believe in the resurrection of Christ. Calvary wasn't enough. We can speak about the death of Christ being a full satisfaction for the penalty of our sins. We can even describe it as the central event in God's purposes. But the Bible makes it clear that, if Jesus wasn't raised from the dead, Christianity would be pointless.

This man was in a unique position. He knew he was about to die. Maybe if the circumstances were different, his request would've been different.

But he knows it's all over for him. So he makes this simple request. In the bright future which lay ahead for Jesus, this man humbly asks that Jesus would look kindly on him. That he'd remember him. That he'd come for him again and rescue him from the clutches of the grave.

V42: THE KINGDOM

Remember me, he says, when you come into your kingdom. Or, “when you come in the glory of your kingdom”.

“Kingdom” is used in a variety of ways in the Scriptures, so we can't be completely sure what this man meant. He could've held the Jewish belief that the Messiah would come to deliver Israel from Imperial Rome and set himself up as a benevolent dictator in a Jewish utopia. He may have believed that, at the moment of his death, Jesus would ascend to heaven and retake his position on the throne.

Both beliefs are wrong. But this man's end-time views are not the most important matter here. The point is rather this: **in using the term “your kingdom”, the man was acknowledging Jesus Christ as King.** Not just a king, but the king above all kings. The king of everything.

This evening, I'll be talking to you about the anointing of Christ. And this role he took on, made official by his anointing, included that of king. And as king, Jesus was the best person to

go to. What a gracious revelation God made to this man to give him such understanding of the nature and mission of Christ!

Jesus Christ is King. And as an all-powerful king, he gets to decide who will make up his subjects. He decides who will be citizens of his kingdom.

Let me be clear: when we refer to his kingdom, we don't mean heaven (although they are connected). All who trusted in a future Messiah, and all who have trusted in the historical Messiah, are made citizens of his kingdom.

The kingdom was ushered in in its fullest sense with the incarnation of Christ. It also has an eternal dimension to it. **But it's also a present reality for all who have Christ as their king.** If you're a believer here today, you are presently in God's kingdom.

Throughout history, there's been a mass immigration into the kingdom of God. This immigration is unique in that every country, tribe and language is represented. And it's unique also in that it's fully controlled by God. Only his elect people will ever enter it, and all of these will be processed in the same way. They all enter under the terms of the gospel, each one admitted on the basis of the merits of Christ.

I said this man's understanding of Christ as king was the most important point here. But we shouldn't ignore his desire to be part of that future which Christ would be head of. No matter how vague or mistaken his understanding of a life after death was, he wanted to be wherever Christ was. "To be with Christ is far better."

The promise of Jesus to this new convert was a future in Paradise. The Bible's silent on the nature of this new world, but we pay attention to the word Jesus chose to describe it. He chose to paint a picture of a garden in this man's imagination. A beautiful garden. And just maybe Jesus was hinting at a return to an Eden-like world but with all possibility of sin removed.

That man's future is the same as all who've been united to Christ down ages. All of them, all of you who belong to God here this morning, and even the guy in the pulpit, will inherit that glorious future.

From the unlikeliest source comes this quite magnificent expression. By the grace of God, a man who was at the end of his life—and what a terrible end—managed to come up with this! We can trace in this the way God deals with a sinner:

- His new awareness allows him to see God in all his greatness
- It results in a fear of God
- He openly acknowledges his sin
- He recognises the righteousness of Jesus Christ
- He confesses Jesus as Lord
- His belief moves him to call on Christ in all humility
- He reveals his belief in Christ's kingship and kingdom
- He asks for mercy
- He receives mercy.

But what of his former companion? What does the future have in store for him?

There's to be a resurrection of the human race. The immediate purpose of this is judgement. The Son of God, Christ Jesus, will sit in the judgement seat.

Consider how, at Calvary, one thief was separated from the other by Jesus on the cross. At the judgement, the results of the cross will divide the men all over again:

- One on his right, the other on his left.
- One repented in life, the other didn't.
- One received mercy, the other didn't.
- One will be escorted into paradise, the other dragged into the lake of fire.

It's a good job Jesus stayed on the cross. **The only reason our thief was delivered from his sin and the consequences of it was by Jesus remaining on the cross and suffering the wrath of Almighty God right down to the last dregs.**

What did the other man want? Well he wanted Jesus to come down *off* the cross. Maybe call on an angelic host, be lifted off the cross and his wounds healed. 'Then he could do the same for this unrepentant thief. Rescue him, heal him, and set him on his way.

Set him on his way so he can go and sin even more and then die anyway! Appear at the judgement anyway, only this time with even more sins against his name! What shortsightedness!

He's no different from the people we encounter today. 'They have no thoughts of eternity. Their plans include career, family, holidays, interests, all the way through to their years of retirement. They calculate how much money they'll be living on when they're elderly.

But that's where their plans end. Most have some faint belief in a peaceful existence after death, and they assume everyone'll be there.

In our witness, WE URGE THEM TO TURN THAT THINKING UPSIDE DOWN. We tell them that how this life pans out is irrelevant when compared to where they'll spend eternity. But unless God reveals the stupidity of their thinking, they'll remain in it, facing disaster.

I spent last Sunday night with cousin at the bedside of my dying uncle. We chatted, occasionally speaking to my uncle in case he could hear me. It was 1:54am when he took his final breath. Although he'd reached the age of ninety, I doubt he'd have come to terms with death. Few people do.

There's less time than people think. So it is we urge people to turn to Christ while they can. Our sense of urgency isn't due to a belief that if we don't reach people in time, they'll be lost, and it'll be our fault.

God will save his people, with or without you and me. As it happens, he's *pleased to use* you and me, to give us the privilege of sharing the gospel in soberness and, yes, with a sense of urgency, but one born out of a love for people.

In the past, I've used the example of the repentant thief as evidence that salvation is all of grace. I'd tell people that here was an example of someone physically restrained from doing any works. My conclusion was that this conversion was set up exactly for that purpose, an example of saving faith which didn't need works.

I didn't come up with this argument, of course. It's been popular for years, and I've heard it from many people.

But I was wrong. If anything, this is an example of an extremely short Christian life being FULL of good works. What do I mean?

The reason this example's been used in the way it has is because the man's hands and feet were tied to a tree. And if you think good works are things you do with your hands, the illustration works.

But works are *not* restricted to what we do physically. Good works can be in the form of speech or thought, too.

Think about the opposite. Think about bad works. They include envy, for example. And envy's something restricted to the mind. It makes sense that, if these works of the flesh include actions, speech and even thoughts, so will good works be expressed in the same variety of ways.

We don't need to misuse this event to bolster up the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. The Bible's full of that doctrine anyway. This event, these good works by this regenerated man, should instead remind us that, **having been saved by grace, we're expected to go on to do good works in God's name.**

One author, commenting on this passage, says: "It is often said that the thief on the cross does not evidence his faith, for he has the equivalent of a deathbed conversion. But the testimony he gives for Jesus in his last moments is one of the most eloquent evidences of faith in the Bible." I agree.

This man's example should provoke us to good works. It should remind us that faith without works is a dead faith. And it should challenge us to ensure that whatever time we have in this life is spent serving God.

Amen