

THE THIEF'S PRAYER AND ITS ANSWER

From a Sermon by J. C. Philpot, M.A., delivered at Oakham, on Feb. 2nd, 1847.

“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.”- [Lu 23:42-43](#)

GOD has given in His Word some astonishing instances of the freeness and sovereignty of His grace, but I do not know that we have a more striking instance than the one before us. It is true indeed that every called and saved vessel of mercy is an astonishing instance of the sovereignty of God's grace; and I believe every truly convinced sinner who is brought to the footstool of mercy, and made to receive salvation as a free gift, is convinced in his own experience that he himself is one of the most marvellous instances of sovereign grace. Yet there are several instances in the Scriptures that seem to shine forth with more distinguished lustre. For instance, look at the case of Paul, and compare it with that of the thief on the cross. I do think that all through the Scriptures we can scarcely find two more striking instances of the fulness and freeness of sovereign grace than these two. One a complete Pharisee, the other a thorough profligate. Which was farthest from heaven? We can scarcely say. Yet the same sovereign grace which could arrest the bloodthirsty Pharisee on his way to Damascus, was able also to snatch from death the expiring malefactor.

In looking, then, at these words, we will endeavour to consider,

- I. The character of the man before he was called by grace.
- II. The sovereignty of God in calling him.
- III. What the man was after he was called by grace.
- IV. His prayer.
- V. The Lord's answer to it.
 - I. First, then, let us consider the **character of the man before grace called him. When** do you think grace called him? There are some people whose eyes, like owls and bats that cannot bear the full light of the sun, have been so dazzled by this glorious effulgence of sovereign grace that they have endeavoured to show that this man was not so bad as the other, and that there were some marks in his character which were not to be found in the other malefactor. In the saving of the one and in the leaving of the other there is such a display of God's electing decrees that these owls and bats could not bear its full lustre. But I think, if we compare the parallel places in the other Gospels, we shall find that the thief who was saved was not one whit better than he who

perished. For we read, “The thieves also which were crucified with him cast the same in his teeth” [Mt 27:44](#). So that it appears up to the moment when sovereign grace touched this sinner’s heart, he could unite with his brother thief in reviling, blaspheming, and casting reproaches on the Redeemer. “If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us.”

It would appear that this man who was being executed upon the cross for his crimes was not a common malefactor, but one of an extraordinary nature; for it seems that the Jews selected two of the vilest wretches they could pick out, in order to throw the greater disgrace on the Lord. So great was their enmity, so intense their hatred against the dear Son of God, that to cover Him with the lowest disgrace two malefactors were chosen, and He was put between them, as though they should thereby loudly declare, “Here are three criminals, and the One in the middle the worst of the three.” But there is another reason why we may suppose both were hardened characters. In those days, history tells us that Judaea was much infested with highwaymen, and these two men seem to have been companions of Barabbas, of whom we read, “And there was one named Barabbas, which lay bound with them that had made insurrection with him, who had committed murder in the insurrection” [Mr 15:7](#). Then here we have a hardened malefactor, a wretch who was justly dying upon the cross.

II. Observe **the sovereignty of God’s grace in calling him**. Try to represent to your mind these two malefactors, each on the side of the Lord Jesus Christ, reviling and blaspheming with their tongues, and thus hoping to find some little relief in railing upon the Lord of life and glory. Well, can you see any difference here? These two men are writhing on the cross, a few hours will close the scene, here is a hell opening her jaws to receive them, here is the wrath of God ready to burst forth. What should there be in one man more than in the other? Nothing, absolutely nothing. Why, then, did one pray, and the other not pray? How is it one was called, and the other left? Why, wholly and solely -let men cavil and blaspheme as they may- because sovereign grace interposed, and God’s electing decrees were carried out in the salvation of one and the ruin of the other. But then someone might say, “Was not God unjust?” How can that be? Would not God’s justice have left them **both** to perish? But His mercy interfered in the behalf of His child, whom He had decreed eternally thus to call and save.

III. We will now look a little at **his character after he was called by grace**. This is a very important point. The man was not saved and taken to heaven without a change. The words of the Lord must ever stand: “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” [Joh 3:3](#). Thus this dying thief must have had a new birth, that mighty revolution wrought in his soul, or else he never could have been with Jesus in Paradise. Regenerating grace touched his heart, the scales dropped from his eyes, the veil of unbelief was taken from his heart, faith was given him, and repentance unto life. And what was the fruit of it?

1. We will look, first, at the man’s **faith**. I believe we have scarcely through the Scriptures such an instance of strong faith as this. It may be said, “Abraham’s faith was very strong.” It was. When he offered up his son Isaac, his faith was strong, perhaps as strong as the dying thief’s. But looking at all the circumstances of the case, I think that, except the Lord Jesus Christ, the Prince of believers, we have scarcely one instance of faith so strong as his. Was there not everything in the circumstances to damp and extinguish faith? Look at His own disciples; they all forsook Him and fled. His own followers, who had walked with Him for years, deserted Him in the last extremity. But to believe and acknowledge that Jesus had a kingdom when He was dying as a malefactor, O what strong faith must God have given him! When he looked on the agonizing body of Jesus- to believe He was the Son of God, and had a kingdom to bestow! For was there not everything without and within to damp and extinguish faith, so that no sooner did faith lift up its head than everything conspired to destroy it? Like a man drowning, when his head is just got above water, there comes a high wave and dashes him back again, yet he stretches forth his hands again, in spite of death and hell; so it was with this thief on the cross. There was everything to destroy his faith, yet it survived. Might not this have been the language of the man on the cross, “If indeed He be the Son of God, would He not deliver Himself?” No! faith triumphed in spite of all without and within, in spite of all the infidelity and unbelief of his heart, in spite of all those outward circumstances which would seem to have extinguished the strongest faith in the world.

2. We see also his **repentance**. It was not naked faith, but there was repentance mixed with it. See how he reproved his fellow malefactor: “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 thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds” [Lu 23:39-41](#). Here was repentance unto life, the acknowledging of God’s righteousness in bringing him to die on the cross.

3. We see in him another grace of the Spirit -**prayer**. He had not time or strength to pray very long. But what virtue there was in his prayer! How it entered into the ears of the Lord Jesus! And what an answer of mercy, peace, and salvation it brought out of Him to his soul!

IV. This leads us to consider **his prayer**: “And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.” “LORD.” Here he acknowledged the Godhead of Christ. O what a wonderful thing was this, that the Lord was pleased to raise up such faith in his soul that he saw the Godhead shining through His agonizing humanity! Others saw it not. His enemies could revile and blaspheme Him. But this poor, writhing malefactor had faith given him to believe that He on whom his eyes were fixed, suffering the same accursed punishment, was the Lord Almighty. It is very easy to talk about these things; but could we put ourselves for a moment into his circumstances, what strength of faith was here! But we see in him not only faith, but confession. “For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation” [Ro 10:10](#). He said, “Lord.” He thus worshipped Him, and owned Him as Lord. He looked to Him, though in his feelings he was indeed at the ends of the earth, and cried. What faith was there in that cry!

What did he say besides? “Lord, **remember me.**” Religion with him was a personal thing; the salvation of his soul was his chief concern. There were but a few hours before his eyes must close in death, and what an eternity was about to receive him! This he felt; this was deeply wrought in his conscience; and this brought out the cry from his soul, “Remember me.” As though he should say, “Lord, whomsoever Thou forgettest, remember **me**, think upon **me**, save **me**, deliver **me.**” And is not this the feeling, the cry of every God-taught soul? “**Remember, think** upon me; do not forget me. Let my name be precious to Thee, before Thine eyes and in Thy heart. Thou hast many things to think upon, Lord; but Lord, **remember me**. I am a perishing wretch, a guilty malefactor, a condemned criminal deserving to die a thousand deaths, and to suffer a thousand hells. But think on me, do me good, cast me not away.”

Observe also that this dying malefactor knew that **the Lord had a kingdom**. What faith is here! Yes, and that He would one day come into that kingdom. And when He came into His kingdom, surrounded by all His saints and angels. then the cry and desire of his soul was that Jesus would remember him. And observe he did not ask for a high place in this kingdom. What do people go to heaven for? to sit on high seats? O, God forbid! "In my Father's house are many mansions" [Joh 14:2](#), but not exalted seats, one above another. All are equal there. What is their joy? To see Christ as He is face to face, and to have done for ever with this wretched body of sin and death. I believe every living soul will be brought there. O, could there be degrees in heaven, what confusion there would be! But when those who are saved are saved as this poor malefactor was -by sovereign grace, by the blood of the Lamb, this takes away all contention and jealousy about the highest place, and makes the soul thankful to be saved at all.

V. This leads us to the last point -the **answer that the Lord Jesus was pleased to bestow**. And O what an answer it was! How encouraging it is to poor souls! Can you find by searching the Scriptures a single instance where a soul earnestly, honestly and sincerely cried to the Lord Jesus Christ when He was upon earth, and He turned a deaf ear to his cry? It is true, when some came to Him and said, "What must I do?" and so on, the Lord sent them to the law. But we never find a poor, guilty wretch who came to His footstool crying and sighing for mercy that He turned away.

What was the answer? "**Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.**" In a moment the word came, "Verily!" It is the faithful Amen that speaks the word; what He says may be depended upon. There is great force in that word, "Verily," -"Amen, I say unto **thee**, thou malefactor, thou standing with a thousand crimes, thou fearing the wrath of God, thou awaiting a justly merited doom- I say unto **thee**." O how the words must have dropped like honey into the poor sinner's heart! What peace and joy must have flowed into his soul as the words fell from the Redeemer's lips! "Verily I say unto thee." And immediately faith doubtless was raised up in his soul. He received the promise, felt the sweetness of it, and died in the enjoyment of it. Blessed man! blessed faith! but above all, blessed Redeemer, who gave the faith and saved the man!

"Today shalt thou be with me in paradise." "**Today**- before the sun sets, before night comes on, on the very day that the words are spoken

to thee -shalt thou be **with me.**” What could he, what would he, want more than to be with Jesus, the Lord of life and glory, in the sweet enjoyment of His love, to see Him face to face, and be ever blessed with the manifestation of His presence? In spite of sin, in spite of death, in spite of Satan, the Lord said, “Today shalt thou be with me -safe in my arms, safe in my bosom, safe under the wings of eternal love.” What could he want more? That fills all.

“In Paradise.” There have been various opinions about it. Some have thought that Paradise means the place of departed souls, at least of happy departed souls, before they go to heaven to be with the Lord for ever. But I think the safest way is to see what the Word of God says. Man’s opinion is of little weight, unless established and confirmed by the Word of the living God. The Word of God says, “I knew a man in Christ about fourteen years ago **whether in the body I cannot tell, or whether out of the body I cannot tell; God knoweth**, such a one caught up into the third heaven. And I knew such a man **whether in the body or out of the body I cannot tell; God knoweth**, how that he was caught up into paradise.” Here we have Paradise identified with the third heaven. So that **wherever the third heaven is, where God is pleased to manifest His glory, there Jesus took the thief: there he was with Him in Paradise, in bliss.** It is true that the Lord Jesus Christ had not then ascended up to where He was before, visibly in His body, but the soul of the thief was with the soul of Jesus in Paradise. But what does the word Paradise signify? Paradise was the garden where Adam and Eve were placed when created. And thus it seems to signify in the language of the Jews **and the Lord saw fit to use the same**, the eternal abode of the blessed, where the tree of life grows, where the face of God is seen, and where all joy and happiness are to the very full. That very day he was with Jesus in Paradise, and he is in Paradise now, in the happy enjoyment of the face of God, bathing his ransomed soul in the streams of the waters of heaven; and there he will be till time shall be no more.

Is not this very encouraging to the Lord’s poor, self-condemned, sin-harassed people? Whatever more can we want than such a free and full salvation? Is not sovereign grace what your soul longs at times earnestly to enjoy? Depend upon it, whether you feel it or not, that you need the same salvation that he did; nay, you need it to be received in the same way, and to be manifested to you in the same manner. If the Lord has ever humbled you, and made you to feel the guilt of sin, and the evils of your heart, you have not a stone to throw at that crucified

malefactor; but in your feelings are every whit as bad as he. Nay, I believe there are thousands in hell who have not been half such sinners as you and I. I can say so for myself. Therefore let men talk of merit as long as they please, let this be all our hope and all our expectation -to be saved freely by the manifestation of sovereign, distinguishing grace. I am sure it is the sweetest song a sinner can sing upon earth, and the sweetest song a sinner can sing in heaven. What discordant notes there would be, did any get to heaven by works! We should have discord in the very court of harmony itself. Manasseh, Mary Magdalene, Paul of Tarsus, Peter the swearing fisherman of the Galilean lake, the thief upon the cross, and thousands of double-dyed sinners would be singing, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive honour and power and glory!" And there would be a semi-chorus of Arminians and workmongers shouting, "Worthy are we to receive honour and glory and blessing, because we have got to heaven by our good works!" But such discord will never be heard in the courts of heaven, where harmony and bliss and peace must ever reign. If you recollect, no man could learn to sing the new song but the hundred-and-forty-four thousand who were redeemed from among men. [Re 14:3](#) What taught it them? The manifestation of sovereign mercy and distinguishing grace, pardoning the sins that lay upon their consciences.

May the Lord, if it be His gracious will and purpose, encourage any poor, self-condemned sinner here. Remember, my friend, remember the thief on the cross; was not his case as bad as ever yours can be? You say your heart is so bad. So it is; worse than you have ever seen it. Your sins are so great -you have never seen a thousandth part of them. Your heart is so full of evil; full, yes, fuller than ever you saw it, or ever will see it. Yet sovereign grace has saved hundreds as bad as you. O may this encourage some of the Lord's despairing saints to lift up their eyes and hearts, and believe that the same grace which sufficed to save the dying thief is sufficient for them. Depend upon it, if they had the same faith that inspired his heart, they would say, "Lord, remember **me.**" And they will have sooner or later, if not the same words, yet the substance of them, spoken to their hearts, "Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise."