

A Way to Heaven from the Gates of Hell

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Dear congregation, if you turn again now to Luke chapter 23, we'd like to consider this account of the penitent thief as he has been called, the thief that comes to repentance. Luke chapter 23, verse 39,

39 And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. 40 But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. 42 And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. 43 And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.

Well, for some afternoons now, we have been considering the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins, and especially in the lives of sinners who broke the commandments that we have been considering in the Sermon on the Mount. So, when we looked at the sixth commandment and the sin of murder, we saw the forgiveness of Manasseh. When we looked at adultery, we considered the forgiveness of David. When we looked at self-righteousness, we saw the forgiveness of Saul of Tarsus. And this morning we looked at the law of retaliation, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, this law that tells us that the punishment is to fit the crime. Now here we have a thief on the cross. We have someone who certainly has no rights left but someone who comes to realize, "I am in this condemnation justly." He's saying, "I deserve to be here. This is the appropriate condemnation. This is the appropriate punishment for my crime." And he comes to find mercy, and maybe of all the sinners we've looked at, maybe there is no trophy of grace so utterly amazing as this thief on the cross, what a trophy to the free and sovereign grace, mercy, forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ this man gives us. So our theme with God's help is "A Way to Heaven from the Gates of Hell." We want to see the gates of hell beneath, the great mystery in the middle, and the gateway to heaven above.

The gates of hell. It really is a terrible scene that we have here before us at Calvary. There are three executions, and they are all executions by crucifixion. Now, crucifixion is one of, if not the most cruel and torturous ways ever invented of ending a person's life. The victim is thrown on their back, the sources tell us, where the wounds they had received

from scourging would likely tear open again and be contaminated with dirt. Large spiked nails are then driven through the wrist, hitting a nerve that causes bolts of excruciating pain to fire up both arms. The weight of the person's body pulling down on these outstretched arms and shoulders would not only be excruciatingly painful, but stop the person from breathing. The only way to breathe was to push up with your legs to get a little breath, which was itself an excruciating thing to do. The result of this was the person had very shallow breathing. As a result, one source says, each effort to breathe would be agonizing and tiring and would lead to asphyxia, which is a slow suffocation. So at the physical level, this is indeed excruciatingly painful. At the physical level, we look at this horrendous scene and we might say this looks like a hell on earth, and yet, dear friends, the sobering reality is that even this is not hell. Those who are in hell would give anything to spend an eternity on one of these crosses. Hell is the place that is prepared for the devil and his angels. The Bible gives several descriptions of it, all descriptions that speak of a place of unimaginable pain and sorrow, outer darkness, the place where the worm never dies, the lake of fire, the place prepared for the devil and his angels.

And so the sobering reality for these thieves on the cross is that as horrific as their physical pain is, the worst is yet to come. These men are in the final hours of their lives. They're about to enter their eternal destiny. That's why we read in Isaiah 14, you get there this insight into what happens in hell when a Christless sinner approaches a lost eternity. Yes, Isaiah 14 is speaking in the first place about the king of Babylon, the one who exalted himself and all his pomp, but yet it gives us this window. Hell, we read there, In Isaiah 14:9, hell is moved for you to meet you at your coming. It stirs up the dead for you, even all the chief ones of the earth. It has raised up their thrones, all the kings of the nations. Those who have gone before are stirred up to meet the Christless soul that comes and they will speak to you and they will say, "Are you also become weak just like we are? Are you become like unto us?" What a horrendous thing to hear, to have someone who has heard the gospel, to have someone who was baptized into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, to have someone who was catechized and disciplined in the love and the care and the nurture of the church, to have someone who was prayed over repeatedly, to have someone go into a lost eternity and hear the awful taunting of people who never heard the gospel like you, "Why are you here? You who heard the gospel, why are you here? Have you become like one of us?"

Well, here in Luke 23, we are indeed at the gate of hell. If we come as it were back to this side of the grave, don't you feel how close to hell we are when we read these words in Luke 23 and you have it in Matthew and Mark as well, Matthew 27, verse 41, "Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said, He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God. The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth." Here is the Prince of Glory, here is the brightness of God's glory and the express image of his person, here is the darling of heaven, here is the Son of God's love mocked. And these thieves, with their shallow breath, pushing up to get a breath, use the little breath they have left to mock, to cast the same insult into his

teeth, to have hours left to live, to have just a few shallow breaths more, and yet to use these shallow final breaths to mock Christ. Oh, what a picture of the wickedness and the hardness of sin.

Well, we want to think about this thief on the cross. From all we can tell, this is a person who has never taken religion seriously. It's quite possible, indeed it's probable, living in this part of the world, that he would have grown up at least with some knowledge of the scriptures, at least some knowledge, living in Judea, some knowledge of the God of Israel, and perhaps he grew up with a mother who taught him the scriptures, who taught him to sing the same Psalms of David that we do, but when you come so quickly to the end of his relatively young life, he's described as a malefactor. That's someone who does evil. And specifically, he is a thief and he is a robber, and the law of the land justly has seen fit to give him the ultimate form of punishment, execution, the death penalty. But here at Calvary, suddenly, remarkably, something changes in this man. If you could picture him with me, suddenly there is most definitely a seriousness that has come over him. His guilt suddenly becomes real to him, and it begins to weigh heavily on him, and he stops mocking. He stops firing insult into the teeth of Jesus and instead of mocking, he comes to mourn. "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." But here in verse 40, "Dost thou not fear God," he says, "seeing thou art in the same condemnation? We indeed justly, for we receive the due rewards of our sins." Suddenly in this man there is a deep conviction of sin. There is this seriousness that has come over him. There is this change of mind concerning sin.

Now what's so instructive to notice here is he's not simply convicted of his lifetime of sin against other people, although that's no doubt there as well, but do you notice what is forefront in his mind? "Dost thou not fear God?" God has become a reality to this man. "Dost thou not fear God?" The God that likely he had heard about on his mother's knee, the God who is the judge of all, the God who will bring every work into judgment and every secret thing, whether good or evil. "Dost thou not fear God?" The thought of God suddenly is not simply something he learned in his Sunday school class, but is a great reality to him. "God is real, and God is judge, and I have sinned against God." The fear of God is to be aware of God. It's for God to become real to you. And when that happens, look at the effect, "Dost thou not fear God? We are in this condemnation justly." An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth and suddenly this man realizes, "I'm getting what I deserve. The punishment, the condemnation fits my crime." Not just the condemnation of this excruciatingly painful death but the condemnation that suddenly he sees as though Isaiah 14 opens up before him and he sees hell opening up before him. And he sees the lake that burns with fire unquenchable opening up before him. "This condemnation, I am in justly. I receive, we receive the due rewards of our deeds."

What an awful place to be, we might think, and that's true at one level, and yet is it not also true that never in this man's life had he been in a better place? Never was there a more hopeful place for this man than when he was hanging on that cross and suddenly the fear of God took hold of him and he realized, "I am in this condemnation justly." My dear friend, has that day come for you? Oh, we can talk about sin, we can talk about the law of God, but has the reality of God taken hold of your life in such a way that you say, "All

that the Bible says, all that it says about a lost eternity is true and it's my just desert because I've sinned against God."

We're here at the gates of hell but, secondly here we see the great mystery in the middle. When you go to John's gospel, chapter 19, verse 18, you have this great verse that says, "Where they crucified Jesus, and two other with him, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst." And in many ways, these words, Jesus in the midst, captures the whole gospel of the grace of God. Jesus in the midst. Isaiah had written in chapter 53 centuries before he was numbered with the transgressors. He suffered among sinners. He suffered with sinners. He was numbered with the transgressors. And here he is physically and vertically in the middle, on the middle cross. That middle cross was the cross that was reserved for the greatest criminal. That's where you put the ringleader. That's where you put the worst of the worst. Yes, this thief is bad and this thief is bad, they deserve to die, but this man in the middle, Barabbas, he's the ringleader. This is the greatest sinner. This is the robber of robbers. And here is Jesus of Nazareth, and he has taken the place of Barabbas and the scripture tells us, now Barabbas was a robber, emphasizing to us, as Hugh Martin tells us, that it's as though heaven is saying, it is heaven saying, Jesus of Nazareth has more guilt on him than even Barabbas. He is on the middle cross. Jesus in the midst. Jesus in the lowest place. Jesus in the most condemned place. Jesus in the worst place.

Now why is he here? Don't you think that's the question that the thief began to ponder? Why is he here? Why is Barabbas not here? Barabbas was the ringleader. Barabbas made me do it, perhaps he would say. Why is Jesus of Nazareth here? Physically he's here, but don't you see that mysteriously yet gloriously Jesus is here savingly. Didn't Isaiah go on and say he is numbered among the transgressors and he bear the sin of many and he made intercession for the transgressors. He bare the sin of many, and so suddenly you realize Jesus is not just here horizontally between two sinners, he's also here vertically between God and heaven, and sinners upon earth, sinners upon earth who will be absolutely, everlastingly consumed with the eternal, infinite, unchangeable wrath of Almighty God because of their sin. And the only thing that stops them and you and me from going into hell is that Jesus is hanging on the cross between God and man. Taking the sin, the guilt, the punishment, drinking the cup of wrath, as you see him in the midst of sinners, you see him in the midst of the curse.

Do you see him there in the midst of death, in the midst of suffering, in the midst of darkness, in the midst of trouble, in the midst of men and devils, in the midst of the armies of hell, in the midst of the taunts of Satan? But don't see Jesus there as a helpless victim. He is not here as a helpless victim. He went here. No man takes his life from him. "I have power to lay it down. I have power to take it again." He's not here as a helpless victim. He's here as a conqueror. He's here as one who is destroying death, as one who is destroying the works of the devil, as the one who is making an end of sin, as the one who is pulling out the sting of death, as the one who is saying, "O death, it will be your plague. O grave, I will be your destruction."

Oh, what a mystery Calvary is. Great is the mystery of godliness. God was manifest in the flesh, and Jesus here in the midst of two thieves. Do you know what you have here?

You have a picture of the whole world. You have a picture of everyone, every person, you, me, our families, our friends, our neighborhoods, our countries, our generation, our race, our human race, every single person that has ever lived or ever will live or lives now is on one of these crosses. Maybe you don't think of your life as being on a cross but, my dear friends, you and I come into this world on a cross. We come into this world justly condemned because of our sin in Adam before we say or do anything wrong. And on this one side of Jesus, there is one man hanging and yet you could say there are many on this side. And on this other side, there is another man hanging, one man here, and yet you could say there are many here. Both are equally condemned. Both are equally guilty. Both of them are on the verge of hell. Both of them, listen to me, both of them are equally close to Jesus Christ, the man in the midst on the middle cross. The great, great question, the great discriminating question that separates the one from the other is this, what are you doing with the man on the middle cross? What are you doing with Jesus, which is called Christ?

Here he is. This great mystery in the middle, God manifest in the flesh on the cross, bearing the sin of many, making intercession for the transgressors even as they hurl insult at him. Which brings us, thirdly, here to see the gateway to heaven above. The gateway to heaven above. Psalm 22 is a Psalm of the cross. "My God, my God," it begins, "why hast thou forsaken me?" It is unquestionably the thoughts of Jesus on the cross. Now right in the middle of that Psalm in verse 17, Jesus says this, "I can tell all my bones." Because of the dehydration, he can see his own bones and immediately he says, "They look and they stare at me." Not the bones of his body, but the people around. "People are looking and staring at me." Now, of course, in that context, they are looking and staring, so many of them, with unbelief and with scorn and with derision, wagging their fingers, the song of the drunkards, but yet isn't it true spiritually that Jesus sees, as he does here on the cross, he sees a people that are looking at that cross, looking at him there and staring at him there.

Now what happens to this thief is the question here in point three. Well, what happens to the thief is he begins to look, and he begins to stare in a different way to Jesus of Nazareth. He looks at him, and he stares at him, and suddenly he does it by faith, and he lays hold of this one. And you ask, "Well, what does he see now when he sees Jesus of Nazareth by faith?" He sees that here is a sinless man. You know, you put yourself into the mind of the thief and you try to trace his steps and think, what did he hear? What did he see? He would have heard Pilate say, astonishingly, "I find no fault in this man." Maybe he had heard the rumor too that the wife had come and said, "Have nothing to do with this just man." He had heard his own people speak of his innocence. He had heard the daughters of Jerusalem coming and bewailing and lamenting him as we have it in verse 27. But he is brought to this conviction at the end of verse 41, "This man, he never did anything wrong. This man has done nothing wrong. He has done nothing amiss. He is holy."

He sees the sinlessness of Jesus, but he also sees, surely he sees the meekness of Jesus, the gentleness of Jesus. This is not an ordinary man to be led away having just heard that he's innocent by Pilate, and to speak so tenderly to the daughters of Jerusalem in verse 28

when he says, "Don't weep for me. Don't weep for me, the man on the middle cross. Weep for your children. Weep for yourselves." And he heard him say in verse 34, with a shallow breath on the cross, "Father, forgive them," as they with all their breath are throwing insults at him and accusing him of many things and saying, if you're the Son of God and making up songs about him, with his shallow weak breath, "Father, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Here's a man who's speaking, a man who's in the place of the criminal, speaking about forgiveness. This is not an ordinary man. This is not an ordinary death, and no doubt this constrains him to believe. This man is the Son of God. This man is calling upon God as his Father. This is God's Son. This is the Savior. This is the Christ.

So he saw the sinlessness of Jesus. He saw the meekness of Jesus. He also heard the testimony of his enemies; even what his enemies said had truth in it, little did they know. He saved others. They heard several people say that. He saved others. The sick, he saved them. The blind, he saved them. The deaf, he saved them. The dead, he saved them. But himself, he cannot save. Let him come down. Let him save himself if he's the Christ, the Christ, the Son of the living God. And then the title they put on his cross, "This is Jesus, the King, the King of the Jews." And then the rocks and the sun and the earth quakes itself and the elements of nature seem to put their amen to all of this. This is absolutely extraordinary. But this man comes to believe that the man hanging beside him is the Savior. He saved others. And now in an act of faith, which is the gift of God, this thief turns to the man with the crown of thorns on his head, who increasingly is becoming the object of his hope and his love, and he requests, "Lord." That's not what you say to a man on a cross, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Lord." He confesses that he's a worm. "I'm here justly, but the one beside me, he is the Lord. He is the King, the King of glory." And he says with another shallow breath, "Remember me. Remember me." Prayers are not measured for their length by God, they are weighed for their depth and there is depth in these two words, "Remember me, say something for me, intercede for me, speak a word on my behalf when you come into your kingdom."

This man is a King, and though he's on a cross, he's going to come forth into a kingdom. It sounds ludicrous to people listening in. He's on a cross. He's about to die. And this man suddenly sees he has a kingdom that he's entering into. "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." But suddenly here Calvary becomes a palace, the cross a throne of judgment, and with a look full of grace and full of love and shallow but loud and clear, the King proclaims from his throne, "Verily I say unto thee, today thou shalt be with me in paradise." Do you see the echo? The thief had said, "Lord," and he said, "Verily I say unto thee." The thief had said, "Remember me," and he said, "Thou shalt be with me." The thief had said, "When, I don't know when, but when you come into your kingdom." And the Lord said, "Today." And when these men who could have lasted several days on a cross suddenly saw the soldiers coming to break their legs, they know Jesus was being literally true. "Today, you enter with me into paradise." "Into your kingdom," says the thief. "Into paradise, into everlasting joy," says, the King of glory. And then these beautiful words, aren't they, "with me, with me."

Do you see what goes on here and on the cross with these three crosses? The other thief, he says to Jesus, "You're with us. Save yourself and us. We're all in this together." The penitent thief, he says, "Don't you fear God? He's not with us, the man in the middle. He doesn't belong with us. We, you and me, we are in this together, justly." But then Jesus says, "No," to the penitent thief, "You're not with him. You're with me. With me. You're with me. You're with me now and you'll be with me forever in paradise." And he turns to this thief, this despised thief, and as Hebrews 2:11 says, "both the one who sanctifies and the one who is sanctified are all of one Father, for which cause he is not ashamed to call them his brother." And he says to this thief, "You are my brother. You are with me, me who called upon God as Father. You are with me, and you can call God your Father too."

Now what joy this must have given the Savior. I mean, everything here speaks of what's dark and horrible, the mocking, the blasphemy, the devils, and all of a sudden in this hellish scene, in this dark and awful scene where there's no disciples, they've all forsook him and fled, suddenly Jesus hears on the cross the cry of faith. He sees the tear of penitence, "Lord, remember me." He sees a sinner fleeing to him to lay hold upon him. How it would have gladdened the Savior's heart. How true it is, is it M'Cheyne who says, "The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day, and there may I, though vile as he, wash all my sins away." The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day, but that fountain, Jesus, rejoiced to hear that prayer of faith.

So John Bunyan in his "Pilgrim's Progress" speaks of Ignorance. Ignorance, as you know, children, has gone up a different way. He didn't get a scroll. He takes the boat across the Jordan River instead of going through the way that the pilgrims are meant to go, and he comes all the way up to the gates of heaven but he has no scroll, and so the angels ask him for the scroll, but there is no scroll, and so he's bound hand and foot, and the angels carry him away into the place of hell. And Bunyan says so solemnly in his "Pilgrim's Progress," "So I saw in my dream that there is a way to hell from the very gate of heaven." My dear friend, if you are outside of Jesus Christ, you are closer to hell than you realize. There is a way from a place like this where the gospel is preached, the gates of heaven, there is a way to the very pit of hell itself. What will the lost in hell say if they see you go there? "Are you come here? Are you become like one of us?" My dear friend, if you do not believe in Christ, these words will haunt you through the endless ages of eternity.

There is a way to hell from the very gate of heaven but gloriously the thief on the cross is telling us, there is a way to heaven from the very gate of hell. It doesn't matter how long, how bad, how sinful, how twisted your life has been, there is a way to heaven from the very gate of hell. Think again of Isaiah 14. Think again of hell that is stirred. "Here come these two men that are ours. We've had them our whole life long. They belong to us." They're ready to swallow them up, and only one of them enters. "Where's the other man? I don't know, but I heard him say, 'Lord, remember me,' and then I heard the King say, 'Verily I say unto you today, you with me in paradise.'"

This passage teaches us about the power of Christ to save. With his shallow breath, with this lifelong criminal who cannot walk, cannot go to church, cannot get down to his knees

to pray, can't use his hands to open a Bible, what a hopeless condition, you would think, and yet what power, what power this dying Savior has to save to the uttermost all that come unto God by him. It speaks about the power of Christ to save. It speaks also about the grace of Jesus Christ. Why is the sinner saved? Why is the thief saved? For the same reason that you or me will be saved, free grace alone. This man has done nothing good his whole life long, and all of a sudden he repents and believes the gospel, and free grace is the song. We speak about preparation, you need to prepare yourselves to come to Christ. No, you need to come to Christ. That's what you need to do, and take free grace as your song. This teaches us that small amounts of truth can be used to save someone. I mean you think of this man piecing together even things that the enemies are saying. "He saved others. This is the King of the Jews." And he starts piecing together little bits of truth and the light as it goes on and the Spirit blesses and the man is saved, a little crack, a little word, a verse or two that we bring to someone, who knows? Small amounts of truth can be used to save a sinner.

Lastly, this warns against presumption as it gives hope against despair. It warns against presumption. There are two thieves. As far as I can remember, this is the only man who we read of who is saved at the eleventh hour. It is not common to find someone repenting and believing the gospel with their dying breaths so we don't presume upon a deathbed conversion, but neither do we despair. No sinner as long as they are on this earth, is at the place where they cannot call upon Jesus of Nazareth, "Lord, remember me with the same love that you give unto your people." And they will find, as you will find, if you come to him this very day, Jesus saying, "All that the Father gives to me shall come to me, and him that comes to me I will in no wise know, no, not if he's a thief on a cross who has spent his lifetime in sin, I will in no wise cast out." Oh, what joy there must have been in heaven that day when suddenly the thief on the cross receives questions not from the damned in hell, but from the spirits of just men made perfect. "Are you here? Are you become like one of us?" And the answer is, "Yes, by the grace of God." Amen.

Let us pray.