

SEVEN SAYINGS FROM THE CROSS

2 – THE PENITENT THIEF PARDONED

Luke 23:35-43

INTRODUCTION

- In the first saying, Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of those who crucified Him
- Lifted up from the earth, He looked down to the sinners below Him, and looked up to the Father above Him
- There was a vertical aspect to the first saying; but now we are to look horizontally, to the left and the right of the crucified Jesus and hear the dialogue that takes place between these three dying men.
- While all four gospels state that there were two others crucified with Jesus, only Luke records the details of their words, and the conversion of one of them.
- Luke was not only a physician, but a meticulous historian who carefully gathered eyewitness testimonies of Christ's life to compile his gospel account
- Whoever Luke sourced these details and words from in this instance must have been very close to the three crosses.
- Not one of the circumstances surrounding Christ's crucifixion occurred by accident or chance. Sinful men in their actions were only fulfilling God's eternal decrees.
- When Pilate ordered that Jesus be crucified beside two thieves, he was fulfilling the prophecy given some 700 years earlier. (Isaiah 53:12; cf. Mark 15:27-28)
- It would be enough of a wonder that the Son of God would die amongst thieves, yet more than this we find Him hearing the repentant cry of one of them and promising to him paradise.
- What condescension! Yet this was the purpose for which Christ came into the world (Luke 19:10)
- Lifted up on the cross, Jesus was drawing sinners to saving faith in Himself (John 12:32)

- Even in the moment of His deepest humiliation and weakness, He demonstrated His sovereign power, as the Son of God, to forgive sins.
- What an astonishing combination of wretched shame and glorious majesty in that moment upon the cross!

I. THE PENITENCE OF THE SINNER

- A. The two thieves brought their petitions to the Saviour
 1. Many, when they face death, will turn to prayer
 2. Yet the contrast between these two prayers, and the spirit in which they are prayed, could not be greater.
 3. “If thou be Christ” – these are words of tempting, provoking, contempt and unbelief (Luke 4:3; 23:37)
 4. “Save thyself and us” – hardly a prayer but a blaspheming.
 5. Initially *both* of the thieves reviled Christ, but one of them relented (Matthew 27:44; Mark 15:32)

- B. God’s grace completely transformed the dying thief
 1. He became awakened by God to his sin
 2. He began to fear God
 3. He recognized his sinfulness
 4. He confessed his just condemnation for them
 5. He acknowledged Christ’s sinlessness
 6. He acknowledged Christ’s substitution
 7. He defended Christ when all others despised Him

- C. The penitent’s prayer demonstrates his conversion. (Luke 23:42)
 1. He confessed Christ as his Lord
 - a. Christ must be received as Lord in order to be saved (Romans 10:9)
 - b. Note that the word “Lord” is omitted in modern Bible versions
 2. He acknowledged Christ as King

- a. To behold Christ upon the cross, and yet believe He would still reign as King showed immense faith
 - b. His conversion to Christ took place before all the supernatural phenomena of that day (the hours of darkness; the cry of “It is finished”; the earthquake; the centurion’s confession)
3. He humbly begged Jesus to “remember” him
- a. There is no demand or expectation

II. THE PROMISE OF THE SAVIOUR

- A. The Lord went far beyond merely “remembering” the thief in a future kingdom
- 1. He promised that on that very day, the penitent thief would be with his Lord in paradise (Ephesians 3:20)
 - 2. The promise is prefaced with “Verily” (truly, amen) indicating its certainty
- B. God’s purpose in salvation is restoring fellowship between God and man
- 1. Christ’s promise was that the thief would be “with me”
 - 2. Salvation includes the gift of eternal life; making us holy; and making us servants of God
 - 3. But God’s chief aim in saving sinners is to bring man into communion with God (1 Corinthians 1:9; 1 John 5:11-12)
- C. That very day, they were united in paradise
- 1. Paradise refers to the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:8), and later to heaven (2 Corinthians 12:4; Revelation 2:7)
 - 2. Christ died first and went to paradise
 - 3. When the thief died, the Lord Jesus was waiting there to receive him
 - 4. The believer takes comfort in the fact that death is but the portal to Christ’s presence (Hebrews 6:20; Acts 7:59)
 - 5. This account emphatically refutes the heresy of “soul sleep” (Philippians 1:23)

6. It also refutes the error that Jesus suffered in the flames of hell after His death
- D. The promise of paradise was conditional only upon his repentant faith
1. He was not baptised, or received into church membership, and did not partake of the Lord's table, yet he went to paradise

CONCLUSION

1. All mankind are represented in the two thieves:
 - One was proud, and therefore resisted by God
 - One was humble, and was given grace by God
 - One prayed for physical deliverance from the cross
 - The other prayed for spiritual deliverance from his sins
 - One looked for his welfare in this world
 - The other looked for his welfare in the world to come
 - The one's prayer was not heard nor answered
 - The other's prayer was both heard and answered
 - One questioned the Lordship and deity of Christ
 - The other confessed the Lordship and deity of Christ
 - One reviled Christ to the last
 - The other reviled Christ, but repented of it
 - One feared death
 - The other feared God
 - One died in his sins
 - The other was delivered from his sins
 - One died in fear
 - The other died in peace
 - One went to hell
 - The other went to paradise
2. Which of the two best matches you?
3. This is the only instance in the Bible of last moment salvation
4. God graciously gives us this account of a sinner's conversion just moments before his death that we would not despair; yet God gives *only* this case that we would not presume.
5. If Jesus was able to save a vile thief while hanging on the cross, how much more can we be confident of His power to save now that He is seated at the right hand of the Father?
6. While dying in agony, Jesus still sought for souls to save
7. We have no excuses for not seeking the lost while we have life and breath.