

Luke 23:39-56

"Two Tickets To Paradise"

Jesus said, "If you will come to Me, I will receive you." He said, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out."¹ There are 2 words in that statement that are very important for you & me to understand & they are the words, "I will". When Jesus says, "I will" we need to understand that we are gaining insight & understanding into the heart of God, into the will of God. Jesus is saying that it is My will to never refuse, to never reject, never cast out anyone who will come to Me, who will surrender their lives before Me. In 2 Peter we read it like this, "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."² For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, so that whosoever would believe upon Him would never perish but have everlasting life. It's God's will to see mankind saved, it doesn't matter who you are, where you've been, what you've done, how bad you believe you may be or have been, God loves you, Christ died for you & it's His desire, His will to receive you unto Himself, that is, to save you from the penalty of your own ways.

The text that's before us today demonstrates that perhaps like no other; that it doesn't matter where you've been or what you've done God loves you, Christ died for you & if you will believe upon Him He will receive you unto Himself.

Many times when we think about the crucifixion of Christ we think of what He did, of how He was hung upon the cross & suffered for our sins (& it's appropriate that we do). However many times we fail to remember that He wasn't crucified alone that day. We discovered it last week in Vs 32 of Ch 23 where it says, "There were also 2 others, criminals, led w/Him to be put to death." He was numbered w/transgressors, He was identified w/sinners; & we read in Vs 33, "& when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, & the criminals, one on the right hand, & the other on the left."

Again the single most significant act to ever transpire in human history if not throughout all eternity & it's brought to us w/a profound simplicity. "They crucified Him." That's all we get, it's all we need. It's both the wisdom & the power of God, it's the sufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf.

¹ The New King James Version. 1982 [Jn 6:37]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

² The New King James Version. 1982 [2 Pe 3:9]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

The Shekinah glory wasn't radiating, no one was bowing before Him in worship for what He was doing for us. They mocked Him, they made fun of Him, they led Jesus to a hill called Calvary & there they crucified Him between 2 criminals & there He paid the purchase price of our salvation.

But we shouldn't miss the significance of what's happening here, of how He was crucified between 2 criminals. God wants to speak to us from this, they would in many ways come to typify all of mankind. Herein lies the grace of God, bringing Jesus between these 2 men, both having equal access *to* Him, both having opportunity to call *upon* Him, to believe *in* Him & be saved...

Well, the religious leaders began to wag their heads, sneer & shoot out the lip sarcastically toward Him. "He saved others, let Him save Himself" but as we well know that had He saved Himself He never could've saved others, namely you & me. Because our life would be predicated upon His death, our vindication would be predicated upon His condemnation.

But this is the scene we're stepping back into, they're dogging Him, seeking to shame & humiliate Him, even one who was crucified next to Him sought to make a spectacle of Him, notice.

Vs 39-43

You guys there is so much going on here & such an incredible transaction takes place here that we're left in wonder as we think it through & try to take it in. We find out from Matt & Mark that initially both of these criminals were jeering at Him & joining in the mockery against Him. But somewhere along the way, somehow something happened in one of these men & he began to have a change of heart toward this Man who was hanging on the cross next to him.

The one (for whatever reason) continued to taunt Him. "Hey, if You're the Christ, save Yourself, & us too!" "Hey Jesus, if You're really the Christ, come down off that cross & while You're at it rescue us, let's get out of here!" Really he was just seeking to slam Him even though he was hanging there next to Him. But it's interesting how many people have the audacity to rail on Jesus & then have the expectation that if He's truly the Christ He'll save them & if He doesn't than He was never a Savior. How many celebrities who've openly mocked Christ, or lived in open defiance of Christ once they've died their buddies write a song about how they're staring down from heaven?

Now I'm not judging what goes on in man's heart in his final moments (hopefully they called out to Him). But you can't defy Christ & then think you'll be saved *by* Christ. That's the essence of what this guy's friend comes to realize; reality begins to sink in that he's on borrowed time. He's getting ready to stand before God, so yelling across the Lord he rebukes his partner in crime, look at it in Vs 40-41. (read)

So w/no altar call, no one there trying to convince him of anything he begins to connect the dots & essentially he rehearses the basic facts of the gospel! He says, "Hey man! Don't you even fear God! In case you haven't noticed we're hanging on crosses here, w/in hours we'll be standing before God...eternity is weighing in the balance!"

So as to where this other thief is focused on what he can see, this man begins to consider the unseen, one of them has an earthly mind, the other is developing a heavenly mind, one of them is focusing on the temporal the other the eternal & it's changing his perspective in a radical way. He recognizes their guilty & the innocence of Jesus.

He says, "You're hanging on a cross too! You're under condemnation just the same as this Guy. The difference is that we deserve it, it's justified in our case; it's the due reward for our deeds. But this Man has done nothing wrong!"

Then in Vs 42 it all comes together, it's the pivoting point that would determine the place this man would abide forever. He looks at Jesus & says, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom..." What is this? This is this man's "sinner's prayer". You guys this undoubtedly is one of the greatest displays of faith in the entire bible. Consider the context, Jesus didn't look like He was in any position to save anyone. He was beaten beyond recognition, there were quivering ribbons of bleeding flesh all over Him from the flogging He'd received, He had a crown of thorns beaten down on His head & He was nailed to a cross left there to die. This man says, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom..." Wow... How this must've blessed the heart of our Lord who came to seek & to save that which was lost.

How in the world could this guy have come to this conclusion? What led him to believe that Jesus could somehow help him eternally? We don't know, but certainly he saw the sign above His head, he heard Jesus praying for those who were nailing Him to the cross. He saw our Lord's composure upon the cross refusing to lash out at those who were mocking Him. He heard people saying, "He saved others, let Him save Himself". He heard Him address God personally as "Father". Perhaps he thought, "If He saved others, maybe He can save me."

So he confessed his sin, He acknowledged Jesus' innocence, he looked over to Him & called upon Him & said, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

Translation, "Lord, be merciful to me... a sinner." Jesus looks at him & says to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be w/Me in Paradise." "...the one who comes to Me, I will by no means cast out." God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance & He will always hear the cry of the repentant heart.

Jesus said, "Assuredly" He's underscoring his assurance, no maybe, not perhaps if you're lucky. "You can be sure" Jesus says, "Today you will be w/Me." Or as we read in 2 Cor 5:8 you can be confident that as a believer, to be absent from the body is to be present w/the Lord. **There's no thought of soul sleep here, no mention of purgatory, or a need to be purged of sin beyond faith in Christ (that's an insult to the cross of Christ). It's either finished or it's not, Jesus said it was. His blood is either sufficient to cleanse me or it isn't. He said it is & I'm siding w/Christ as opposed to the false doctrines of man...**

You guys this is what we called, "Saved by grace through faith." This was the gift of God. This man didn't deserve it, he couldn't earn it, he wasn't going to church, hadn't given to the work of the church, he wasn't baptized, he would never do any good works, partake of communion or anything else... But in trusting in Christ he would be saved the same as Billy Graham or Chuck Smith, or Paul the apostle or your or me.

Now in this we recognize that his was most definitely what we might call a "death bed" confession. But let's not presume he'd had any previous opportunity either. As far as we know this is the 1st contact that he'd ever really had w/Christ & he's believing upon Him at the 1st given opportunity he has. Thinking that you'll have opportunity to believe upon Jesus just before you die is like presuming you'll find a rock to save you just before you plunge over Niagara Falls! You *might*, but you might not ever have the chance. That's why the bible says that "Today is the day of salvation" don't put it off & presume upon tomorrow. You're never guaranteed tomorrow, you have right now & that's all you can count on.

Vs44-46

No one took His life, He laid it down. We know from the other gospel accounts that when He cried w/a loud voice what He said was, "It is finished!" It was a cry of victory, "Paid in full" the Father had received the payment of Christ for the sin of the world & as such there was no more cause for Him to be there so He dismissed His spirit as He quoted the 5th Vs of the 31st Ps. "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit."

Now in Vs 44 we discover that there was a darkness that covered the earth for 3 hrs.

That would be from noon until 3 pm. It was a supernatural solar eclipse. I say, “supernatural” because Passover always happens at the time of the full moon. You can’t have a solar eclipse during the full moon it only happens during the new moon. So this was most definitely a heaven sent darkness (if you will). Now Jesus said, *“I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.”*³ And again, *“As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”*⁴ & Now as mankind is seeking to extinguish that Light it seems only appropriate that the world should be shrouded in darkness. We read in Ch 3 of John’s gospel where Jesus said, *“And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.”*⁵ Here at the cross it’s as if God is giving a visible illustration of the spiritual reality of where people are at w/out the Light of the world. Rejecting Jesus leaves you in darkness.

Now in Vs 45 we have the mention of the rending of the veil from the top to the bottom. Not from the bottom to the top as though from man upward. But from the top to the bottom from God downward; the veil was that article in the temple that separated the holy place from the most holy place where the presence of God dwelt. It was a place that none but the high priest could enter & that only 1 day a year on the Day of Atonement. At the end of the day that veil spoke of a separation between God & man. God is holy, man is unholy, stay out.

But when Christ died upon the cross God tore that veil sending the message now no longer of *separation* but of *reconciliation* to God through Christ. That we no longer need a priest, a sacrifice, an altar or any of that to approach God; we’re no limited to 1 time a year. We can come boldly & freely through the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross for us. Access to God is granted freely through the broken body, the torn flesh (if you will) of Christ Jesus who is the Mediator (the go between) between God & man. We come to God through Christ. It’s what the writer of Hebrews was saying when he wrote, *“Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh,”*⁶ God’s message to you in Christ isn’t “Keep out”, it’s “Draw near” w/a true heart & in full assurance of faith.

³ *The New King James Version*. 1982 (Jn 8:12). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁴ *The New King James Version*. 1982 (Jn 9:5). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁵ *The New King James Version*. 1982 (Jn 3:19–20). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁶ *The New King James Version*. 1982 (Heb 10:19–20). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Here's the problem, here's the difficulty or dilemma that confronts us...

sewing the veil back up. "What do you mean?" Through Christ we've been granted free access to the Father. Too often we get out our needle & thread & say, "We haven't sang our handful of worship songs," "I haven't had my devotions", "Haven't done this," "Need to do that". We devise formulas or various steps through which stitch by stitch we so up the veil. We forbid ourselves or others access to God on the basis of our own rules & regulations (we call that religion, legalism). God invites us to come freely, no strings attached in Christ.

Vs47-49

There was something different about the death of Jesus. Somewhere in there it seems as though the people went from mocking to wondering, "What have we done?" They began to beat their breasts, the world went dark, the earth quaked, Jesus dismissed His spirit & the people (it seems) began to 2nd guess themselves. They were being made ready for the day of Pentecost, their hearts were being convicted & very soon Peter would share the gospel w/them & 3,000 would realize what they'd done, cry out for forgiveness & believe upon the Lord J.C.

Even this centurion, though he'd seen countless people crucified before realized there was something different about Jesus. Did he get saved? I don't know...it wouldn't surprise me. I just don't see how you could be present during all of this & see it as a common kind of execution. Your heart would be stirring, emotions raging w/in you & I don't think you would ever forget what you seen that day. These hearts were now in such a place whereby being convicted of their sin they awaited the preaching of the gospel & not too many days from this point that's exactly what they'd get. Jesus said that if He were lifted up (upon the cross) that He would draw all men unto Himself & certainly we're already seeing that in this centurion.

Vs50-56

Few quick things & we're done. We read here where Joseph of Arimathea comes into focus here as a one time undercover Christian who's coming out of the closet. He was on the council but he didn't approve of their decision nor their deed. We read here that he was a good & a just man, didn't approve of their actions & he awaited the kingdom. Which means he too was trusting in Jesus as Messiah.

It's interesting to think of all the open followers of Jesus now heading underground & all the underground followers of Jesus now coming to the surface.

But be that as it may he was a good & just man. That's the testimony of the word of God about him. When I read how the bible describes people it makes me wonder how the word of God would describe me. *Favorable light, or flaky light? A servant of God or just along for the ride? Sold out to Jesus or double minded, unstable & never following through, humble or full of pride. How would the word of God record the testimony of your life?* If you belong *to* the Lord, are a servant *of* the Lord, than praise God! If not, there's still time to change an unfavorable testimony, you can surrender your life *to* the Lord & begin to live your life *for* the Lord even today...

The bible gives us details here so that we know Jesus was really dead. W/out His death we can't know life. You don't wrap an unconscious man in a mummified state, you don't place a man who's still alive in a tomb & roll the stone in front of it. You don't prepare burial spices for a man on the rebound. These are things you do for the dead. The ladies followed them so that they would know exactly where to go Sunday morning; they weren't confused; they knew where their Lord had been laid. But the Sabbath was approaching so they'd have to wait to go through the appropriate procedures which sets the stage for them finding an empty tomb Sunday morning.

Now, let's return to our criminals & we'll close. As we mentioned these 2 guys become a picture of the world around us. There are 2 kinds of people in this world. Those who will accept Jesus, & those who will reject Jesus. We're all condemned because of our sin, we're all justifiably in that place being guilty as charged. We all have the opportunity to call upon Jesus, some will mock, some will choose to believe. One was taken, the other left, one accepted, the other rejected. What was the difference between these 2 boys? Nothing, the difference lie in the way they responded to Jesus. One hardened his heart against Him, the other opened his heart, humbled himself & called upon Him.

Then came the assurance, "Today you will be w/Me in Paradise." You may be in pain right now, you may be suffering right now, you may be dehydrated, disoriented & dying right now. But very soon it will all come into focus for you, you will never thirst again, there will be no more crying, no more pain, no more suffering for the former things will have passed away. How does that sound to you? How precious is the promise, "All that the Father give Me will come to Me & the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out."

Prayer Points:

Lord we thank You for the precious promise You've made to us that it doesn't matter where we've been or what we've done if we will come to You, You will receive us. Each & everyone of us here who know You bear witness to the faithfulness of Your word, Your promise that You've kept to us. Lord we don't want to walk in darkness, we want to abide in the light of life. It's our desire that Your light would shine forth from us that others might see You, be drawn *to* You & saved *by* You. Use us for Your glory.

If you're here today & you're in that place where perhaps God is dealing w/you. You know you're guilty as charged, you know the places you've been, the things you've done but today you've been brought into contact w/Jesus & now you've got a decision to make. Jesus hung on the cross, He shed His blood, the Innocent One for the guilty, the sufficient sacrifice for the sin of the world. You can be forgiven of your sin & receive the promise of being w/Christ *today*. Don't harden your heart, humble yourself, open your heart & come to Jesus. If you will accept Him, He *will not* reject you. **If you want Jesus to remember you, when you stand before Him, than ask Him today & He won't turn you away...**