

The Word of Salvation

by A.W. Pink

The salvation of the dying thief illustrates the sovereignty of God in salvation and the supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit, demonstrating that salvation is entirely by God's grace.

Scripture: Luke 23:42

Topics: "Grace", "Salvation"

Description

A.W. Pink emphasizes the profound significance of the second saying of Christ on the cross, where He assures the repentant thief of his place in Paradise. This moment illustrates God's sovereignty and grace, as both thieves were equally near to Christ, yet one was saved while the other was not, highlighting the mystery of divine election and human responsibility. Pink underscores that salvation is entirely by grace, as demonstrated by the thief's last-minute conversion, which serves as a powerful reminder that no one is beyond the reach of God's mercy. The sermon also reflects on the nature of true repentance and faith, showing that even in the direst circumstances, faith in Christ can lead to salvation. Ultimately, Pink concludes that the essence of salvation is not merely deliverance from sin but the promise of eternal fellowship with Christ in Paradise.

Transcript

The Seven Sayings of the Saviour on the Cross

2. THE WORD OF SALVATION

"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"

Luke 23:42, 43

THE SECOND OF CHRIST'S cross-utterances was spoken in response to the request of the dying thief. Ere considering the words of the Saviour we shall first ponder what occasioned them. It was no accident that the Lord of glory was crucified between two thieves. There are no accidents in a world that is governed by God. Much less could there have been any accident on that day of days, or in connection with that event of all events - a day and an event which lie at the very centre of the world's history.

No, God was presiding over that scene. From all eternity he had decreed when and where and how and with whom his Son should die. Nothing was left to chance or the caprice of man. All that God had decreed

came to pass exactly as he had ordained, and nothing happened save as he had eternally purposed. Whatsoever man did was simply that which God's hand and counsel "determined to be done" (Acts 4:28). When Pilate gave orders that the Lord Jesus should be crucified between the two malefactors, all unknown to himself, he was but putting into execution the eternal decree of God and fulfilling his prophetic word.

Seven hundred years before this Roman officer gave his command, God had declared through Isaiah that his Son should be "numbered with the transgressors" (Isa. 53:12). How utterly unlikely this appeared, that the Holy One of God should be numbered with the unholy; that the very one whose finger had inscribed on the tables of stone the Sinaitic Law should be assigned a place with the lawless; that the Son of God should be executed with criminals - this seemed utterly inconceivable.

Yet, it actually came to pass. Not a single word of God can fall to the ground. "Forever, O Lord, thy word is settled in heaven" (Ps. 119:89). Just as God had ordained, and just as he had announced, so it came to pass. Why did God order it that his beloved Son should be crucified between two criminals? Certainly God had a reason; a good one, a manifold one, whether we can discern it or not. God never acts arbitrarily. He has a good purpose for everything he does, for all his works are ordered by infinite wisdom.

In this particular instance a number of answers suggest themselves to our inquiry. Was not our blessed Lord crucified with the two thieves to fully demonstrate the unfathomable depths of shame into which he had descended? At his birth he was surrounded by the beasts of the field, and now, at his death, he is numbered with the refuse of humanity. Again, was not the Saviour numbered with transgressors to show us the position he occupied as our substitute? He had taken the place which was due us, and what was that but the place of shame, the place of transgressors, the place of criminals condemned to death!

Again, was he not deliberately humiliated thus by Pilate to exhibit man's estimate of the peerless one - "despised" as well as rejected! Again, was he not crucified with the two thieves, so that in those three crosses and the ones who hung upon them we might have a vivid and concrete representation of the drama of salvation and man's response thereto - the Saviour's redemption; the sinner repenting and believing; and the sinner reviling and rejecting? Another important lesson which we may learn from the crucifixion of Christ between the two thieves, and the fact that one received him and the other rejected him, is that of the sovereignty of God.

The two malefactors were crucified together. They were equally near to Christ. Both of them saw and heard all that transpired during those fateful six hours. Both were notoriously wicked; both were suffering acutely; both were dying, and both urgently needed forgiveness. Yet one of them died in his sins, died as he had lived - hardened and impenitent; while the other repented of his wickedness, believed in Christ, called on him for mercy and went to Paradise. How can this be accounted for except by the sovereignty of God!

We see precisely the same thing going on today. Under exactly the same circumstances and conditions, one is melted and another remains unmoved. Under the same sermon one man will listen with indifference, while another will have his eyes opened to see his need and his will moved to close with God's offer of mercy. To one the gospel is revealed, to another it is "hidden". Why? All we can say is, "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight." And yet God's sovereignty is never meant to destroy human responsibility.

Both are plainly taught in the Bible, and it is our business to believe and preach both whether we can harmonize or understand them or not. In preaching both we may seem to our hearers to contradict ourselves, but what matters that? Said the late C H Spurgeon, when preaching on 1 Timothy 2:3, 4, "There stands the text, and I believe that it is my Father's wish that "All men should be saved, and come unto the knowledge of the truth". But! know, also, that he does not will it, so that he will save any one of them, unless they believe in his Son; for he has told us over and over again that he will not.

He will not save any man except he forsakes his sins, and turns to him with full purpose of heart: that I also know. And I know, also, that he has a people whom he will save, whom by his eternal love he has chosen and whom by his eternal power he will deliver. I do not know how that squares with this, that is another of the things I do not know." And said this prince of preachers, "I will just stand to what! ever shall and always have preached, and take God's word as it stands, whether! can reconcile it with another part of God's word or not."

We say again, God's sovereignty is never meant to destroy man's responsibility. We are to make diligent use of all the means which God has appointed for the salvation of souls. We are bidden to preach the gospel to "every creature". Grace is free; the invitation is broad enough to take in "whosoever believeth". Christ turns away none who come to him. Yet, after we have done all, after we have planted and watered, it is God who "giveth the increase", and this he does as best pleaseth his sovereign will.

In the salvation of the dying thief we have a clear view of victorious grace such as is to be found nowhere else in the Bible. God is the God of all grace, and salvation is entirely by his grace. "By grace are ye saved" (Eph. 2:8), and it is "by grace" from beginning to end. Grace planned salvation, grace provided salvation, and grace so works on and in his elect as to overcome the hardness of their hearts, the obstinacy of their wills, and the enmity of their minds, and thus makes them willing to receive salvation.

Grace begins, grace continues, and grace consummates our salvation. Salvation by grace - sovereign, irresistible, free grace - is illustrated in the New Testament by example as well as precept. Perhaps the two most striking cases of all are those of Saul of Tarsus and the Dying Robber. And the case of the latter is even more noteworthy than the former. In the case of Saul, who afterwards became Paul the apostle to the Gentiles, there was an exemplary moral character to begin with.

Writing years afterwards of his condition before his conversion, the apostle declared that as touching the righteousness of the law he was "blameless" (Phil. 3:6). He was a "Pharisee of the Pharisees": punctilious in his habits, correct in his deportment. Morally, his character was flawless. After his conversion his life was one of gospel-righteousness. Constrained by the love of Christ he spent himself in preaching the gospel to sinners and in labouring to build up the saints.

Doubtless our readers will agree with us when we say that probably Paul came nearest to attaining the ideals of the Christian life, and that he followed after his Master more closely than any other saint has since. But with the saved thief it was far otherwise. He had no moral life before his conversion and no life of active service after it. Before his conversion he respected neither the law of God nor the law of man. After his conversion he died without having opportunity to engage in the service of Christ.

I would emphasize this, because these are the two things which are regarded by so many as contributing factors to our salvation. It is supposed that we must first fit ourselves by developing a noble character before God will receive us as his sons; and that after he has received us, tentatively, we are merely placed on probation, and that unless we now bring forth a certain quality and quantity of good works we shall "fall

from grace and be lost". But the dying thief had no good works either before or after conversion.

Hence we are shut up to the conclusion that if saved at all he was certainly saved by sovereign grace. The salvation of the dying thief also disposes of another prop which the legality of the carnal mind interposes to rob God of the glory due unto his grace. Instead of attributing the salvation of lost sinners to the matchless grace of God, many professing Christians seek to account for them by human influences, instrumentalities and circumstances. Either the preacher or providential and propitious circumstances or the prayers of believers, are looked to as the main cause.

Let us not be misunderstood here. It is true that often God is pleased to use means in the conversion of sinners; that frequently he condescends to bless our prayers and efforts to point sinners to Christ; that many times he causes his providences to awaken and arouse the ungodly to a realization of their state. But God is not shut up to these things. He is not limited to human instrumentalities. His grace is all powerful, and when he pleases, that grace is able to save in spite of the lack of human instrumentalities, and in the face of unfavorable circumstances.

So it was in the case of the saved thief. Consider: His conversion occurred at a time when to outward appearance Christ had lost all power to save either himself or others. This thief had marched along with the Saviour through the streets of Jerusalem and had seen him sink beneath the weight of the cross! It is highly probable that as one who followed the occupation of a thief and robber this was the first day he had ever set eyes on the Lord Jesus, and now that he did see him it was under every circumstance of weakness and disgrace.

His enemies were triumphing over him. His friends had mostly forsaken him. Public opinion was unanimously against him. His very crucifixion was regarded as utterly inconsistent with his Messiah-ship. His lowly condition was a stumblingblock to the Jews from the very first, and the circumstances of his death must have intensified it, especially to one who had never seen him except in this condition. Even those who had believed on him were made to doubt by his crucifixion. There was not one in the crowd who stood there with out-stretched finger and cried, "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world!"

And yet, notwithstanding these obstacles and difficulties in the way of his faith, the thief apprehended the Saviour-hood and Lordship of Christ. How can we possibly account for such faith and such spiritual understanding in one circumstanced as he was? How can we explain the fact that this dying thief took a suffering, bleeding, crucified man for his God! It cannot be accounted for apart from divine intervention and supernatural operation. His faith in Christ was a miracle of grace!

It is also to be remarked that the thief's conversion took place before the supernatural phenomena of that day. He cried, "Lord, remember me" before the hours of darkness, before the triumphant cry, "It is finished", before the rending of the temple veil, before the quaking of the earth and the shivering of the rocks, before the centurion's confession "Truly this was the Son of God". God purposely set his conversion before these things so that his sovereign grace might be magnified and his sovereign power acknowledged.

God designedly chose to save this thief under the most unfavorable circumstances that no flesh should glory in his presence. God deliberately arranged this combination of unpropitious conditions and surroundings to teach us that "Salvation is of the Lord"; to teach us not to magnify human instrumentality above divine agency; to teach us that every genuine conversion is the direct product of the supernatural

operation of the Holy Spirit. We shall now consider the thief himself, his various utterances, his request of the Saviour, and our Lord's response. "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" Luke 23:42, 43

1. Here we see a representative sinner.

We shall never get to the heart of this incident until we regard the conversion of this man as a representative case, and the thief himself as a representative character. There are those who have sought to show that the original character of the repenting thief was nobler and worthier than that of the other who repented not. But this is not only not true to the facts of the case but it serves to efface the peculiar glory of his conversion and takes away from the wonderment of God's grace. It is of great importance to see that prior to the time when the one repented and believed there was no essential difference between the two thieves. In nature, in history, in circumstances they were one. The Holy Spirit has been careful to tell us that they both reviled the suffering Saviour:

"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" (Matthew 27:41-44).

Terrible indeed was the condition and action of this robber. On the very brink of eternity he unites with the enemies of Christ in the awful sin of mocking him. This was unparalleled turpitude. Think of it - a man in his dying hour deriding the suffering Saviour! O what a demonstration of human depravity and of the native enmity of the carnal mind against God! And reader, by nature there is the same depravity inhering within you, and unless a miracle of divine grace has been wrought upon you there is the same enmity against God and his Christ present in your heart.

You may not think so, you may not feel so, you may not believe so. But that does not alter the fact. The word of him who cannot lie declares, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked" (Jer. 17:9). That is a statement of universal application. It describes what every human heart is by natural birth. And again the same scripture of truth declares, "The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Rom. 8:7).

This, too, diagnoses the state of every descendant of Adam. "For there is no difference for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:22, 23). Unspeakably solemn is this: yet it needs to be pressed. It is not until our desperate condition is realized that we discover our need of a divine Saviour. It is not until we are brought to see our total corruption and unsoundness that we shall hasten to the great physician. It is not until we find in this dying thief a portrayal of ourselves that we shall join in saying, "Lord, remember me".

We have to be abased before we can be exalted. We have to be stripped of the filthy rags of our self-righteousness before we are ready for the garments of salvation. We have to come to God as beggars, empty-handed, before we can receive the gift of eternal life. We have to take the place of lost sinners before him if we would be saved. Yes, we have to acknowledge ourselves as thieves before we can have a place in the family of God. "But," you say, "I am no thief! I acknowledge I am not all I ought to be.

I am not perfect. In fact, I will go so far as to admit I am a sinner. But I cannot allow that this thief represents my state and condition." Ah, friend, your case is far worse than you suppose. You are a thief, and that of the worst type. You have robbed God! Suppose that a firm in the East appointed an agent to represent them in the West, and that every month they forwarded to him his salary. But suppose also at the end of the year his employers discovered that though the agent had been cashing the cheques they sent him, nevertheless, he had served another firm all that time.

Would not that agent be a thief? Yet this is precisely the situation and state of every sinner. He has been sent into this world by God, and God has endowed him with talents and the capacity to use and improve them. God has blessed him with health and strength; he has supplied his every need, and provided innumerable opportunities to serve and glorify him. But with what result? The very things God has given him have been misappropriated. The sinner has served another master, even Satan.

He dissipates his strength and wastes his time in the pleasures of sin. He has robbed God. Unsaved reader, in the sight of Heaven your condition is as desperate and your heart is as wicked as that of the thief. See in him a picture of yourself. 2. Here we see that man has to come to the end of himself before he can be saved. Above we have contemplated this dying robber as a representative sinner, a sample specimen of what all men are by nature and practice - by nature at enmity against God and his Christ; by practice robbers of God, misusing what he has given us and failing to render what is due him.

We are now to see that this crucified robber was also a representative case in his conversion. And at this point we shall dwell simply upon his helplessness. To see ourselves as lost sinners is not sufficient. To learn that we are corrupt and depraved by nature and sinful transgressors by practice is the first important lesson. The next is to learn that we are utterly undone, and that we can do nothing whatever to help ourselves. To discover that our condition is so desperate that it is entirely beyond human repair, is the second step toward salvation - looking at it from the human side.

But if man is slow to learn that he is a lost sinner and unfit for the presence of a holy God, he is slower still to recognize that he can do nothing towards his salvation, and is unable to work any improvement in himself so as to be fit for God. Yet, it is not until we realize that we are "without strength" (Rom. 5:6), that we are "impotent" (John 5:3), that it is not by works of righteousness which we do, but by his mercy God saves us (Titus 3:5), not until then shall we despair of ourselves, and look outside of ourselves to the one who can save us.

The great scripture type of sin is leprosy, and for leprosy man can devise no cure. God alone can deal with this dreadful disease. So it is with sin. But, as we have said, man is slow to learn his lesson. He is like the prodigal son, who when he had squandered his substance in the far country in riotous living and began to be "in want", instead of returning to the father straightaway, he "went and joined himself to a citizen of that country" and went to the fields to feed swine; in other words he went to work.

Likewise the sinner who has been aroused to his need, instead of going at once to Christ, he tries to work himself into God's favour. But he will fare no better than the prodigal - the husks of the swine will be his only portion. Or again, like the woman bowed down with her infirmity for many long years. She tried many physicians before she sought the great physician: so the awakened sinner seeks relief and peace in first one thing and then another, until he completes the weary round of religious performances, and ends by being "nothing bettered, but rather grows worse" (Mark 5:26).

No, it is not until that woman had "spent all she had" that she sought Christ: and it is not until the sinner comes to the end of his own resources that he will betake himself to the Saviour. Before any sinner can be saved he must come to the place of realized weakness. This is what the conversion of the dying thief shows us. What could he do? He could not walk in the paths of righteousness for there was a nail through either foot. He could not perform any good works for there was a nail through either hand.

He could not turn over anew leaf and live a better life for he was dying. And, my reader, those hands of yours which are so ready for self-righteous acting, and those feet of yours which are so swift to run in the way of legal obedience, must be nailed to the cross. The sinner has to be cut off from his own workings and be made willing to be saved by Christ. A realization of your sinful condition, of your lost condition, of your helpless condition, is nothing more or less than old-fashioned conviction of sin, and this is the sole prerequisite for coming to Christ for salvation, for Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. 3.

Here we see the meaning of repentance and faith. Repentance may be considered under various aspects. It includes in its meaning and scope a change of mind about sin, a sorrowing for sin, a forsaking of sin. Yet there is more in repentance than these. Really, repentance is the realization of our lost condition, it is the discovery of our ruin, it is the judging of ourselves, it is the owning of our lost estate. Repentance is not so much an intellectual process as it is the conscience active in the presence of God.

And this is exactly what we find here in the case of the thief. First he says to his companion, "Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?" (Luke 23:40). A short time before he had mingled his voice with those who were reviling the Saviour. But the Holy Spirit had been at work upon him, and now his conscience is active in the presence of God. It was not, "Dost not thou fear punishment?" but, "Dost not thou fear God?" He apprehends God as judge. And then, in the second place he adds, "And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds" (Luke 23:41).

Here we see him acknowledging his guilt and the justice of his condemnation. He passes sentence upon himself. He makes no excuses and attempts no extenuation. He recognized he was a transgressor, and that as such he fully deserved punishment for his sins, yea, that death was his due. Have you taken this position before God, my reader? Have you openly confessed your sins to him? Have you passed judgment upon yourself and your ways? Are you ready to acknowledge that death is your "due"?

Whether you palliate sin or prevaricate about it, you are shutting yourself out from Christ. Christ came into the world to save sinners - self-confessed sinners, sinners who really take the place of sinners before God, sinners who are conscious that they are lost and undone. The thief's "repentance toward God" was accompanied with "faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ". In contemplating his faith we may notice first that it was an intelligent head faith. In the earlier paragraphs of this chapter we have called attention to the sovereignty of God and his irresistible and victorious grace which were exhibited in the conversion of this thief.

Now we turn to another side of the truth, equally necessary to press, a side which is not contradictory to what we have said previously, but rather, complementary and supplementary. Scripture does not teach that if God has elected a certain soul to be saved that that person will be saved whether they believe or not. That is a false conclusion drawn by those who reject the truth. No, scripture teaches that the same God who predestined the end also predestined the means. The God who decreed the salvation of the dying thief fulfilled his decree by giving him a faith with which to believe.

This is the plain teaching of 2 Thessalonians 2:13 (and other scriptures): "God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth". This is just what we see here in connection with this robber. He "believed the truth." His faith took hold of the word of God. Over the cross was the superscription, "This is Jesus the King of the Jews". Pilate had placed it there in derision. But it was the truth nevertheless, and after he had written it, God would not allow him to alter it.

The board bearing this superscription had been carried in front of Christ through the streets of Jerusalem and out to the place of crucifixion, and the thief had read it, and divine grace and power had opened the eyes of his understanding to see it was the truth. His faith grasped the kingship of Christ, hence his mention of "when thou comest into thy kingdom". Faith always rests on the written word of God. Before a man will believe that Jesus is the Christ he must have the testimony before him that he is the Christ.

Distinction is often made between head faith and heart faith, and properly so, for the distinction is real, and vital. Sometimes head faith is decried as valueless, but this is foolish. There must be head faith before there can be heart faith. We must believe intellectually before we can believe savingly in the Lord Jesus. Proof of this is seen in connection with the heathen: they have no head faith and therefore they have no heart faith. We readily grant that head faith will not save unless it be accompanied by heart faith, but we insist that there is no heart faith unless there has first been head faith.

How can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? True, one may believe about him without believing in him, but one cannot believe in him without first believing about him. So it was with the dying thief. In all probability he had never seen Christ before this day of his death, but he had seen the written superscription testifying to his kingship and the Holy Spirit used this as the basis of his faith. We say then that his was an intelligent faith: first, an intellectual faith, the believing the written testimony submitted to him; second, a heart faith, the resting in confidence on Christ himself as the Saviour of sinners.

Yes, this dying robber exercised a heart faith which rested savingly on Christ. We shall try to be very simple here. A man may have head faith in the Lord Jesus and be lost. A man may believe about the historic Christ and be no better for it, just as he is no better for believing about the historic Napoleon. Reader, you may believe all about the Saviour - his perfect life, his sacrificial death, his victorious resurrection, his glorious ascension, his promised return - but you must do more than this.

Gospel faith is a confiding faith. Saving faith is more than a correct opinion or a train of reasoning. Saving faith transcends all reason. Look at this dying thief! Was it reasonable that Christ should notice him? A crucified robber, a self-confessed criminal, one who a few minutes ago had been reviling him! Was it reasonable that the Saviour should take any notice of him? Was it reasonable to expect that he should be transported from the very brink of the pit into Paradise?

Ah, my reader, the head reasons, but the heart does not. And this man's petition came from his heart. He had not the use of his hands and feet (and they are not needed for salvation: they rather impede) but he had the use of his heart and tongue. They were free to believe and confess - "For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Rom. 10:10). We may also notice his was a humble faith. He prayed with becoming modesty.

It was not "Lord, honour me", or "Lord, exalt me", but Lord, if thou wilt but think of me! If thou wilt only look on me - "Lord, remember me". And yet that word "remember" was wonderfully full and appropriate. He might have said, Pardon me, Save me, Bless me; but "remember" included them all. An interest in Christ's heart will include an interest in all his benefits! Moreover this word was well suited to the condition of the

one who uttered it. He was an outcast from society - who would remember him!

The public would think no more of him. His friends would be glad to forget him as having disgraced his family. But there is one with whom he ventures to lodge this petition - "Lord, remember me". Finally, we may notice that his was a courageous faith. Perhaps this is not apparent at first sight, but a little consideration will make it plain. He who hung on the central cross was the one on whom all eyes were turned and toward whom all the vile mockery of a vulgar mob was directed.

Every faction of that crowd joined in jeering at the Saviour. Matthew tells us that "they that passed by reviled him", that "likewise also the chief priests mocked, with the elders and scribes". While Luke informs us "the soldiers also mocked him" (23:36). It is therefore easy to understand why the thieves should also take up the taunting cry. No doubt the priests and scribes smiled benignly upon them as they did so. But suddenly there was a change. The repenting thief instead of continuing to sneer and jibe at Christ, turns to his companion and openly rebukes him in the hearing of the spectators gathered around the crosses, crying, "This man hath done nothing amiss."

Thus he condemned the whole Jewish nation! But more; not only does he bear testimony to Christ's innocency, but he also confessed his kingship. And thus by a single stroke he cuts himself off from the favour of his companion and of the crowd as well! We talk today of the courage which is needed to openly witness for Christ, but such courage in these days pales into utter insignificance before the courage displayed that day by the dying thief. 4. Here we see a marvellous case of spiritual illumination.

It is perfectly wonderful the progress made by this man in those few dying hours. His growth in grace and in the knowledge of his Lord was amazing. From the brief record of the words that fell from his lips we may discover seven things which he had learned under the tuition of the Holy Spirit. First, he expresses his belief in a future life where retribution would be meted out by a righteous and sin-avenging God. "Dost not thou fear God?)" proves this. He sharply reprimands his companion, and as much as says, How dare you have the temerity to revile this innocent man?

Remember, that shortly you will have to appear before God and face a tribunal infinitely more solemn than the one which sentenced you to be crucified. God is to be feared, so be silent. Second, as we have seen, he had a sight of his own sinfulness - "Thou art in the same condemnation. And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds" (Luke 23:40, 41). He recognized that he was a transgressor. He saw that sin merited punishment, that "condemnation" was just. He owned that death was his "due".

This was something that his companion neither confessed nor recognized. Third, he bore testimony to Christ's sinlessness - "This man hath done nothing amiss" (Luke 23:41). And here we may mark the pains God took to guard the spotless character of his Son. Especially is this to be seen toward the end. Judas was moved to say, "I have betrayed innocent blood." Pilate testified, "I find no fault in him." Pilate's wife said, "Have nothing to do with this just man." And now that he hangs on the cross, God opens the eyes of this robber to see the faultlessness of his beloved Son, and opens his lips so that he bears witness to his excellency.

Fourth, he not only witnessed to the sinless humanity of Christ but he also confessed his Godhead - "Lord, remember me," he said. A marvellous word was that. The Saviour nailed to the tree, the object of Jewish hatred and the butt of a vulgar mob's ridicule. This thief had heard the scornful challenge of the priests: "If thou be the Son of God come down from the cross", and no response had been given. But moved by faith and not by sight he recognizes and owns the deity of the central sufferer.

Fifth, he believed in the saviour-hood of the Lord Jesus. He had heard Christ's prayer for his enemies, "Father, forgive them . . ." and to one whose heart the Lord had opened, that short sentence became a saving sermon. His own cry, "Lord, remember me" included within its scope, "Lord, save me", which therefore implies his faith in the Lord Jesus as Saviour. In fact he must have believed that Jesus was a Saviour for the chief of sinners or how could he have believed that Christ would "remember" such as he!

Sixth, he evidenced his faith in Christ's kingship - "when thou comest into thy kingdom". This too, was a wonderful word. Outward circumstances all seemed to belie his kingship. Instead of being seated on a throne, he hung upon a cross. Instead of wearing a royal diadem, his brow was encircled with thorns. Instead of being waited upon by a retinue of servants, he was numbered with transgressors. Nevertheless, he was king - King of the Jews (Matthew 2:2). Finally, he looked forward to the second coming of Christ - "when thou comest".

He looked away from the present to the future. He saw beyond the "sufferings", the "glory". Over the cross the eye of faith detected the crown. And in this he was before the apostles, for unbelief had closed their eyes. Yes, he looked beyond the first advent in shame to the second advent in power and majesty. And how can we account for the spiritual intelligence of this dying robber? Whence did he receive such insight into the things of Christ? How comes it that this babe in Christ made such amazing progress in the school of God?

It can be accounted for only by divine influence. The Holy Spirit was his teacher! Flesh and blood had not revealed these things unto him but the Father in heaven. What an illustration that divine things are hidden from "the wise and prudent" and are revealed to "babes"! 5. Here we see the Saviour-hood of Christ. The crosses were only a few feet apart and it did not take the Saviour long to hear this cry of the penitent thief. What was his response thereto? He might have said, You deserve your fate: you are a wicked robber and have merited death.

Or, he might have replied, You have left it till too late; you should have sought me sooner. Ah! but had he not promised, "Him that cometh to me! will in no wise cast out"! So it proved here. Of the reproaches which were cast on him by the crowd the Lord Jesus took no notice. To the insulting challenge of the priests to descend from the cross, he made no response. But the prayer of this contrite, believing thief arrested his attention. At the time he was grappling with the powers of darkness and sustaining the awful load of his people's guilt, and we should have thought he might be excused from attending to individual applications.

Ah! but a sinner can never come to Christ in an unacceptable time. He gives him an answer of peace and that without delay. The salvation of the repentant and believing robber illustrates not only Christ's readiness but also his power to save sinners. The Lord Jesus is no feeble Saviour. Blessed be God he is able to "save unto the uttermost" them that come unto God by him. And never was this so signally displayed as when on the cross. This was the time of the Redeemer's "weakness" (2 Cor. 13:4).

When the thief cried, "Lord, remember me", the Saviour was in agony on the accursed tree. Yet even then, even there, he had power to redeem this soul from death and open for him the gates of Paradise! Never doubt then, or question the infinite sufficiency of the Saviour. If a dying Saviour could save how much more he who rose in triumph from the tomb, never more to die! In saving this thief Christ gave an exhibition of his power at the very time when it was almost clouded. The salvation of the dying thief demonstrates that the Lord is willing and able to save all who come to him.

If Christ received this penitent, believing thief, then none need despair of a welcome if they will but come to Christ. If this dying robber was not beyond the reach of divine mercy then none are who will respond to the invitations of divine grace. The Son of Man came "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10), and none can sink lower than that. The gospel of Christ is the power of God "to every one that believeth" (Romans 1:16). No limit not the grace of God. A Saviour is provided for the very "chief of sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15), if only he will believe.

Even those who reach the dying hour yet in their sins are not beyond hope. Personally I believe that very, very few are saved on a deathbed, and it is the height of folly for any man to postpone his salvation till then, for there is no guarantee that any man will have a death-bed. Many are cut off suddenly, without any opportunity to lie down and die. Yet, even one on a death-bed is not beyond the reach of divine mercy. As said one of the Puritans, "There is one such case recorded that none need despair, but only one, in scripture, that none might presume".

Yes, here we see the Saviour-hood of Christ. He came into this world to save sinners, and he left it and went to Paradise accompanied by a saved criminal - the first trophy of his redeeming blood! 6. Here we see the destination of the saved at death. In his splendid book, *The Seven Sayings of Christ on the Cross*, Dr Anderson-Berry has pointed out that the word "Today" is not correctly placed in the rendering of our King James version, and that the designed correspondence between the thief's request and Christ's response requires a different construction of the latter.

The form of Christ's reply is evidently designed to match in its order of thought the robber's petition. This will be seen if we arrange the two in parallel couplets thus: And he said unto Jesus And Jesus said unto him Lord Verily I say unto thee Remember me Shalt thou be with me When thou comest Today. Into thy kingdom In paradise.

By arranging the words thus we discover the correct emphasis. "Today" is the emphatic word. In our Lord's gracious response to the thief's request we have a striking illustration of how divine grace exceeds human expectations. The thief prayed that the Lord would remember him in his coming kingdom, but Christ assures him that before that very day had passed he should be with the Saviour. The thief asks to be remembered in an earthly kingdom, but Christ assures him of a place in Paradise.

The thief simply asks to be "remembered", but the Saviour declared he should be "with him". Thus doeth God abundantly above all that we ask or think. Not only does Christ's reply signify the survival of the soul after the death of the body, but it tells us that the believer is with him during the interval which divides death from the resurrection. To make this the more emphatic, Christ prefaced his promise with the solemn but assuring words "Verily I say unto you". It was this prospect of going to Christ at death which cheered the martyr Stephen in his last hour and therefore did he cry, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59).

It was this blessed expectation which moved the apostle Paul to say, I have a "desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better" (Phil. 1:23). Not unconsciousness in the grave, but with Christ in Paradise is what awaits every believer at death. Every "believer" I say, for the souls of unbelievers, instead of going to Paradise, pass to the place of torments, as is clear from our Lord's teaching in Luke 16. Reader, whither would your soul go, if this moment you were dying?

How hard Satan has striven to hide this blessed prospect from the saints of God! On the one hand he has propagated the doleful dogma of soul-sleep, the teaching that believers are in a state of unconsciousness between death and the resurrection; and on the other hand, he has invented a horrible purgatory, to terrify

believers with the thought that at death they pass into fire, necessary to purify and fit them for heaven. How thoroughly the word of Christ to the thief disposes of these God-dishonoring delusions!

The thief went straight from the cross to Paradise! The moment a sinner believes, that moment is he "made meet to be a partaker of the inheritance of the saints in light" (Col. 1:12). "For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified" (Heb. 10:14). Our fitness for Christ's presence, as well as our title, rests solely on his shed blood. 7. Here we see the longing of the Saviour for fellowship. In fellowship we reach the climax of grace and the sum of Christian privilege.

Higher than fellowship we cannot go. God has called us "unto the fellowship of his Son" (1 Cor. 1:9). We are often told that we are "saved to serve", and this is true, but it is only a part of the truth and by no means the most wondrous and blessed part of it. We are saved for fellowship. God had innumerable "servants" before Christ came here to die - the angels ever do his bidding. Christ came not primarily to secure servants but those who should enter into fellowship with himself.

That which makes heaven superlatively attractive to the heart of the saint is not that heaven is a place where we shall be delivered from all sorrow and suffering, nor is it that heaven is the place where we shall meet again those we loved in the Lord, nor is it that heaven is the place of golden streets and pearly gates and jasper walls - no, blessed as those things are, heaven without Christ would not be heaven. It is Christ the heart of the believer longs for and pants after - "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee" (Ps. 73:25).

And the most amazing thing is that heaven will not be heaven to Christ in the highest sense until his redeemed are gathered around him. It is his saints that his heart longs for. To come again and "receive us unto himself" is the joyous expectation set before him. Not until he sees of the travail of his soul will he be fully satisfied. These are the thoughts suggested and confirmed by the words of the Lord Jesus to the dying thief. "Lord, remember me" had been his cry. And what was the response?

Note it carefully. Had Christ merely said, "Verily I say unto thee, Today thou shalt be in Paradise" that would have set at rest the fears of the thief. Yes, but it did not satisfy the Saviour. That upon which his heart was set was the fact that that very day a soul saved by his precious blood should be with him in Paradise! We say again, this is the climax of grace and the sum of Christian blessing. Said the apostle, "I have a desire to depart, and to be with Christ" (Phil. 1:23).

And again, he wrote, "Absent from the body" - free from all pain and care? No. "Absent from the body" - translated to glory? No. "Absent from the body... present with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8). So, too, with Christ. Said he, "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you"; yet, when he adds, "I will come again" he does not say "And conduct you unto the Father's house", or "I will take you to the place! have prepared for you", but "I will come again and receive you unto myself (John 14:2, 3).

To be "for ever with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17) is the goal of all our hopes; to have us for ever with himself is that to which he looks forward with eager and gladsome expectation. Thou shalt be with me in Paradise!

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net