

Luke 23

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon explores the significance of the crucifixion of Christ and the salvation of the thief on the cross, highlighting the power of God to save anyone who puts their faith in Christ.

Scripture: Luke 23:1

Topics: "Rejection of Christ", "Grace and Salvation"

Description

John Nelson Darby expounds on Luke 23, illustrating the profound rejection of Christ by both religious leaders and civil authorities, culminating in His crucifixion. He emphasizes the complete guilt of both Jews and Gentiles, as Pilate, despite declaring Jesus innocent, succumbs to the pressure of the crowd. The sermon highlights the moral depths to which humanity can sink, yet also showcases the grace of Christ, particularly through the salvation of the repentant thief on the cross. Darby underscores that true salvation comes not from human effort but through faith in the finished work of Christ, who offers immediate peace and assurance of eternal life. The closing scenes of Christ's death reveal the significance of His sacrifice, opening the way to God and demonstrating the power of faith amidst despair.

Transcript

Verses 1-25. Religious iniquity had now only to lead on the world to finish the wickedness in which itself had taken the lead. The civil power must give in to the wilful evil of the apostate people of God. This is the history of the world, and of the two, the religious side is always nearest to Satan. The chief priests manifested their enmity by their accusation, which was calculated to arouse the jealousy of the governor; charging on Christ what was entirely false as to Caesar, but with the subtle groundwork of that which they knew (reckoning on His truth) He could not deny. The guilt of the Jews was complete, as was also that of the Gentiles, for Pontius Pilate declared Him innocent, and desired to release Him. Cruel enough himself, the Roman governor disliked cruelty in others, but he would not go so far as to save Him from the malice of His enemies: it would have cost something to do this; it threatened his interest, and Pilate gave way. The one thing that is strong in the world is enmity against Christ.

But there was another form of evil to be introduced, to wit, Herod, the apostate king of apostate Israel; and in rejecting Jesus all are friends, however jealous and divided. How terrible the union between the fourth beast and God's external people! But if the Gentiles failed shamefully in protecting the just and hence fell into basely unrighteous judgment, the activity of an evil will was with the Jews. Three times the opportunity of a relenting voice was given; but while the governor's indifference was as plain as the disappointed

insolence of Herod, every time the cry of the people increased in ardour for the death of the Messiah. Pilate, therefore, released the guilty Barabbas, whom they desired, to appease the Jews, and delivered Jesus to their will.

177 Verses 26-31. It was a terrible time and full of violence. It mattered little whom they met, if they could only force them to help in their iniquity. Their hour was struck, and all fell into the same mass of rejection and insult of Christ, save that the Jews acted with more knowledge. The forms of privilege became sorrows and harbingers of terror; they must be laid low, for all was untrue now. The natural feelings, touched by affecting circumstances, as we see in the weeping daughters of Jerusalem, did not change this. They understood neither the cross of Christ nor the ruin which awaited themselves. One may be affected with comparison, as if one were superior to Christ, and fall under the judgment consequent on His rejection and death. No humiliation of Jesus put Him out of His place of perfect capability of dealing with all others from God. Alas! it was not only on Pilate and Herod, nor on the chief priests, that judgment was coming, but on the women that lamented Him, unconscious of their own state, which was under condemnation. Neither natural conscience, nor natural religiousness, nor natural feelings will do - nothing short of the glory of God in Jesus. And if He, the living and true vine, who indeed bore fruit to God, was thus dealt with, what must be the lot of the fruitless and unprofitable, for such branches were they? Where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear? Man rejects the green tree, and God rejects the dry. Life was there in the person of Jesus, and they would not have it, and are therefore given up; it cannot be had now but through a dead and risen Christ.

Verses 32-43. There is the setting aside of all they looked for here in present deliverance, for Christ must die. But if we are also to see how low man can go morally, we learn, at the same time, that Christ in His grace can go lower still. "Except the corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone." Therefore, whenever you see an attempt (and it is the attempt of man's religion) to connect a living Christ, before death and resurrection, with living sinners, be sure there is error. It unites sin with the Lord from heaven, and it denies that its wages is death. Had Christ delivered Himself as the rulers, with the people, said in derision, He would not have delivered us. He must pass through death, and take a higher place, even in resurrection, and there He takes us. By itself, the incarnation cannot bring life and redemption to those who are dead in trespasses and sins. We need to be set beyond all in resurrection-life in Christ.

178 Thus, then, in spite of the grace of Jesus in intercession, Jews and Gentiles joined in mockery of the crucified; yet God had prepared, even here, the consolation of His mercy for Jesus in a poor sinner. But no sorrow, no shame, no suffering brings the heart too low to scorn Jesus; a gibbeted robber despises Him! There is an instinct, so to speak, in every unrenewed heart, against Jesus, which was not quelled even by that power of love in which He was going down into the deepest humiliation, to suffer the wrath due to sin. Say not that you are one whit better than this wretched man. "There is none righteous, no, not one: none that understandeth; none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are altogether become unprofitable." In two words, there is no difference. You are as bad, in God's sight, as the railing impenitent thief. See now the fruit of grace in the other. Grace works in a man who was in as low a condition as he who, notwithstanding his own dying agony and disgrace, had pleasure in outraging the Lord of glory; indeed both had done it (Mark 15:32). But what more blessed and certain than the salvation of this thief, now that he bows to the name of Jesus? He is going to Paradise in companionship with the Lord whom he owned.

It is often idly said, that there was one saved in this way, that none might despair, and but one, that none might presume. The truth is, that this is the only way whereby any poor sinner can be saved. There is but

one and the same salvation for all. There was evidently no time for him to do anything, had this been the way; but all is done for him. That very day his knees were to be broken. But how could he get into Paradise! Christ wrought his deliverance through His own death, and his eye was opened in faith to what Christ was doing.

Nor was it only that Christ's work was wrought for him - the ground on which his soul rested for salvation. There was a mighty moral work wrought in him through the revelation of Christ to his soul by the Spirit who convinced him of his utter sinfulness. "Dost not thou fear God," is his rebuke to his railing fellow, "seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we, indeed, justly." It was not all joy. Conscience had its place. There is a real sense of good and evil; for he has got in spirit into God's presence, and this, making him forget circumstances, elevates him into a preacher of righteousness. And if he owns the rightness of his own punishment in honest confession of sin, what a wonderful testimony he bears to Christ! "This man hath done nothing amiss." It was just as if he had known Christ all his life. He had a divine perception of His character; and so with the Christian now. Have you such jealousy about the spotlessness and glory of Christ, that you cannot help crying out when you hear Him slighted? He believed that He was the Lord, the Son of God, and so could answer with assurance for what He had been as a man. As completely a man as any other, the holy obedience of Christ was divine. "This man hath done nothing amiss." What a response in the renewed heart to the delight of sinlessness! His eye glances, as it were, over the whole life of Christ; he could answer for Christ anywhere, because he has learnt to know himself.

179 Then he says, turning to Jesus, "Lord, remember me, when thou comest in thy kingdom." As soon as he can get rid of what was sad, when he has done with his testimony to the other thief, his heart turns to Christ instinctively. How undistracted he was! Was he thinking of his pain? or of the people around the cross? As is always the case, where God's presence is realised, he was absorbed. In the extremity of helplessness, as to outward appearance, he hears the Shepherd's voice, and recognised Him as the Saviour and King. He wants Christ to think of him. The judgment of men was that Christ was a malefactor. The weeping women saw not who He was. But no degradation of circumstances could hide the glory of the Person who hung by his side. He owned Jesus as the Lord, and knows that His kingdom will certainly come. The other malefactor thought only, if he thought at all, of present deliverance; but this one saw the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow. His mind was set, not on being free from bodily pain, but on the loving recognition of Christ in glory. He looks not to earth, nor nature, but to another kingdom, where death could not come. There was not a cloud, not a doubt, but the peaceful settled assurance that the Lord would come in His kingdom.

180 And the Lord gave him more than his faith asked. There was the answer of present peace. It was not only the kingdom by-and-by, but "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, To-day shalt thou be with me in Paradise." As if He said, You shall have the kingdom when it comes, but I am giving now soul-salvation; you are to be associated at once with Me in a way far better and more than the kingdom, blessed and true as it is. For indeed the work was accomplished on the cross, which could transport a soul into Paradise. If the Saviour had taken the sinner's place, the sinner is by grace entitled to take the place of the Saviour. The poor thief might know but little of Christ's work and its effect, but the Holy Spirit had fixed his heart on the person of Christ. The words of the Lord (v. 43) imply the atonement, by virtue of which we are made fit to be His companions in the presence of God. The work of Christ is as perfect now for us, as then for him; it is as much accomplished for us as if we were already caught up into Paradise. How distinct this is from anything like progress of the soul to fit it for heaven! And how wonderful that such a soul should be a comfort to the Saviour! He had come into the condemnation; yea, and wrath was on Him to the uttermost.

And now the converted thief was a bright witness of perfect grace and eternal salvation through His blood.

Verses 44-49. The scene was closed which let in the light beyond through the portals of a heart now purged by faith, and the darkness proper, to the hour took now its suited course - specially over Israel, it would seem; "and the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst." Thus the way into the holiest was made manifest by the act which had its place in this darkness, and God in the grace of Christ's sacrifice shone forth upon the world. Darkness of judgment as it was to one, the light broke through, and access was opened within the veil. All was finished, and the Lord with no hesitating voice but aloud cried, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." This was not Jewish blessing, (for the living, the living, they shall praise Thee), but it was much higher; it was sonship, death overcome, and the occasion merely of presenting the spirit, safe, happy, confident, notwithstanding death, into the Father's care and presence. This is an immense principle, and, short of resurrection, of the highest possible importance. Death in the hands of Jesus - what a fact! The centurion, in the course of duty, struck at least in natural conscience, glorified God and owned a righteous man on the cross. The masses were troubled and went away, auguring no good. Those who knew Him, and the women from Galilee, were more nearly interested, but in fear stood afar off.

181 Verses 50-56. But the providence and operation of God, the righteous Judge, took measures for the body of the Holy One. If the more prominent witnesses were set aside, others feeble in the faith are found active and faithful in the post of danger, confession, and attachment to the Lord. How often the difficulties which frighten those force these forward! So was it with Joseph of Arimathea, for Jesus must be "with the rich in his death." The women too, in true but ignorant affection, make useless preparation, awaiting the just Jewish time for a Lord who had passed far beyond their faith. The resurrection was soon to usher in the dawn of a bright morrow: for the honour of the grave, like the intentions of the women from Galilee, was of a Jewish character, and all this was now closed in death.

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