



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Luke 23: 39-43

"Two Criminals, One Believed"

TRANSCRIPT

Solomon wrote, "It is better to go to a house of mourning than a house of feasting." (Ecc 7:2). In other words, it's better to go to a funeral than to a party. So if you've passed up a festivity to be here this afternoon, Solomon would call you a wise person.

Well, that's what it says, but why is that? Because at a funeral, or a memorial service, we are reminded of what we all face—but also of the only hope we have.

There was a man who suddenly came to that realization, and with good reason; he was nailed to a cross next to Christ. He was one of two thieves who were crucified on either side of Jesus. Neither had sympathy for the Lord. They, perhaps, saw the sign that Pilate had placed over His head: "This is the king of the Jews." And as they considered that, they thought, 'What kind of king is crucified?' And so they, along with many of those that were there, the priests, the scribes, the Pharisees, they mocked Him.

But at some point one of them stopped taunting; and when his comrade in crime said to Jesus, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!", he scolded him, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" (Luke 23:39-40). Then he confessed his, and his companion's guilt, and Christ's innocence: "...we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." (vs41). Now that's an amazing change from attacking the Lord to defending Him. What happened?

Well, I suppose a lot of things happened. First of all, facing the certainty of death is a sobering thing. Samuel Johnson, the 18th century English man of letters said, "Depend on it sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates the mind wonderfully." And here, hours away from death, we would think that his mind had been concentrated and he thought of eternity and was, perhaps, haunted by the consequences of his guilt and death.

But he was also in close proximity to the Lord. He'd gotten a look at Him, at His person, at His character. He witnessed His composure through the pain and the persecution He suffered as an innocent man. The thief heard His words; heard Jesus speak to the women of Jerusalem on their walk to Calvary and saw His concern for them; heard Him pray for His enemies.

In addition, he had heard others, what they were saying, men who were there, as I mentioned, who were mocking Him. They said that Jesus claimed to be, 'The Christ of God, His Chosen One.' And what this thief saw in Christ was certainly consistent with that—with being God's Chosen One.

All of that must have affected this man. And that's what brings about a change in people, the revelation of God, the revelation of Christ, getting a glimpse of Him in truth, hearing and learning the reality of who He is and what He's done.

Of course, both thieves had the same opportunities. They were equally close to the Lord. They heard and saw the same things, as far as we can tell. But only one of them believed. Why is that? The natural thought might be, 'Well, the one was smarter than the other, had more insight than the other, or was a better person.'

There's no indication of any of that. Both were criminals. And in fact, the Bible teaches something quite different from that: 'There is none righteous...there is none who understands and none seeks for God.' That's the apostle Paul in Romans chapter 3, verses 10-11; and that is a quote from Psalm 14, verses 1 through 3. The Word of God, Old and New Testament alike says, 'No one, in and of himself or herself, seeks for God.'

So the explanation for the different responses in these two, very similar men can't be found in them. It can only be found in the sovereign grace of God. And Jesus

said that. In John chapter 6, verse 44 He said, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him."

Well, God drew this man. God used, I think, everything around him, the words he heard, the sights he saw, to draw him in faith. And so, with a changed heart and an enlightened mind, this second thief turned to the Lord and said, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" (vs42).

In other words, he asked the Lord to remember him for blessing, for benefit. He didn't say, 'Remember my works.' He didn't have any works that he wanted Jesus to remember. He didn't say, 'Remember that I suffered on a cross, too.' Or, 'Remember that I admitted my guilt and I'm sorry for the path that I took in life.' He simply said, "Remember me..." And what that expression means is, 'Bless me.' He cast himself completely on Christ's mercy and he asked the Lord to let him into His kingdom.

Now a person doesn't do that—doesn't look for access into God's kingdom from 'a mere man who is at death's door', even if that man is a good person or a good teacher or a martyr. The thief knew that the Lord was far more than that.

He addressed Him by His name, Jesus; and that name means "Savior". And that's how he looked at Him, and how he looked to Him. He believed that He is the Savior. He believed that Jesus was the king of the Jews, the Messiah, the Christ of God. That Christ had a future, that the cross was not the end of it for Him; it was really the way to the beginning and the opening up to the kingdom; and to all who would come to Him in that kingdom. Christ would receive His kingdom.

The content of this man's faith, though, was certainly minimal. He didn't know much, as far as we can tell. But fortunately, God saves even those with very small faith, very little faith. In fact, the Lord, Himself, talked about that. How much faith is necessary? "Faith like a mustard seed", He said, (which is the smallest of the seeds). (Luk 17:6). The thief had that; and with it he was trusting in Christ, and he was asking Him for mercy. Jesus always responds to that request. He always responds to a request

for grace and mercy, responds to a request of faith alone in Him. And He responded here.

Interestingly, He had not answered any of those taunts of the people around the cross who had mocked Him for hours, but now He speaks and answered the thief's prayer, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise." (vs43).

That was far more than the thief had hoped for. He'd asked to be allowed into the Lord's kingdom when it comes in the future, at the end of the age. Jesus said, 'Yes, but not at the end of the age, now, today you shall be in paradise.' The thief had asked only to 'Be remembered by Jesus', and Jesus said, 'Not only will I remember you but you will be with Me in My presence, by My side.' And He promised him more than immortality; He promised him "Paradise", (which is actually a Persian word, what we call a *loanword*.) And that word in Persian means, *park or garden*.

In fact, it's the oldest word in the Persian language which indicates how important gardens were to the Persians; who lived in a land that was arid, largely a desert. And so they built beautiful parks fed by channels of water, and were filled with trees for shade against the sun and the heat. So when the translators of the Hebrew Bible translated the Bible into Greek, they used that word for the Garden of Eden. And then it came to picture heaven itself, with all the suggested images from a garden: That of peace, and joy, and rest. It's where God's people go before the resurrection and the kingdom to come. And that's what Christ promised this man; He promised him heaven.

Now that must have filled him with a sense of peace. It must have filled him with joy in the midst of his great pain and suffering. In his suffering he had hope. And this is the hope that every believer in Jesus Christ has. It was Doug's hope.

But do you know what really makes paradise, paradise; what really makes heaven, heaven? It's not only the beauty of it and the bliss that comes with that glorious place, (that's described in terms of 'streets of gold that's like glass', and 'gates of pearl' and all of these glorious descriptions of it.) As great and unimaginable as all of that is,

what makes paradise, paradise, is Christ Himself. It's the promise He gave this man to 'be with Him'. "Today you will be with Me in paradise." And that's where the emphasis of that promise lies: to be with Christ, to be with the Son of God.

John gave us a glimpse of paradise, of heaven itself, in Revelation chapter 7, verses 15 through 17. It is a description that is given to us in symbolic form. At the graveside yesterday, Larry spoke, and he referred to some of these things. Like John 14, verses 1 through 6, and the promise of the Father's house and how lots of these descriptions, really all of these descriptions, are given to us in 'figures of speech', because we really can't understand the greatness of it. In fact, Paul speaks of being caught up into heaven, the third heaven, in 2 Corinthians chapter 12, and he speaks there, in verse 4, of it being "Paradise". So he uses the same word of it, but he said that what he heard there were "inexpressible words." Doesn't give a description of what he saw. And what he was saying there is, 'He couldn't describe it.' We don't have the words to describe it. It is beyond us.

And so, when we come to the Book of Revelation for example, we have descriptions of heaven, (the world to come), but they're given to us in 'symbol's, in 'figures of speech.' They're not to be taken literally but the meaning is to be drawn from them.

And so we read, for example, of this "great multitude" in heaven, here in chapter 7, (speaks of two multitudes), but the second one is there in heaven. They've come out of this world and the interpreter for John explains who they are. He says, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." (vs14). He sees this multitude clothed in white robes. And how did their robes become white? They washed them "in the blood of the Lamb."

You see the unusual description there: 'Blood that makes white.' That's a picture of the blood of Christ and it's a description of these people that have joined themselves to Him. They put their faith in Him. It is as though they washed their garments and made

them white in this 'wash of blood'. And what it describes is what's happened to them. They've been justified, forgiven, declared righteous.

And because of that, we read in the next verse, "For this reason," (that is, because they washed their robes and made them white), "they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them. They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes." (Rev 7:15-17)

You'll notice a few things about that description of paradise, of heaven; there's activity there. There's activity in heaven: Service. Now we are not described the details of the service that is given. It is not described, but you know it must be fascinating, fulfilling activity, and the kind of activity that is exhilarating, not wearying or fatiguing.

We have a description there of relief from all trials: 'The sun won't beat down on them.' And for those who grew up around the Mediterranean and the Middle East where the sun is sometimes described as 'The Syrian Sun', the sun that beats down on the desert. They know the sense of fatigue that comes with working out under the sun in the fields—and what the promise is: There's not going to be any oppression like that. There will not be any fatigue from activity. Just the opposite. I think the more activity, the more exhilarating it will be. It will be fascinating service to the Lord God, and that's what he describes there.

There is continual refreshment, like that which comes from drinking of a cool stream of water. And there is joy unspeakable. No more sorrow; put in the negative, in a sense, because here we read that He "...will wipe every tear from their eyes", the great promise that God gives.

In fact, that's repeated twice in the Book of Revelation. That's part of the deep fellowship we will have with the Lord Jesus Christ. That's why I say, 'This is the greatest blessing. We will be with the eternal Son of God, who is very God of very God. And He

will speak personally to us, and He will teach us and explain things to us.' And I think this picture of 'wiping every tear from their eyes' is a way of saying that they will have an explanation for all the trials and the difficulties that we had in life; and why they were necessary; and how they were, really, beneficial. And all the difficulties will be cleared up and there will be joy.

That's Paradise. That's where Doug is now. This is a description of what he is experiencing. And just as the Lord welcomed that former thief turned believer into paradise, so too, He welcomed Doug Barrow into heaven, personally, warmly; as every bit as personally and warmly as He welcomed the apostle Paul and all of the other saints that have come there.

Not because of any good thing Doug did, any more than the thief had done a good thing. Christ did it all on the cross. That is why Christ declared at the end, "It is finished." (Jn 19:30). There's nothing more to be done. That's where He paid for our sins fully and completely when He died in our place and suffered that penalty for us. Doug, like that repentant thief, simply believed in Christ and received Christ's mercy. That was enough, his faith in Jesus Christ. And again, that's all that we can do. Why? Because Christ has done it all. And so we simply trust in Him.

And there's no greater proof of that, than this thief. What did he do? He said, "Jesus, remember me." 'Savior, remember me.' And the Savior said, "Truly, I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."

That promise knocks down more than one error. It disproves the notion of 'soul sleep', the idea that between death and the resurrection, the soul remains in an unconscious state: "Today you shall be with Me in paradise." As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:8, (in fact this is on the front of the bulletin that you have), "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." Instantly. No transition. To be absent from this body is to be there with Him, to be in paradise, joyfully worshiping Him.

And this promise refutes the idea that sinners are saved by some work they do, or the sacraments and ordinances of the church: by taking the mass, or the Lord's

Supper, or being baptized—you name it. Nothing can be added to the Gospel of salvation: By grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

And the thief did that, believed that. The thief was saved: Never baptized, never joined a church. He never took the Lord's Supper, never put a shekel in the offering plate. He simply believed in Christ as the Savior. He trusted in Him. He is the great example of salvation by faith alone. It's all that God requires of the sinner, that he or she believe, trust in Christ.

And, as we study the Scriptures, we know that even that faith is a gift of God. I think it's the way Paul puts it in Ephesians chapter 2, verse 8, where he wrote to those Ephesians, "For by grace," (a free gift), "by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves," (not even your faith), "it is a gift of God." Altogether the gift of God. Salvation is a free gift received through faith.

And something else that the thief on the cross proves, and that is that a person can come to Christ and be saved late in life—at the very end. So we shouldn't give up hope. Earlier I mentioned Samuel Johnson. There's a well-known epitaph that he liked to quote to people who were in despair. It was on the grave of a very wicked man who was killed by a fall from his horse, in which he was supposed to have said, "Between the stirrup and the ground I mercy asked, mercy I found." As unusual as that may be, salvation can happen that late and that quickly. We can be saved in an instant. We are saved in an instant when we're saved, but it can be between the stirrup and the ground. It can be at that very moment of faith. That's when one is saved.

And that happened to this thief. That's what Christ does. He saves all who call on His name, all who believe. And He can save them because He died for them. He paid for their sins on the cross.

It was a cruel and a painful price to pay, and a shameful form of death. But the writers of the New Testament never lament the cross because in the cross God saved sinners. And so we, like the apostle Paul can say, "We boast in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." We have nothing else to boast in but what He did for us.

The cross is God's answer to Adam's sin and fall—and the fall of the human race. Adam ate from a tree and lost paradise. Christ suffered on a tree and regained Paradise for every believer. In the words of Charles Wesley, "Christ has opened paradise, Alleluia!" (from *Christ The Lord Is Risen Today*).

Well, can you say, 'He's opened Paradise for me'? Where are you in regard to Jesus Christ? There were two men on either side of the cross. All of us are like one of them. Which one are you? That's why it's better to go to a house of mourning than a house of feasting, so that we think on those things and we ask that question of ourselves. Both men faced death. We all do. But some are like that thief who gave no thought to eternity. He wanted deliverance from physical death but had no concern for the eternal state of his soul.

That's typical of so many. So many in the west are like that, that death really doesn't "concentrate" their mind at all. They cannot see beyond this life. They are completely earthbound.

If that is you, do what the thief did. Ask for God's mercy. That's what Doug Barrow did. Turn to Christ, the Savior. Believe in Him for the forgiveness of sin and eternal life, and He will answer you, and He will bless you, and then you'll see Doug again, and you'll see a whole multitude of those in heaven who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. May God help you to do that.

Father, we thank You for this house of mourning, though we don't mourn as those who have no hope. We have great hope, and it's glorious, and we thank You for that. And we thank You that we can say with confidence that Doug, who loved to read Your Word every day, as present with you. And the things that he read about and the hope that he had is now no longer a hope and things to think about, but the reality that he's experiencing. What a great thing that is. And so we're glad to be here. We grieve. That's natural, because we miss our brother. We miss Your servant here, but we don't

grieve without hope, we rejoice for him. And I pray Lord, that the things that have been said, the music that we've listened to, and the hymns we've sung will all be a great encouragement to Jackie and the family, and Doug's friends, to all of us, to comfort us with these great truths.

We thank You for Your grace. We thank You for Your Son. We thank You for the salvation He's obtained for everyone who puts their faith in Him. And it's in His name we pray. Amen.