

4. From the Cross to Paradise

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[0 : 0 0] God our Father, we've come to listen to you, we have come to hear your word, and we have come to open our minds, open our hearts, and put our lives under the authority of that word.

Father, we thank you for this word, not just the word you once spoke, but the word you are still speaking today. And we thank you for these passages about the very heart of our faith, about the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us.

Each of us comes here with different needs from different circumstances to which we will return.

And so we pray, Lord, that the word that we hear will be adapted to what we need to hear.

Father, we know that you have things to say to us, things that we need to hear, and we pray that we will indeed hear the voice of the Son of God. And we remember, Lord, the city and the world around us.

We are not living in an island, we are not living in a vacuum, and we know that this gospel is the message for the whole world, to everyone who believes. And so help us, our Father, quieten our hearts and minds as we open your word, and as we open our hearts to that word.

[1 : 1 6] In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Now this is the fourth and last of this little series, which I've called the Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.

We've been looking at particularly some passages in the Gospel of Luke, which talk about the cross and the particular way in which Luke presents that.

And we're reading this afternoon on page 84, and we're going to read from verse 26.

Verse 26, and in fact, we'll go on to verse 49. So that's Luke chapter 23, beginning on page 884.

Jesus has been condemned by Pilate, and the sentence is now being carried out. As they led Jesus away, they seized one Simon Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross to carry it behind Jesus.

[2 : 2 8] And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. But turning to them, Jesus said, Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.

For behold, the days are coming when they will say, Blessed are the barn and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed. Then they will begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us, and to the hills cover us.

When they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry? Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.

And when they came to the place that is called the Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right hand and one on his left. And Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

And he cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by watching, but the ruler scoffed at him, saying, He saved others. Let him save himself.

[3 : 3 4] If he is the Christ of God, his chosen one. The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.

There was also an inscription over him, This is the king of the Jews. One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us.

But the other rebuked him, saying, Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds.

But this man has done nothing wrong. And he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And Jesus said to him, Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light filled. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.

[4 : 39] Then Jesus called out with a loud voice and said, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. And having said this, he breathed his last. Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, Certainly this man was innocent.

And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. And all his acquaintances, and the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance watching these things.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to us, and open our hearts and minds to what it has to say. Some of you may have visited the city of Jerusalem.

And if you have visited it, almost certainly you'll have been taken by your guide to one of the two places traditionally believed to be the Hill of Calvary.

One of them, almost certainly the authentic one, is in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which is a dark and sinister and gloomy place, mainly marked by warring factions of different churches, sinister looking monks who hate each other, and who fill the place with anything but peace and harmony.

[6 : 07] Or you may have seen the other place, which is more the traditional view, so called Gordon's Calvary, after General Gordon, who discovered it, or said he had discovered it in the 19th century.

This is more like the traditional picture, a garden in which there was once a tomb. In any real sense, it doesn't matter which of these is the real place.

It doesn't matter if you've seen either of them, or both of them. Because what the cross achieved, what the Lord Jesus Christ did at Calvary, is not confined to a geographical place.

It's not confined to a location on the earth's surface. And while it is true that we can go to these places, and indeed visiting Jerusalem and the other sites mentioned in the Bible, it can be a very inspiring and very moving experience.

The important thing, though, is that we do not need to go there in order to meet the living Christ, the one who died and rose again, the one who is seated in heaven, the one who will come as judge on the last day.

[7 : 16] We've looked at these passages in Luke, and I've suggested to you that Luke's presentation of the cross has a particular angle. Now, obviously, Jesus is victim here, as he is in the other Gospels.

But there's also the other very strong thread that runs through this narrative, that Jesus, while being the victim, is also the victor. While being the sacrifice, is also the one who offers the sacrifice.

And that he is indeed the saviour of the world. He is not a helpless victim. He is the saviour of the world. It's very important to realise that this actually is a true story.

This is not some myth, not some legend. Luke tells us at the beginning of his Gospel, he'd done his homework. He had listened to those who had taken part in the events. He'd read what they'd had to see.

And so as we look at this story for a few moments, I think it's showing two things. It is about choices. What are we going to do with this story? Or rather, what are we going to do with this story?

[8 : 26] What are we going to do with the saviour of the world who comes to us in this story? And there are choices and there are consequences. And first of all, there's a series of wrong choices which are made in this story.

Verse 27 there, followed a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. This is what I would call misplaced sympathy. Now, of course, this is far better than mockery or ridicule.

And their sympathy for Jesus was indeed commendable and not to be mocked at. But they're totally misunderstanding what's happening. That's why Jesus says, verse 28, Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.

because he's pointing forward to the time some 40 years later when Jerusalem was to be destroyed with great violence and great cruelty by the Romans, the city raised to the ground, the temple destroyed, and a terrible massacre of people.

That's why he said, the days are coming, verse 29, you will say, blessed are the barn and the wombs that never bore. as people saw their children destroyed, killed in front of their eyes.

[9 : 46] Basically, he's saying, you don't understand what's happening here. That's why, that's why he quotes here from the, then they will say, to the mountains, fall on us and to the hills, cover us.

this is the prophet's way of speaking about the last day. What Jesus is saying is you don't realize this is the beginning of the judgment. The fact that I am being crucified means the judgment has begun.

That one day, the judge will appear and one day, everyone will stand before him. So that's why I call misplaced sympathy. And when we're reading these stories of the cross, we need to have more than misplaced sympathy.

It's not a good idea to read these and then just say, poor Jesus, what an awful thing to happen. Well, it is an awful thing to happen. A dreadful crime. But if we simply say that and stop there, we are missing the point.

So that's the first wrong response, if you like. The second wrong response is more obvious. Verse 36, the soldiers mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, if you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.

[11:03] Now, we saw this last week and the week before as well. The soldiers feeling secure, essentially bullies, and seeing that Jesus was helpless or as they imagined helpless, indulge in mockery.

As we know, Jesus is still mocked. The gospel is still derided. The gospel is scorned and the preaching of the gospel is derided. But the third response, which you also get here in the wrong responses, perhaps the most common one of all.

You get it, first of all, in verse 35, the people stood by watching. And then again, in verse 48, all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, that's what they thought of it, a spectacle, a drama, a pageant that they went out to see.

And that is more common than any other wrong attitude towards Jesus, certainly in our country. Just indifference. Not hostility.

Not misplaced sympathy. But just, I don't care. It's nothing to do with me. Washing their hands of it as Pilate had done literally. So in this choice that must be made, there are these wrong choices which still happen.

[12:16] Misplaced sympathy. A sad story of a good man crushed by the world's sinfulness and evil. Mockery. What a ridiculous story.

How can a man's death 2,000 years ago save us? Or else simply indifference. There are more important things to think about. Cost of living. Relationships.

The weather, even. All these sort of things. These are what matter. I'm not caring much about Jesus. But more important than these wrong choices is this astonishing story of the two criminals. Luke alone tells us about this astonishing leap of faith here of one of the two criminals. These criminals are almost certainly associates of Barabbas.

Remember we read about Barabbas last week when Pilate set free because the custom was to release a prisoner. These two were not so fortunate. And one of them and the other Gospels tell us this actually.

[13:20] Join the criticism. Join the mockery. And says, Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us. And verse 40. Other rebuked him saying, Do you not fear God since you're under the same condemnation?

And we indeed justly are we receiving the due reward of our deeds. But this man has done nothing wrong. This is the ultimate deathbed repentance, repentance, isn't it?

This is the ultimate eleventh hour salvation. Indeed, the eleventh hour is ticking. We're almost at the last moments of the eleventh hour. There's always hope.

While someone is still alive, there is always hope that they may come to Christ. Most people who come to Christ come when they're young. And that's great because then they've got their whole lives to serve the Lord.

But sometimes you come across somebody who has rejected or ignored Jesus all their lives and the Spirit moves in their heart and they come to him. But surely not many as late as this.

[14:28] And surely that reveals what salvation by grace through faith means. This man had no time to do any good works, did he? He had no time to put things right.

He had no time to apologize to his victims. No chance to undo the many, many wrongs he had done. And remember, this isn't some petty thief.

The word used, these are criminals. These are terrorists. These are thugs. These are people who had beaten people up, who had murdered, who had raped, who had pillaged. That's the kind of man

that he was.

And yet, in a moment, in an instant, he is transformed and becomes a child of God. the old medieval story of a knight who had lived a life of great cruelty and great oppression. And the story is told of how in the middle of a battle he was struck by an arrow and fell to the ground mortally wounded. And in that split second, in that eternal second almost, of being struck through the heart and falling to the ground, he reviewed his past life and he asked for forgiveness.

[15 : 41] The old medieval Rhymster says, between the saddle and the ground, salvation sought, salvation found. In an instant, the vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

So in a sense, this of course is the scandal of the cross, isn't it? A man like this, why should he go into the kingdom of God? The tabloid press wouldn't have liked this because the tabloid press don't believe in grace.

Someone falls away, that's them finished. They don't believe in forgiveness, they don't believe in grace. Why don't you think of what this, for a moment or two, of what this man did. Remember that the same evidence is in front of his eyes as everyone else.

What he sees is no different from what anyone else sees. He sees a man hanging on a cross. Criminal like himself, except the other criminal thinks that, dying, crushed, broken, and about to expire.

And in and with that in front of his eyes, what does he do? He turns the verdict on its head. The whole civil, political, religious, military establishment condemned Jesus.

[17 : 06] What does he do? He proclaims Jesus as Lord. He believes in his triumph and he stakes his future on it. He knows very well there is absolutely no hope of escaping punishment in this world.

He is dying and he knows it. But then he also sees there is every hope of escaping eternal death, judgment in the next world. And a conversion so radical that Jesus says, truly I say to you today, you will be with me in paradise.

We have no, we are not given the kind of details we would like to know. What gave that? Well, obviously it was the Spirit of God who opened that man's eyes. we can speculate what did he, had he been brought up to hear the word of God?

Had he been taught in a particular way and suddenly in a moment of illumination it flashed on him that this was the Christ, the Savior of the world? We don't know. But notice what he says, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Come into your kingdom. This is a condemned criminal hanging on a cross. As I say, the man looks at this, the same evidence as everyone else, but he sees beyond.

[18 : 29] He sees beyond the surface meaning and he sees that this man is the Christ of God. And he's rewarded by these words, not in an unthinkable future you'll be with me, but today you will be with me in paradise.

And once again, that shows the strange authority of Jesus, doesn't it, shine through Luke's account. Today, you will be with me in paradise. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. In effect, Jesus is saying, I'm king at the moment. I'm already king. And today, you will be with me in paradise. You won't actually have to wait until the kingdom comes.

Today, you will be with me. So you see, the transformation, the right choice, the transformation that's made. And there is another one, verse 47, when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, certainly this man was innocent.

Now, some of the other gospels, Mark says, truly this man was the son of God. Remember, the gospel of Luke is written primarily for Greeks, for Gentiles, who probably when they heard the words son of God might have misunderstood this as meaning simply that he was another of the Greek gods and so on.

[19 : 50] This man is also converted, changed, transformed. So what are the consequences of this briefly? We've had the individual consequences, haven't we?

Two men, one a criminal, the other an executioner. These go into the kingdom. They go into the kingdom before the Pharisees, before the religious people, although it's very good to read, as we haven't read on and we're not talking about this particularly, that one of the establishment, Joseph of Arimathea, came to join in the triumph of the kingdom and John tells that Nicodemus as well came.

So, a wonderful way in which the death of Christ reaches out to draw all kinds of people. Individual consequences, people, people's lives transform.

There's also cosmic consequences for the universe. The darkness falls, a supernatural darkness because the, this is not, this is, this is the middle of the day.

But that darkness we'd already, we'd already met in, back in chapter 22, in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus says, this is your hour and the power of darkness.

[21 : 13] He's wrestling with the prince of darkness himself. And, in verse 46, Jesus uses the words of Psalm 31.

This is an evening prayer. These were the words that a devout Jew would pray as they went to sleep. Lord, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

A prayer for protection during the, during the dark hours of the night. The battle is won. The victory is won. And that's shown by the fact in verse 45, the great, thick, heavy curtain of the temple is torn in two.

Now, if you read the Old Testament accounts of sacrifice, read the book of Leviticus, everywhere, there, everywhere, there are signs saying, keep out, this is dangerous, do not touch, do not go any further.

Now, these signs are removed. The way is blazed into the presence of God. how do we know that the words spoken to the dying criminal were true?

[22 : 25] We know because the heavenly sanctuary, not just the sanctuary on earth, the heavenly sanctuary is open. And as our hymn says, which we'll sing in a moment, the vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus, a pardon receives, that is the gospel for today as well.

Let's see, as we read these stories, we see how the criminal and the executioner were converted. And then as we go on in the story, if you read on further, you'll find that the establishment figures as well, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus as well.

This is the Christ, the saviour of the world and the saviour of all who will believe in him today and all the days in the future until he returns.

Let's pray. God our Father, this is a tremendous story, beautifully told, all those details and all the tension and suspense.

Yet it is more than a story. It is the great plan of salvation, planned before the worlds were made, now coming into time and space when the one who loves us to all eternity washed us from our sins in his blood.

[23 : 51] We praise his name and we pray for your forgiveness for our many sins and ask that you will be more committed to the service of your kingdom.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.