

4. Two thieves

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[0 : 00] Father God, as we come to your word, we pray that you would address us in the very depths of our being.

And as we ask that, we pray that the Lord Jesus Christ would indeed be raised up. Amen. Amen. Well, it would be a great help to me if you could have in front of you our Bible reading, Luke 23, verses 32 to 43.

And I'm speaking particularly to people who perhaps have wandered in today, and Good Friday is an important day, but you've never really got to grips with it. And I want to persuade you to become a Christian. That's what I'd like to do today.

Well, as we begin, I'd like to begin with Billy Connolly, this comedian. He was born and bred in Glasgow, brought up at 65 Dover Street in Anderson.

And this is his biography written by his wife, Pamela Stevenson. And the book caught my eye because its opening chapter is entitled, Jesus is Dead, and it's your fault.

[1 : 17] So we join Billy as a small boy enduring a terrible childhood. His mother left home when he was two. His father sexually molested him.

He used to long to go on holiday so he would not have to share a bed with his father. And he is six years old in this opening chapter. And we read the following.

When he moved up to the boys' school at six years old, there was a harshness he'd not experienced in kindergarten. In the main hallway, there was a massive crucifix, a bleeding life-size Christ that thoroughly spooked him.

Billy had not yet been fully indoctrinated into the faith, but once he was at the boys' school, that occurred as swiftly and as subtly as a fishhook in the nostril. On his first day at his new school, his teacher, Miss Wilson, informed him that Jesus was dead and that he, Billy, was personally responsible.

So I wonder if you can imagine it. Billy walks in. There is a huge life-size Christ and he's told, it is your fault. And he has no idea what is going on. No wonder, 45 years later, we read these words.

[2 : 24] At the end of the Billy and Albert show, Billy farewell, 6,018 people with, it's been a pleasure talking to you. Don't worry, I'm the one going to hell.

Now, what I'd like to do as we look now is look at Jesus' death. And please, snapshot of it, is that he just doesn't know what's going on.

But I wonder what you think is going on as you look at the death of Christ. What is happening there? What does it achieve? What does it promise you? Here is a man who is absolutely blind to it.

And what I want to do as we look at this little passage here in Luke's Gospel is see that actually Luke gets out a camera and it's as though he takes various snapshots at the cross for us.

And he says, what do you make of it? What light does it shed on the cross for you? And the first snapshot that we have from Luke is that this is predicted. This death, that's my first P.

[3 : 23] It is predicted. There is a prediction here. I wonder if you can look at verse 32. As we look down. Two men, both criminals, were also let out with him to be executed.

When they came to the place called the Skull, there they were crucified with him, along with criminals, one on his right, the other on his left. I had a friend who came to All Souls, my church in London.

He'd been a Christian for four months. His name was Steve. And he came along and I said, Steve, how did you come to faith? He said, Rico, imagine the 2040 FA Cup final.

And imagine that you could tell me right now who was playing, who won, who scored, and in what minute. He said, Rico, that's exactly what the Bible does with the death of Christ.

And it was that which made me believe. It was an inspired book. You see, as we look down at verse 32 here, at the death of Jesus, with criminals either side, what we've got to realise is that 700 years before, the Bible said this was exactly how God's king would die.

[4 : 27] Exactly in this way. Isaiah 53 verse 9 says that he would be assigned a grave with the wicked in his death. Unjustly executed, a criminal among criminals.

So it was predicted that Jesus would die in this way. Furthermore, can you see verse 34 as we look down? Verse 34. Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they're doing.

And they divided up clothes by casting lots. So Jesus' robe was seamless, and rather than rip it up, the soldiers gambled for it. And that is the next snapshot that Luke gives us.

Because back in the Old Testament, in Psalm 22, we read the following. And I wonder as we read this, if it rings any bells for you. Does this ring any bells?

Verse 16. Here, God's suffering king is described. Dogs have surrounded me. A band of evil men has encircled me. They have pierced my hands and my feet.

[5 : 26] I can count on my bones. People stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them. And cast lots for my clothing. I wonder if it rings any bells.

You see, there is this snapshot of God's king's suffering. And this is predicted that Jesus would die in this way hundreds of years before the Phoenicians and the Romans had invented crucifixion. We have this prediction. You see, we know that he will die in Psalm 22 before a gloating crowd with no broken limbs, with garments that are gambled for.

And I could show you another prediction from verse 36 from Psalm 69. Can you see, it's like knowing the teams, the results, the scorers in the FA Cup final in 2040.

And my question is, what do you think? Do you think that actually it could be that this book is divinely inspired? Could it be the case that actually it has God's hand upon it?

[6 : 29] It's very interesting, you know, if you read Isaiah 41 verse 22, the proof that God is God is that he can predict and control the future. So we read, as Isaiah attacks idols, he says, bring in your idols.

Tell us what's going to happen. Declare it to us, the things that are to come. Tell us what the future holds, so that we may know you are gods. In other words, an authentic religion will be able to predict the future.

And indeed, if you turn to Luke's Gospel, Luke at the start says, Luke 1 verse 1, he says, this is an account of the things that have been fulfilled. I've checked them out with eyewitnesses.

In other words, the reason that you know that the Bible is trustworthy is because it's divinely inspired and because the future is predicted. And I want to ask, could you maybe look at the Koran and see if it can do that?

Or look at the Bhagavad Gita and see if it can do that? What makes the Bible authentic and divinely inspired is that actually the future is predicted, the death and resurrection of Jesus.

[7 : 36] And Luke begins by saying, take a snapshot. What do you think? What do you make of that? But it's not just the prediction. Secondly, there is, as we look at this extraordinary passage, there is also the person of Jesus Christ.

Can we see, as we look down, the person and character of Jesus Christ? And I have to confess, as a schoolboy, this was the thing that I heard about Jesus Christ that rocked my life.

I remember I used to go along to a communion service at nine o'clock on a Friday night. My father was abroad, growing tobacco, so I was sent to a boarding school.

I'm all right now, I've just about recovered from it. But I went to this school, and I remember there was a lovely girl called Emma Young, and I was much too shy to introduce myself, but I used to go to this voluntary communion service to watch her walk up and down the aisle.

I don't think she realises she's the reason I'm now a clergy, but anyway, there you have it. But I had said to me then, what was by far, by the chaplain, the most profound thing said to me in my school days, school days, and it's here in verse 34, and I pass it on to you.

[8 : 46] Do you see what Jesus says in verse 34? As he is on the cross, he cries out, of the people judicially murdering him, crucifying him, Father, forgive them, for they know what they're doing.

Now in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had said, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, and now, as he is dying, his life and lip correlates.

He lives out what he taught. Now I, as a schoolboy, could utterly relate to Tennyson, who said, oh for a man to arise in me, that the man I am should cease to be. I could see my selfishness.

But in Jesus, there is this absolute correlation between life and lip. Mitsuo Fuchia was another man who was staggered by this snapshot of Christ on the cross.

He led the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. I don't know if you knew that. And he was given the Gospel of Luke after he had gone into a terrible depression at the end of the war, utterly disillusioned and broken, contemplating suicide.

[9 : 51] He was given Luke's Gospel, this Gospel, by a missionary. And it was at this verse, as he read Jesus' prayer for his murderers, that his life was turned round, and then the man who led the attack on Pearl Harbor became a famous Christian preacher in Japan.

And my question is, my question is for you, as you look at verse 34, do you not think it would be an amazing thing to meet this man?

What would it be like to meet him, Jesus Christ? What would it be like to actually find that there he is before you, walking off the pages of Scripture? What would it be like to know him?

It was Napoleon Bonaparte who said, Alexander the Great, Caesar of Charlemagne and I, built our empires on force, but Jesus Christ built his on love, with the result that millions would die for him.

And I'm saying really, as we come to this point, don't you think you can trust Jesus Christ to lead you? I voted Labour in the last election, but I was struck today by the front of the Telegraph, which says, Tories close the gap as Blair loses public trust.

[11 : 04] And we then read, the poll confirms that trust is now a major problem for the Prime Minister. 63% said the government was not honest. We need leaders that we can trust.

I've just read Bill Clinton's book, an amazingly gifted man, but the issue was he could not lead himself. Incredibly gifted as a leader of others, but he couldn't lead himself.

Jesus here leads himself, and I'm saying, could you not trust him to lead you? This amazing correlation between life and life, it's staggering. So first we have the prediction, second we have the person, but thirdly, there is the puzzle here of Christ's death.

The puzzle, it's very puzzling. I wonder if you can see verses 35 to 39 as we look down. The people stood watching and rulers even sneered at him. They said, he saved others.

Let him save himself if he's the Christ, the chosen one. The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, if you're the king of the Jews, save yourself. There was a written notice above him which read, this is the king of the Jews.

[12 : 10] One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him. Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us. Well, I wonder if you can imagine the scene. At this moment, on Good Friday, we have to walk into it.

The crowd stood watching these gruesome deaths of these criminals, much as spectators gather at an accident. I think the police call it rubbernecking. It's repulsive.

And then we have three snapshots. The rulers, verse 35. The Roman soldiers, verse 36. The criminal, verse 39. And Luke records the vicious reaction these three people, these three groups, give.

And they overlap in the very important details. And please note, please note, their words all head in the same direction. Can we see as we look down? Can you see? The rulers sneer.

Then the soldiers mock with cruelty. The criminal hurls insults and desperation. But the content of their mockery in each case is that if Jesus really is the Messiah, if he is the promised king of the Jews, then he should save himself.

[13 : 20] Do you notice as we look down, can we see verse 35? Let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the chosen one. Verse 37. If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself. Verse 39. Are you not the Christ?

Save yourself and us. And the puzzle here is, why doesn't Jesus save himself? I go down to Speaker's Corner in central London and there are many Muslims there.

And this is what they say. They say the cross is ridiculous. If he is the son of God, he should save himself. But in Gethsemane, when his own followers got out swords to defend him, Jesus says, Matthew 26.53, put your swords away.

Don't you think that I could call on my father and he'll at once put at my disposal twelve legions of angels? Yet you see, Jesus will not save himself.

Indeed, when he spoke about his own death, saving himself was the last thing on his agenda. So he looks to this horrific crucifixion and heads in that direction.

[14 : 22] And no one can stop him. Pilate can't stop him. The disciples can't stop him. He says, the reason why my father loves me is that I lay down my life for the sheep. He says, I've come to give my life as a ransom for many.

There's a clear refusal to save himself. He says, I'm the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. You see, it's very puzzling. And the question is, what do you see as you see Jesus dying on the cross?

Why doesn't he save himself? And the key answer to the puzzle is actually in verses 44 and 45, just on from this passage, where we read, here's how the puzzle is answered.

it was now the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. So this is the Jewish system of timekeeping. And while the sun's light failed, here we read in Luke 44, 45, a curtain of the temple was torn in two.

So it's twelve till three in the afternoon. It is totally dark. Now what may seem most striking here is that the cosmos acknowledges the death of Jesus. It's dark. So the midday sun should be at its brightest, but it's dark.

[15 : 35] Interestingly, the historian Thalys speaks of this darkness. He said it's an eclipse, but that couldn't be the case. An eclipse happens when, say, the light is the sun, my fist is the moon, my face is the side of the earth, and there is a shadow.

But at Passover, the moon's over here. Now this is a supernatural intervention. But the key is not the darkness, the key, verse 45, is that the temple in the curtain was torn in two.

So there was an enormous temple in the curtain in Jerusalem. It was 80 feet high, and as thick as a man's hand, more like a carpet, and gloriously embroidered in purple and gold, and it was like that, six inches thick, and there it stood.

And suddenly, as Jesus died, there was a massive ripping sound from top to bottom, and the curtain falls, and the presence, into the holy of holies, is opened up.

And we've got to understand, you see, what the temple curtain stood for. It was a barrier. It was the place where God lived, in behind the barrier, and it was a silent century that said, keep out, you cannot come into the presence of God.

[16 : 46] And the high priest could only go into the holy of holies once a year, and the whole system shouted, it was no easy thing to enter into God's presence. presence. And then, as Jesus dies, and he cries out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

As he dies, the temple curtain falls in two, and I can walk into God's presence. I've just read this book, My World, by Johnny Wilkinson, and he says many interesting things, but this is one of the interesting things he says.

He says, I like to believe in judgment from a greater power. I live my life as if a 24-hour surveillance camera is trained on me, which is ironic, as lately it's felt as though one has been.

At the end of my days, I want to be able to hand over and sign away the video, happy that its contents actually reflect the person I am. And so it is so, there is a video, says Wilkinson, of our lives, and there'd be lots on it that would be great, loving relationships, redemptions in the arts, sports, academically, perhaps a flourishing career.

But here's the issue, if we're honest, what else is on the video of which we'd be ashamed of? The hatred, the lies, the jealousy, the envy, the malice, the gossip, the manipulation, the venom, the pockets of loss, above all, the way in which we have used and ignored God in his world, so taking God's gifts, family, friends, falling in love, food, fitness, but ignored the giver.

[18 : 18] And I guess as I'd hold up this video of life, I'd say, what's the thing you're most ashamed of? What do you most want deleted, edited out?

I was interested that the word tron means the weighing place. Well, what is the thing that you least want weighed on the video?

And the Bible says that actually the content of this video will take me to hell. So we may think that we are through with our past, but the past isn't through with us.

The Bible says, be sure that your sin will find you out. The Bible says, everything will be laid bare and uncovered before the eyes of him to whom we must give an account. And that's a good thing. You know, in the Bible, God's judgment is not set in contrast to his goodness, it's proof that he's good. God must judge. And then you see, what we have is this, like the temple curtain, as a massive barrier between me and God, and it must be paid for, otherwise I will have to pay for it myself in hell.

[19 : 26] It's a massive barrier. And as Jesus dies on the cross, he says, I am removing the barrier and you can walk into the presence of God. So we do the sinning, he does the dying.

The wages of sin is death and he pays them. And my plea is that please do not pay for your sin yourself in hell. Allow Jesus to pay for you.

And you see, verse 35, we see it, verse 35, why can't Jesus save himself? Because he's saving us. Verse 39, are you not the Christ, save yourself and us?

That is how he's saving us. Not your life, but your soul. And the religious leaders, the soldiers, the criminals, are just like Billy Connolly.

They cannot see it. And the question is, what do you see at the cross? What do you see? Do you see that he is dying there in your place for your forgiveness? Well, we must close.

[20 : 26] We have the prediction. Is this book divinely inspired? We have the person. Don't you think you can trust Christ to lead you? As he says, Father, forgive them, they know what they do.

We have the puzzle. What do you think happened at the cross? Was indeed your sin removed by his death? And lastly, the plea. The plea.

What do you think of this last camera angle that we see at the cross? Can we see as we look down verse 40? But the other criminal rebuked him. Don't you fear God, he said, since you are under the same sentence.

We're punished justly, for we're getting what our deeds deserve, but this man's done nothing wrong. Then he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Jesus answered him, I tell you the truth, today you'll be with me in paradise.

Well, can you see that these two criminals face death? But they are not one in their death. Yes, both are looking at death.

[21 : 25] They knew that by the end of the day they would be dead, and yet there is no honour among thieves here. One rebukes his companion for hurling insults at Jesus.

He steps away from his friend, it's quite extraordinary, as all around sneer at Jesus. And he sees something totally different as he sees Jesus.

He sees a different picture. Can you see? It's in verse 40. He says as he looks at Jesus, don't you fear God. He sees that in criticising Jesus, the other criminal is criticising God, and there's such reverence here.

Alongside the reverence, there's also recognition. It's most striking. Do we see verse 41, we're punished justly, we're getting what our needs to serve. But this man's done nothing wrong.

It's almost as though hanging next to Jesus Christ and seeing his innocence, this man's done nothing wrong. It's as though he sees his own wrong doing.

[22 : 27] And you know, we can never see Christ as he really is, without seeing ourselves as we really are. And as he saw Christ's innocence, his purity, he saw his own wrong doing.

And actually there's something refreshing about him. He hangs there and solemnly acknowledges that it's a rightful punishment. We're punished justly, we're getting what our deeds deserve. It's most unusual language.

You know, there's no quibbling here. Can you see it? He says, well, I'm not blaming bad luck, bad laws, bad parents, bad background. He says, no, I did it, I was wrong and I deserve to be here. It's amazingly refreshing.

He fronts up. So there's his reverence, there's his recognition of his own sin, and lastly, there is this request for mercy. He says, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

So as he hangs there, actually what he does is he hangs on Jesus, the weight of his soul, his sin, his Wilkinson video, his eternity. He doesn't just see a Galilean carpenter.

[23 : 29] He says, no, no, this is much more than that. This isn't just some guy bleeding to death. He's dying there in my place for my wrongdoing. You see, he is depending on Jesus alone for his future, because he knows that only Jesus can deal with his past.

He's depending on Jesus alone for his future, because only Jesus can deal with his past. And with the curtain ripped in two, sin paid for, this contrast between the two criminals could not be more stark.

One treats Jesus as his servant, he says, save yourself and us, 999 call, he used God all his life, he's using him now, you just save yourself and us. The other hangs his soul on Jesus and treats him as his king, he says, Jesus, please don't forget me, please have mercy on me, I know I'm getting what I deserve, there are no excuses, but he says, Jesus, please remember me, and that is

faith.

Faith says, Jesus, remember me, faith says, Jesus, your death is for me, faith says, Jesus, please, please, remember me, and what is the answer he gets, can we see the answer, is the answer not a chance, you're a terrorist, you're a murderer, you're a convicted criminal, you'll never get into heaven, can we see the answer, verse 43, as we look down, I tell you the truth, today you'll be with me in paradise, and can you see, this criminal can do nothing to earn his way into heaven, nothing, his arms and legs are nailed, he can do nothing for God, and yet this is the litmus test of getting into heaven, because he gets the greatest of promises, today you'll be with me in paradise, and yet he can do nothing himself, all he does is recognise his own sin, and ask for mercy, he says, Jesus I am totally dependent on you, well there may be one or two here who are in that position, and maybe today on

Good Friday you need to recognise Jesus as king, recognise your own sin, and see that it's a very serious thing to live in God's world and to live ignoring God, and that my sin will take me to hell, and I need to be saved from it, and trust in what Jesus has done on the cross to save your soul, the question is will you do that?

[26 : 03] We'll close now, and here is a prayer that will enable you to do that, let's pray together