

NOTES FROM PASTOR TIM'S SERMON 7th April 2023 am

Good Friday – “Pardon for the vilest of offenders”

Scripture references from the ESV

Luke 23 :32 – 43 Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³ And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”^[b] And they cast lots to divide his garments. ³⁵ And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine ³⁷ and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him,^[c] “This is the King of the Jews.”

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him,^[d] saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴² And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³ And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

When Don Carson wrote about the death of his father, who was simply a pastor of a small church and not at all well known, he said this: ‘there were no crowds outside the hospital and no attention was paid by the nation. But on the other side all the trumpets sounded. Dad won entrance to the only throne room that matters, not because he was a great man or a good man, but **because he was a forgiven man.**’ If you are a believer here this morning, that is true for you.

You will enter heaven because you are a forgiven person.

We might easily think that only applies to those who live a reasonably good life – maybe those who are pastors or missionaries – but what about those whose lives are clearly wrong?

Can God forgive those who are seemingly beyond any hope of salvation?

In the passage above, we read of such a person. He was the thief who was crucified next to Jesus, a criminal whose crimes were so bad that society had determined he should die. Yet Jesus said to him:

Today you will be with me in paradise (v43)

The Bible tells us that heaven is a place that does not accept sinners.

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality,¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

Thieves are specifically mentioned as those who will not inherit the kingdom of God, but Jesus told

this thief that he would be a member of the kingdom that very day.

This man never had the opportunity to repay what he had stolen, or to live a good life. He had never been to church or read his Bible. He never even had the opportunity to be baptised, yet Jesus welcomed him into heaven. Why?

It is because it is Jesus who opens up heaven for all who trust him.

It is not because of anything we do. It is because we find forgiveness with Jesus.

This is one of the most public conversions to Christ ever recorded. It took place in front of:

- A crowd of people who had come to see Jesus die
- The religious leaders and Roman soldiers who were mocking Jesus
- The other thief whose only interest in Jesus was as a means of saving his own skin from the cross

It was a powerful testimony on that day to who Jesus is and to his power to forgive sins

It is a powerful testimony today to who Jesus is and to his power to forgive sins

This thief became our Christian brother – he is ‘our’ thief, in contrast to the other thief! What did he see in Jesus that brought him to faith and repentance?

1. **‘Our’ thief saw that Jesus is righteous (vv39-40 above).** The other thief joined the crowds in hurling abuse at Jesus, seeing him as just another criminal who had tried to gain a following. He was only interested in Jesus if Jesus could get him off the cross. In the face of death, he had no fear of God or of his judgement. He did not recognise that he would have to stand before a holy God and give an account of his sinful actions. He was a man hardened to eternal issues who was about to die speaking blasphemies and curses. That is a fearful place to be.

‘Our’ thief was not like that. He rebuked his friend (v40) and acknowledged that Jesus was sinless and had done nothing wrong (v41). It is not clear what had convinced him of this, but perhaps it was how Jesus responded to those who crucified him. He saw that there was something different about Jesus.

- Unlike other criminals (and indeed most people), Jesus did not retaliate when he was mocked
- Unlike most condemned men, Jesus did not resist being nailed to the cross, and even asked God to forgive those who were hammering in the nails.

‘Our’ thief saw in Jesus:

- A love in the face of hostility that he had never seen before
- A man acting in a righteous way towards those who were **not** acting in that way towards him

Perhaps this convinced him that Jesus was not dying because he had committed a crime.

What we think of Jesus matters to God.

God wants us to follow Jesus , not because he can save our skin, as the other thief wanted, but because we love him. We must say along with our thief that this man has done nothing wrong and he is worthy of our faith and allegiance.

2. **‘Our’ thief saw that Jesus is King.** In front of all those gathered, he made a huge step of faith by confessing that Jesus is King. (v42 above). The crowds, the

soldiers and the other thief were all mocking Jesus, but 'our' thief saw what none of them did.

He saw that Jesus really was the Messiah

He saw that Jesus was the king who had been promised to Israel.

Even in death, in what seemed like the weakest moment,

Jesus displayed his power as King.

Even on the cross, he retained the power of love over his tormentors, marking him out to be the Messiah. 'Our' thief had eyes to see what others could not.

- He had eyes to see Jesus as King, and that dying next to him was the Lord of Glory

In front of that mocking crowd, he acknowledged publicly that Jesus is King when he said:

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom (v42).

In confessing Jesus publicly, he discovered the truth of Jesus' words:

So everyone who acknowledges me before men,

I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven (Matt 10:32)

3. **'Our' thief saw that Jesus is Saviour.** The other thief just wanted to get off the cross and go back to his old life. He did not want to pay the penalty for his crime.

Our thief was not seeking to escape Roman justice. He acknowledged his guilt (v40-41). This was more than an admission of guilt under Roman law for it seemed he had come to realise that he would have to stand face to face before the only judge who mattered. Yet he had come to see there was hope in Jesus, and cried out to him. His simple words were a cry of faith, recognising that in some way

Jesus alone could help him when he entered eternity

His cry was met with the glorious words from Jesus: **Today you will be with me in paradise.**

Jesus was telling him that his sins were forgiven, and he had the right to be with Jesus in heaven.

- How was it possible for this man's sins to be forgiven?

It was because Jesus, the righteous King, was taking those sins on himself and paying the penalty for them. Jesus faced the full wrath of God for this man's sin, and not only for his sin but for ours too. A great exchange took place. As the man's sin was placed on Jesus, so Jesus' righteousness was given to that man. As a result, our thief was declared righteous and given entrance into the presence of God.

- Though he still had to face the excruciating death of the cross, he no longer had to face the wrath of God.

How peace must have flooded his heart as God, the only judge who matters, wrote his verdict:

Not guilty!

More than that – fully righteous!

For the first time in his life, this man knew peace with God, and could truly say it is well with my soul.

The greatest words sinners can hear are the words of God spoken to us in Romans 8:1:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

These words are true for every Christian believer, whether you are a thief or a pastor.

**For those who trust Christ for salvation,
all of our sin has been covered by his blood, and we are clothed in the righteousness
of Christ.**

**We will enter the throne room not because we are good or great but
because we are forgiven through the death of Christ.**