

## Were You There?

Luke 23:39-46

### Introduction

J. I. Packer: 'Three centuries ago a story went round about a student who went to visit Thomas Goodwin, the Puritan president of Magdalen College, Oxford. In the dark study Goodwin opened the conversation by asking if his visitor were ready to die. At this, the lad fled.'

While the lad may have misunderstood the intentions of Mr. Goodwin - - - the point is a valid one - - if we recognize the brevity and fragility of life - - we should live in a state of readiness - to be spiritually prepared for our day of death when it should come

This morning - as we enter the Passion Week - - it is often customary for church liturgy to focus in on the 7 sayings of Christ from the cross - as a lead up to Resurrection Sunday

This morning - I would like to consider two of the sayings of Christ from the cross - one of them being the promise of Jesus to the repentant thief on a cross who puts his faith in Jesus

Luke 23:43 - 'And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in paradise."'

When I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade - I played the trumpet - - - a common band song in those days was to play: 'Oh when the saints go marching in'

The lyrics:

O when the saints go marching in  
O when the saints go marching in  
O Lord I want to be in that number  
When the saints go marching in

It's a song about being included in the glory and celebration of heaven

Here - this morning - at the cross of Calvary - - - we see Jesus telling a felon / a thief on a cross - - - that he will be in that number - - - that he will 'today' be with Jesus in paradise

J.C. Ryle: 'No one ever received such a strong assurance of his own forgiveness [and entrance into glory] as this man.'

As we approach Resurrection Sunday next week - - I would like to take us back to the scene of the cross this morning - - - to listen in to the amazing words spoken by Jesus on the cross.

### I. Today in Paradise - Luke 23:39-43

Jesus is brought to Golgotha [Aramaic] / Calvary – Latin word meaning skull – due to the shape of the hill

Jesus had been scourged and whipped beforehand / badly beaten

Crucifixion – was a brutal death

The old African spiritual – ‘Were you there?’ – asks the question

**Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Sometimes it causes me to tremble / tremble**

**Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree?  
Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?  
Were you there when He rose up from the dead?**

If we were there - - - this is what we would have seen and heard

We would have seen Jesus nailed to a cross - - then praying: ‘Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.’

We would have seen that Pilate had a sign hung on the cross

‘This is the King of the Jews’ – v. 38

Jesus died along with two criminals – one on the right and one on the left – 3 crosses

**Isaiah 53:12 - ‘. . . He was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors.’**

The two thieves portray for us two very different reactions to Jesus

They give us a picture of humanity today - - - how people respond to Jesus

The wicked thief – says he will believe if Jesus does a supernatural miracle – save yourself and us while you’re at it!

Both of the thieves likely heard Jesus’ prayer for the forgiveness of His murderers

Spurgeon speaks of the repentant thief

**Spurgeon: ‘He himself, probably, had met his executioners with a curse; but he heard this man breathe a prayer to the great Father . . . that was a petition the like of which he had never heard, nor even dreamed of.’**

We see the wheels of God's Spirit begin to move when the thief starts talking about the fear of God to the other – v. 40

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom

This thief rebukes the other – and says, 'Do you not fear God?'

Here they are facing the death penalty for actions they had done – they were guilty

Standing – as it were – on the edge of eternity - - one man begins to think about God and His judgment

Western Cathedrals in Europe - - - particularly during the Renaissance period - - - Often depicted scenes of the last judgment – carved or painted inside the entry portal - - - artists such as Michelangelo / Hieronymous Bosch

The idea was that the depiction of God as a judge - - - should prompt repentance or confession of sin in the worshiper

Hebrews 9:27 - 'And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment,'

After we die – there will be a judgment

Erwin Lutzer: 'One minute after you slip behind the parted curtain, you will either be enjoying a personal welcome from Christ or catching your first glimpse of gloom as you have never known it. Either way, your future will be irrevocably fixed and eternally unchangeable.'

We don't know much about the back story of these two men - - - how they got to where they were - - - everybody has a story - - - a story that includes choices and circumstances / parental upbringing / peer influence

You have a story / I have a story

There is one common denominator in all our stories - - - 'All we like sheep have gone astray'

Ashley Garret grew up in Western Australia – where he and his buddies began trying to find ways to have fun. They jumped on and off trains that chugged slowly through their town.

They hitched rides on other vehicles too. One night, Ashley and his friend were joyriding on the back of a truck – when the vehicle picked up speed. They couldn't get off – and his friend fell to his death.

Ashley – was only 13 years old – he did not handle the death well. He began smoking, drinking, drugs / hanging out with a bad crowd of friends [getting into trouble with the law]. But – around the age of 19 - - - he began to take stock of his life

He knew he was not living the kind of life he wanted to - - - he was on a dead end road and he knew it. He began attending his mother's church - - - where he heard the good news of Christ crucified and risen. He put his trust in the Savior - - - and began a new journey - - - the journey of faith

This thief – we don't know how old he is - - - what choices led to this outcome - - - what we do know is that he is a sheep who has gone astray - - - and he is about to enter eternity

When we go to the airport - you look up on the screens and you see two things

- Departures
- Arrivals

People are coming or going

Birth is earth's arrival gate!  
Death is the departure gate!

These men are at the departure gate - - - and the section of their plane has started boarding!

In fact – to speed things up – the soldiers will come around in a few hours and smash their legs - - - so they can't push themselves up to breathe

As many do in their hour or time of death - - - they think about what is next

We're very familiar with our surroundings in this world - - our homes / our community / familiar sights and places

One thing we know - - - at death we go somewhere we've never been before

What will that involve?

The thief on the cross – is taking stock – and saying: 'I've been a fool in life'

He sees his sin – it's undeniable

Fortunately for him - - - there is still a window of time - - - to change his eternal destiny

But – his moments are ticking away with each breath

Of course – all of our lives are brief and fragile in the grand scheme of things

Psalm 103:15- 17 - 'As for man, his days are like grass; As a flower of the field, so he flourishes. When the wind has passed over it, it is no more; and its place acknowledges it no longer. But the lovingkindness of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him.'

We are like grass / a flower

We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree  
And wither and perish but naught changeth Thee

Heaven and hell are not places far away - - - we may find ourselves in one place or the other before the day is over

Death comes unbidden / sometimes sudden / sometimes it's a slow steady march

I went to seminary with two guys from Lincoln [One graduated with me] - - - they both moved to Philadelphia - - one to pastor a church / the other to finish seminary at Westminster

Both young men – [26 yrs. old] - - - married [one had kids]

Just a few months after they got there - they were going to the store to get donuts for Buddy's kids - - a drunk driver ran a red light and smashed into their vehicle in the intersection at a high speed - - - both men were gone that night - - - sudden unexpected

Eternity is always much closer than we think

All of humanity is somewhat represented in this scene

- Those who scoff / ignore God / joke about religion
- Those who fear God / repent / trust in Jesus

The one thief repents – acknowledges his sin - - and expresses his faith with the words: 'Jesus – remember me when you come in your kingdom.'

I want to be in the number of the redeemed

Spurgeon: 'Recollect that he was surrounded by scoffers. It is easy to swim with the current, and hard to go against the stream. This man heard the priests, in their pride, ridicule the Lord, and the great multitude of the common people, with one consent, joined in the scorning; his comrade caught the spirit of the hour, and mocked also, and perhaps he did the same for a while; but

through the grace of God he was changed, and believed in the Lord Jesus in the teeth of all the scorn.'

His faith is notable in this scene

He sees no powerful display of Jesus' omnipotence – [such as others had seen]

Jesus is hanging helpless on a cross – at least to all appearances

This display of faith took place before the 3 hour period of supernatural darkness  
It took place before the earthquake

This man never saw Jesus walk on water – or feed the 5000 – He was not witness to the resurrection of Lazarus

All he saw was a dying Savior - - - on a cross of wood – being mocked and scorned by those around the cross

He was there – when they nailed Him to a tree

*Alfred Plummer: 'Some see Jesus raise the dead, and did not believe. The robber sees Him being put to death, and yet believes.'*

His confession of faith: 'Remember Me when you come in your kingdom'

Jesus exceeds his request – when He responds from the cross – 'Truly I say to you – Today you shall be with Me in paradise'

This passage reminds us of some very important truths

- It tells us that a man can be saved in the eleventh hour – if he genuinely puts his trust in Christ

*Thomas Guthrie: "It cannot be too often, or too loudly, or too solemnly repeated, that the Bible, which ranges over a period of four thousand years, records but one instance of a death-bed conversion—one that none may despair, and but one that none may presume."*

- It tells us that justification is by faith alone in Christ alone

*Ephesians 2:8-9 - 'For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, lest any man should boast.'*

This thief had no time or opportunity to be baptized / to join a church / etc.  
He only had time to believe - - justification takes place thru genuine faith - [Abraham believed God and it was reckoned unto him as righteousness]

- This passage teaches us that when a believer dies - - they go right to heaven – [not to purgatory / etc.]

**Philippians 1:21 - 'For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.'**

Why? Because at that moment – He would be in the presence of the Lord

Death may come by a car crash – a gunshot – a swim in the ocean - a prolonged illness

All of that is trumped however – by this reality: - - - ‘today you will be with me in paradise’

The body goes in the grave - - awaiting the resurrection - - - but the soul goes to be with the Lord

For the Christian – death is the process by which our souls leave our physical bodies

At the rapture – we are told that Christ will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus – their souls will be reunited with resurrected bodies at a day in the future

**I Thessalonians 4:13-17 - 'We do not want you to be uninformed, brethren about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and thus we shall always be with the Lord.'**

Not everybody has to die – the generation alive when Christ returns - - - instant glory

We'll be like Elijah – or Enoch – taken right to heaven

The use of the word, ‘today’ in Jesus’ statement contradicts or corrects any belief in purgatory - - - in the afterlife

J.C. Ryle: 'If the thief needed no purgatory - the whole doctrine falls to the ground.'

Jesus said [Jn. 14]: 'In My Father's house are many dwelling places - I go to prepare a place for you.'

He made us a promise - to have a place prepared for us

When the Council of Constance condemned John Hus - one of the early Protestant martyrs - in 1415 - the RCC Bishop ended the proceedings with: 'Now we commit your soul to the devil.'

Hus responded with: 'I commit my spirit into Thy hands, Lord Jesus Christ; unto Thee I commend my spirit, which Thou hast redeemed.'

He was then burned at the stake

No matter how we die - - if we belong to the Lord - - - we will have a safe landing - in the arms of the Lord

D.L. Moody: "Some day you will read in the papers that D.L. Moody of East Northfield, is dead. Don't you believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now; I shall have gone up higher, that is all, out of this old clay tenement into a house that is immortal.'

## II. The Prayer of Trust - Luke 23:44-46

There was a 3-hour period of darkness - this is the final statement of Jesus from the cross

This is a prayer of trust between the Son and the Father - - - it is also a quote from a Davidic Psalm

Psalm 31:5 - 'Into Thy hand I commit my spirit; thou hast ransomed me, O Lord, God of truth.'

As Jesus faces death - He expresses His trust that the Father will take care of Him

At grave side services - - I will often conclude by saying that - 'Father we rest so and so's body in your loving arms as we await the glorious day of resurrection.'

We can't do anything about a person's soul after they die - - - we are nowhere told to say prayers for the dead - - as though we can move them over from hell to heaven / etc.

The body - we place in the grave - in faith - awaiting the day of resurrection

Jesus - knew his body was only being laid aside temporarily [Friday - Sunday morning]



Psalm 16:10 - 'For Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Sheol; neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay.'

Jesus' body will not be forsaken – but instead will be raised up

Matthew seems to be referring to this prayer when he writes

**Matthew 27:50, 51 - 'And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, and the earth shook; and the rocks were split.'**

The tearing of the veil by the hand of God – signified – that Jesus had put an end to the sacrificial system – that access to God was thru Jesus who died once and for all

Of course – the Jews would sew the veil back together and put it back up – only for it to be destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD

There is no more sacrifice for sin

The Lamb of God had been slain - - all who come to God come thru Jesus

### **Conclusion**

When we consider these two sayings of Christ from the cross - - - we are reminded of two fundamental questions

- How can I die with peace?
- How can I be counted in that number?

Be like the repentant thief – and cry out in faith: 'Jesus – remember me when you come in your kingdom.'

The steady march of death approaches all of us

Spurgeon: 'There may come a day when He cannot be found, a time when He will not be near. When the great Judge of all has once said, "Depart;" when once the Master of the house has risen up, and shut the door, in vain will be all your seeking, and your praying, and your knocking at the door that will never open again. Therefore seek ye Jehovah while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near.'

Romans 10:13 - 'For whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.'