

LUKE 23.43: JESUS ON THE CROSS PROMISES LIFE

1. JESUS MAKES AN OUTRAGEOUS OFFER

On the Cross Jesus offered not just forgiveness – he also promised life.

To one of those dying with him on a cross, Jesus declares: “**Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise**” (Lk 23.43). What an amazing statement!

Throughout the Gospel of Luke we see Jesus showing special concern for those living on the very margins of society – the poor, the women, and the cheats of his day.

But here on the Cross Jesus embraces the greatest of outsiders and promises him a place a paradise. Jesus is truly outrageous in the way in which he extends his love to all.

Who was this man to whom Jesus addressed this ‘word’ from the cross?

Luke calls him a "**criminal**" (So NRSV, GNB, NIV, REB). The underlying Greek word (*kakourgos*) literally means an "*evil doer*". Hence the term ‘malefactor’ used in the AV.

He was a ‘zealot’ seeking to overthrow the Roman occupation of Palestine.

He was a 1st century equivalent of a 21st century terrorist today.

Almost certainly he was a brutal and ruthless man, with little to commend him.

Unfortunately tradition and legend have painted a false picture of him.

- One legend makes him a Jewish Robin Hood who robbed the rich to give to the poor
- Another legend tells of how Mary and Joseph were attacked by robbers when they fled with the baby Jesus from Bethlehem to Egypt. On that occasion Jesus was saved by the son of the leader of gang of robbers. The story goes that the leader's son was so struck by the beauty of the baby Jesus that he said: "O most blessed of children, if ever there come a time for having mercy on me, then remember me and forget not this hour". According to the legend, the robber met him again at Calvary - and this time Jesus saved him.

Actually, not only are these legends not true, they are distinctively unhelpful.

For tradition has tended to build up this man - to make him out as not such a bad chap after all. Whereas, the reverse was the case. He was a rotter, he was an "**evil doer**".

He almost certainly had blood on his hands. And yet Jesus saved him.

This story is an illustration of the truth nobody is ever too bad for Jesus to forgive.

Here we discover the truth of Isaiah 1.18: "**Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool**".

It doesn't matter who we are or what we have done, with Jesus we can always begin again.

If Jesus could forgive a dying criminal with blood on his hands, he can forgive you - he can forgive me

But there was not just one criminal crucified along with Jesus, there were two.

You might well ask why this was so? Why was Jesus was crucified along with two others?

After all, it was not as if all three were guilty of the same crime.

Almost certainly this triple crucifixion was not accidental, but deliberate.

It was probably arranged to further humiliate Jesus.

By crucifying Jesus along with two criminals, the authorities of the day wanted to emphasise that Jesus too was but a common criminal.

As far as they were concerned, this thirty-year old Galilean was no better than the other two - he too deserved to die.

Although I am sure that the authorities of the day never intended this, by crucifying Jesus with these two 'evil-doers' they were in fact fulfilling Scripture.

For in Is 53.12, toward the end of the prophet's description of the Suffering Servant, we read that "**he was numbered with [REB 'reckoned among'] the transgressors**".

Interestingly although Luke does not refer to Isaiah 53 in his account of the crucifixion, he does quote Isaiah 53.12 in his account of the Lord's Supper (Luke 22.37).

When Jesus died, he died with sinners.

But, of course, there is more to the cross than that.

We die because of our sins. Jesus died for our sins.

Jesus did not simply share our pain, he took upon himself our sin. But I digress.

2. EVEN ON THE CROSS JESUS IS A DIVISIVE FIGURE

The two criminals themselves reacted in very different ways to their fellow sufferer.

One of them taunted Jesus. Luke tells us that he "**kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'**" (v39).

In this respect this criminal was actually no worse than anybody else.

- The Jewish leaders standing by "**scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one'**" (23.35)
- Likewise the Roman soldiers mocked him: "**If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself**".

All of them failed to see that Jesus could not save himself - or at least, he could not save himself if he were to save us.

The other criminal sought to defend Jesus. "**This man has done nothing wrong**" (v41). How much he knew about Jesus, we don't know.

- It may be that he had heard about this Jesus of Nazareth, who had gone about Galilee doing good. It's even possible that he had even seen Jesus in action and therefore knew from first-hand experience the kind of man Jesus was.
- On the other hand, it may well have been that this was the first time he had ever met Jesus. But what he saw of Jesus that Good Friday was enough. The very attitude Jesus displayed as he was crucified made him realise that Jesus was no common criminal. For instead of cursing those who crucified him, Jesus had cried out, "**Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing**" (v34). Like the centurion later on he realised that "**certainly this man was innocent**" (v47).

Even on the cross Jesus is a divisive figure. The way in which these two criminals reacted so differently to the Crucified Jesus is prophetic of the effect that the cross of Jesus has always had upon others down through the centuries. Jesus has always been a divisive figure.

People always react differently to the message of the Cross of Jesus.

[Paul put it this way when writing to the Corinthians: "**For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God**" (1 Cor 1.18)].

Jesus died for all - but sadly not all are able to make a positive response.

But to those who react positively Jesus says: "**Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise**"

2. ENTRY INTO PARADISE IS CONDITIONAL

Before Jesus could make that promise of life in Paradise, two things were necessary

i) he had to face up to his sin

"Do you not fear God.....?" said the one criminal to the other. **"We indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong"**.

According to Francis Schaeffer, the late founder of the L'Abri community in Switzerland, there is little use in speaking about salvation to people who don't believe in the reality of God or acknowledge their guilt. *"We must never forget that the first part of the Gospel is not 'Accept Christ as Saviour', but 'God is there'. Christian faith means that a man bow twice:*

- *i. he must bow metaphysically, acknowledge that he is a creature before the infinite personal creation;*
- *ii. he must bow morally, to acknowledge that he is a sinner, guilty before this holy God".¹*

"Do you not fear God?", asked the one of the other, and in doing so he was in Schaeffer's terms bowing "metaphysically" - for he acknowledged that we must all stand before the judgement seat of God and there give an account of our lives to him.

"We are getting what we deserve" - and in saying that he was in Schaeffer's terms bowing "morally" - he was acknowledging that he was a sinner, that he could only plead guilty before the bar of God's justice.

At what point, I wonder, did he become aware of his guilt before God?

Had he always been plagued by a guilty conscience?

Or was he overcome by a sense of his guilt only as he looked to Jesus on the Cross?

It may well be that it was the sight of the Crucified Jesus which caused him to become truly self-aware. It was perhaps only then that the enormity of his sin dawned on him.

Leonard Griffith, a Canadian preacher, said: "Apart from the sight of what it cost God to forgive our sins, we have no idea how sordid our sins really are".

Similarly P.T. Forsyth, a Scottish theologian of an earlier generation, wrote: "Christ came to reveal not only God, but sin".

It is only as we look at the figure of Jesus on the Cross that we begin to realise the full gravity of our human condition; for only then do we begin to appreciate our need of forgiveness.

[In the words of Paul **"all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3.23)**]

But it wasn't enough for the criminal to feel guilty

ii) he had to put his faith in Jesus

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

"Jesus, remember me when you come to your throne" (REB)

"Jesus, don't let me die forgotten!"

"Jesus" says this un-named man.

¹ Francis Schaeffer, *Everybody Must Know. Family Devotions from the Gospel of Luke* (1974).

It's an interesting fact nowhere else in any Gospel does anyone directly address Jesus simply by his name, without adding some other qualification.

The dying criminal dares to be familiar with Jesus in a way which nobody else dares.

“Remember me”. Although the dying criminal will not have been aware of it, this recalls Mary’s words in the *Magnificat*: **“He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy”** (Luke 1.54) - or in the GNB translation: **“He has remembered to show mercy”**

We can't pretend that this dying criminal had any developed understanding of who Jesus was. He certainly recognized that Jesus didn't deserve to die - for as he said to his fellow terrorist, **“this man has done nothing wrong”** (v41).

What is more, whereas the other terrorist mocked Jesus for claiming to be king, this man dared to ask a favour from Jesus as he assumed his throne.

Somehow he realised that Jesus was a King who could save him.

It has been said: **“Some saw Jesus raise the dead, and did not believe. The robber sees him being put to death and believes”**.²

Yes, he believed – he put his faith in Jesus.

True, his faith was simple and unsophisticated.

However, at the end of the day it is not our sophistication which counts.

My mind goes to the words of Jesus: **“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of God”** (Matt 18.3: see Luke 18.16, 17). To become like a child is not to be childish in our thinking, but rather to be childlike in our trust. The glory of the Christian faith is its simplicity.

It is for all - for the university professors of this world and also for the mentally challenged.

Our salvation does not depend upon our intellectual capacity - otherwise none of us would be saved. The fact is that God's ways/thoughts are not our ways/thoughts (Isaiah 55.8).

What is required of us is that we trust him.... and in particular that we put our trust in King Jesus to save us.

Entry into paradise is conditional on whether we turn to Jesus or not. As preachers of a past generation used to say: **“One was saved upon the Cross that none might despair; and only one, that none might presume”**.

4. JESUS PROMISES PARADISE

In response to the confession of sin and the expression of faith, Jesus declared: **“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise”**.

Notice the little word **“truly”**: literally ‘*Amen*’. Jesus makes a solemn promise.

The hope of life to come with Jesus is not just wishful thinking, but rather it is a certainty.

In the words of the committal used at a Christian funeral service: it is a **“sure and certain hope”**.

With regard to Jesus’ promise we can say two things:

i) Jesus promises life beyond death.

² Alfred Plummer, *A Critical & Exegetical Commentary of the Gospel according to Luke* (T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 5th edition 1900) 535.

Many years ago John Neville Figgis, an Anglican theologian who belonged to the Community of the Resurrection, wrote: "*Religion is fundamentally concerned with the other world. Ultimately, the criterion of any religion lies in what it has to tell us of Death*" (J. Neville Figgis).³

That is certainly true of the Christian religion. For Christians death is not the end. Bertrand Russell, was wrong when he wrote: "*I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive*". Those who put their trust in Jesus will survive. Indeed, they will not simply 'survive' - survival in itself holds little joy - rather they will be with Jesus in Paradise.

The word **paradise** is the opposite of 'Gehenna'.

'Gehenna' is the place of condemnation and punishment, whereas 'paradise' is Eden restored.

The word 'paradise' is Persian in origin and means "*walled garden*".

In the New Testament this word "paradise" is found not only here, but also in 2 Cor 12.4 & Rev 2.7, where it is clearly used of heaven.

In the Greek Old Testament (LXX) it is used of the Garden of Eden.

Heaven is Eden restored. It is in fact a delightful picture of the life to come.

Donald Coggan, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote of how much he liked the horticultural image present here. "A park or garden speaks of serenity and beauty. and it speaks of ongoing activity, of gardeners in co-operation with the creator - there is little beauty in a park where no work is done! Heaven thought of in these terms speaks of growth, development, creativity, of creatures and creator in happy collusion."⁴

Frankly, I think Coggan is reading a little more into the text than is actually there. And yet he is right in this sense: heaven is bliss.

Heaven is all that we could hope for - and so much more.

In the words of an old song: "*Heaven is a wonderful place - Full of glory and grace*"

ii) Jesus promises life with him

Heaven is a wonderful place above all because it is where Jesus is

"You will be with me in Paradise".

It is the presence of Jesus which makes all the difference.

This is what makes the Christian concept of heaven different from the Muslim concept.

Muslim suicide bombers are promised that their reward in paradise will be to enjoy the delights of 72 virgins.

By contrast Jesus says **"Today you will be with me in Paradise"**.

As Brueggemann point out: paradise here "is not about a place, but about a relationship, it concerns being 'with me'. The place of well-being, abundance, and blessedness is in relationship to Jesus".⁵

As hell is life without Christ, so heaven is life with him.

"With Christ" that is the Christian hope.

- **"My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better"** (Phil 1.23)

³ John Neville Figgis, *The Fellowship of the Mystery Being the Bishop Paddock Lectures Delivered, at the General Theological Seminary, New York, During Lent* .(Longmans, Green & Company, London 1914) 34-35.

⁴ Donald Coggan, *Voices from the Cross* (Triangle, SPCK, London 1993).14.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Into your Hand: Confronting Good Friday* (SCM, London 2015) 9.

- Jesus said to his disciples: "**I will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also**" (John 14.2).

There is much about heaven which we do not know. But one thing for certain: We shall be there with Jesus.

Notice the word "**today**". Did Jesus literally mean "today"

As some have pointed out, the resurrection only took place "on the third day"

I like the suggestion that "today" is the "day of salvation".

The world to come is a world beyond time and space. We cannot press too much meaning into the word '**today**' – apart from the assurance that in Jesus heaven is an assured reality, where all are welcome. Or as Brueggemann puts it: "The 'today' is an incredible welcome, no questions asked, no qualifying exam. Come on in!"⁶

5. THE PROMISE OF LIFE IS ALWAYS UNDESERVED

"**Today you will be with me in Paradise**". Here is a man who admits that he deserves to die - he has lived a rotten life. And yet to him Jesus promises life.

Some might feel this is not fair that a man should go through his whole life doing wrong, robbing others, and even perhaps killing some, and then with a last minute appeal to Jesus should secure acquittal before the bar of heaven.

And in one sense it is not fair.

But if fairness were to be the judge, then nobody would be saved.

For all of us have done wrong. The fact that our sins are grey in colour, rather than bright red, makes not a whit of difference. All of us deserve to die in our sins.

Do note, however, that in one important respect this criminal sets an example.

He turned to Jesus before it was too late.

Unlike the Rich Fool who built bigger barns (Luke 12.16-21) and unlike the Rich Man at whose gate Lazarus used to beg (Luke 16.19-31), this terrorist repented before it was too late.

We too need to turn to Jesus before it is too late. For as J.S. Whale [a Congregationalist theologian] said in a mission to Cambridge students: "*Dying is inevitable, but arriving at the destination God offers to me is not inevitable.*" He went on to quote Dr Johnson: '*I remember that my Maker has said that he will put the sheep on his right hand and the goats on the left*'. Whale added: "*That is a solemn truth which only the empty-headed and empty-hearted will neglect. It strikes at the very root of life and destiny*"⁷

Yes, in an important respect the dying criminal sets an example. Yet, as one American preacher pointed out, it would have been even better if he had discovered a little earlier the difference Jesus can make to life. "His tragedy", said Howard Hageman, "is that his introduction to paradise came so late... And his glory is that he found him in time. His tragedy and his glory are not unlike yours and mine. And Good Friday is the opportunity to redeem tragedy into glory. For what is our tragedy but our failure to grasp what Christ can do for our lives here and now? And what is our glory but to discover with him how to live in

⁶ Brueggemann, *Into Your Hand* 8.

⁷ John S. Whale, *Eight Lectures Delivered in the University of Cambridge in 1941* (Cambridge University Press, 1961) 186-187.

[Luke 23.39-43]

heaven while we live on earth?”⁸

So in conclusion, Jesus on the Cross promises life – the good news is that we too may enter into that promise if we too turn to him.

⁸ Howard Hageman, *We Call This Friday Good* (Muhlenberg, Philadelphia 1961) 29 quoted by Justo L. Gonzalez, *Luke* (Westminster John Knox, Louisville 2010) 265.