

The second word on the cross is Salvation - Luke 23: 42,43

Scripture reading: Luke 23: 26 - 43.

Sermon text: Luke 23: 42,43:

He said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom".

Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

Introduction:

When a person works an eight-hour day and receives a fair day's pay for his time, that is a wage. When a person competes with an opponent and receives a trophy for winning, that is a prize. When a person receives appropriate recognition for his long service or high achievements and good performance, that is an award. But when a person is not capable of earning a wage, can win no prize, and deserves no award, yet receives such a gift anyway, it is a good picture of God's unmerited favour. This is what we mean when we talk about the grace of God.

Christ crucified between two robbers by the will of God

It was no accident that our Lord was crucified between two robbers. There are no accidents in this world ruled by God. There can be no accident on that day and with that event which lies at the centre of God's revelation of his love and salvation. God was in control. From eternity he had decreed when and where and with whom his Son would die. Nothing was left to chance or to the urges and ideas of man. What God had eternally decided, happened exactly as he had ordained, and nothing happened except what was his purpose to happen. God's *"power and will had decided beforehand what should happen"* (Acts 4:28).

When Pilate commanded that the Lord Jesus should be crucified between the two robbers, he was carrying out the decree of God, fulfilling the prophecy of Scripture. Seven hundred years earlier God had declared through Isaiah that his Son was to be *"numbered with the transgressors"* (Is 53:12). On Good Friday Jesus hung on the cross with a criminal crucified on his left and his right. What God ordains and announces comes to pass.

Why did God ordain that his beloved Son should be crucified between two criminals?

Our Lord was crucified with two robbers in order **to demonstrate the full extent of his humiliation**. At his birth there was no place for him to be born, but a stable, and now at his death, he is numbered with criminals. He hung there in our place, as our Substitute. We are the transgressors. It should have been us hanging there on the cross between the two who deserved the death sentence, because we too deserve the wages of sin, which is death. But Christ took our place. He was numbered among transgressors in our place.

The sovereign grace of God

An important lesson we learn from the second word on the cross concerns the sovereign grace of God. The two criminals were equally near to Christ. Both of them saw and heard all that happened those six hours that Jesus hung on the cross. Both were wicked, dying and in pain. But one of them died in his sins, he died as he had lived, without repentance. The other repented of his wickedness, believed in Jesus, called on him for mercy, and went to Paradise. Only the sovereign grace of God can account for this difference in response under the same circumstances and with the same experience.

Don't we see it still happening today? Under the same circumstances, one is thawed out and the other remains cold with regards to the gospel. The same sermon will be received with indifference by one, while another will see God's love and mercy. To one the Gospel is revealed, to another it remains a closed book. Why does this happen?

While upholding that every person is responsible before God for his own sin and conversion, we know that only those come to God whom God calls to him. This is what we call the sovereign grace of God.

These words of Jesus on the cross offer salvation, by grace, to the criminal crucified with Jesus, and to each one of us. Yes, the salvation of the dying robber shows us the glorious grace and mercy of our Lord. The apostle Paul says: *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith."* (Eph 2:8).

Salvation by grace is nowhere illustrated in Scripture as well as in the case of the forgiven robber that was crucified with Jesus. He had no "good works," to rely on. He had no high standard of morality. Rather, he was a vile and wicked man; he respected neither the law of God nor the law of man. There is no way that either he or anyone else could say that he had earned his salvation. And, after his conversion on the cross, this thief had no grateful response to his salvation and he bore no fruit of salvation - except faith in Jesus – for his conversion took place just before his death.

Yet, he was saved. His salvation was by grace only. His faith through which he received Christ, was a gracious gift of the Holy Spirit. (See Eph2:8)

The thief on the cross reminds us that salvation is totally by grace: that it is free, unmerited, unearned, and totally dependent upon God and His mercy. He reminds me of the fact that I am saved because of grace, and because of love. The love of God in Christ Jesus. This love I accept in faith. This Jesus I receive in faith.

The criminal on the cross next to Jesus is proof that I don't have to reach a certain standard or level of holiness before God will accept me as his child. That thief is proof that I don't have to get my life under control first, in order to claim the promises of God for myself. He reminds us that salvation is totally by grace; that it is free, unmerited, unearned, and totally dependent upon God and His mercy.

It is important to remember *when* the Lord saved this man. His conversion occurred at a time when it seemed as if Jesus had lost the power to save either himself or others. It seemed as if the enemies of Jesus were triumphing over him. His friends had forsaken him and public opinion was against him. He was in pain, dying! Even those who believed in him had doubts about him. Yet, the thief confessed his faith in Christ.

How can we possibly explain that a dying robber took a suffering, bleeding, crucified man for his God? There can be only one explanation, which is the sovereign grace of our Lord!

A contrite sinner

To get to the heart of the second word of the cross, the word of salvation, we must realise that the remorseful robber represents all sinners of every age, everywhere.

He is not only a sinner, *he is a converted sinner*. He rebuked the other robber for his mockery of our Lord. *"Don't you fear God,"* he said, *"since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong"* (vs 40,41). He repents of his sin and evil. He acknowledges his guilt and the judgment of God upon his sin.

We also see him turning in faith toward Christ: *"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."* The thief, by grace, recognized Jesus as the Messiah, as the Son of David, who would rule over the Kingdom of God to be established. "Remember me," says the robber. He is placing his destiny in the hands of Jesus.

The Lord wants us all to recognise ourselves in this remorseful sinner hanging on a cross next to Jesus. He wants us to recognise our sin and the wrath of God on sin. He wants us to repent of our sins and turn to Jesus in faith. He wants us to cry out too, "*Jesus, remember me ...*"

A word of salvation from the cross

The crosses were only a few feet apart. The Lord immediately heard the cry of the repentant man. Remember the promise of Christ, "*whoever comes to me I will never drive away*" (Jn 6:37). We see here that this promise is the truth. Jesus answered him, "*I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.*" The thief asks Jesus to remember him, but Jesus says, "*you will be with me.*"

I urge you to turn to Jesus right now in repentance and in faith. We saw the power of Christ the Saviour. Even then, even there dying in pain, he had the power to redeem from hell and open the gates of Paradise. Never doubt the ability of our Saviour to save you. If a dying Saviour could save so powerfully, how much more a Saviour who rose from death in triumph, never more to die!

Conclusion

To receive a wage that you have not earned, to get the prize that you have not won and to be awarded the acknowledgement you do not deserve! That is what it means to be saved by grace through faith. Listen then today to the Lord's merciful, loving words as it echo's through the ages to reach us as God's word here, today! "You will be with me in Paradise!" This is the truth! This is the word of God.

In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.