

The Gospel of Christ Jesus A today Saviour

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New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

It is said that when Titus captured Jerusalem in A.D.70 there were so many crucifixions that they ran out of wood to make sufficient crosses. There were so many dead bodies that the living could no longer bury their dead and corpses were just left in plain sight. It was just as Jesus had said:

“Let the dead bury their own dead” (Matthew 8:22).

As we conclude our series on the Gospel of Christ Jesus by looking at Luke chapter 23:39 – 43, we are going to consider Him a ‘today’ Saviour. But before we read the relevant Scriptures it is worth just considering for a moment the context or back story to this passage. Death by crucifixion was an awful way to die. It was painful and could take a matter of days. During that time the condemned would be open to public ridicule as they suffered increasing levels of pain and discomfort. Interestingly, after the fall of Jerusalem Josephus was searching for his family amongst the survivors and found three relatives who had been crucified. He pleaded for their release which was granted, and one actually survived.

For the condemned three things stand out: one, they were not there by personal choice, being under the authority of the Roman powers. Two, they had no future to speak of and three, they could not look backwards. It is just worth bearing these three things in mind as we will later consider the kind of salvation that Jesus brings. Now let us read our verses from Luke chapter 23:

“Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, “If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.” But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, “Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong. “Then he said to Jesus, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” And Jesus said to him, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.””

Surely here we have the very fulcrum of history. On a hill outside Jerusalem stood three crosses. On the middle of these, Jesus of Nazareth, the very Son of God, was hanging. Man’s judgement stood confirmed: “We will not have this man to reign over us” (19:14). Or like the T-shirt logo I once saw said: “If Jesus was to come back again, we would put Him straight back on the cross.” What a travesty for the Man whom even His judge, Pilate, had on more than one occasion declared to be faultless, and certainly not worthy of death. Yet there He hung, in willing submission to the plans of His Father and in confirmation of all that He had said before:

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up” (John 3:14); and, “Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again” (John 10:17 – 18).

As that particular crucifixion began it might not have appeared to be anything out of the ordinary. We read in Mark 15:25 – 32:

“Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him. And the inscription of His accusation was written above: the king of the Jews. With Him they also crucified two robbers, one on His right and the other on His left. So the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “And He was numbered with the transgressors.” And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, “Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the cross!” Likewise the chief priests also, mocking among themselves with the scribes, said, “He saved others; Himself He cannot save. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him.”

Both of the other two condemned men who were being crucified with Jesus reviled Him. As Luke tells us, one of these two condemned men had a very clear idea of what salvation meant. If Jesus really was who He said He was, then why not get down from the cross, and whilst He was at it get them down too! Salvation to him was nothing more than getting to live for another day. Another day of criminality, another day of frustration and thwarted dreams, another day of missed hopes and disappointment. Is this all that Jesus can offer? For too many they think that this is indeed the case. However, as we shall see, His very presence had already made all the difference to the other of the two condemned men. Although they both started off from the same place – both physically and morally, Jesus had made one choose a very different path to the other.

Before long, instead of joining in the reviling accusations, the second criminal rebuked the first. Here he was on the threshold on eternity, facing certain death. At such a time all the trivialities of life had fallen away. It no longer mattered how much money he had. It no longer mattered how Jerusalem Athletic were doing in the football, or whether the latest Roman boy band were number 1. We do spend so much of our lives thinking about and following after trivialities. For sure, they may seem important at the time, sometimes they may even be important things. But at the end of our lives, all that matters is a certain appointment with God and how that will go. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it: “It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgement” (Hebrews 9:27). Each one of us will stand before Almighty God, whether we expect to or not, whether we believe in Him or not. For those of us who have trusted in the finished work of Christ on the cross it will be a day of joyful reunion and accounting for service done. For those who die in rebellion to Him, it will be a dreadful judgement for that rejection of His gracious salvation.

This criminal’s next words show how much the events of this crucifixion were impacting upon his value judgement. “We indeed justly” speak of a recognition that what was happening to him was not an unreasonable outcome for his actions. We have abolished the death penalty in this country and depending upon your point of view, this is a good thing or a bad thing. For this man he recognised that his previous actions merited the punishment he was then enduring. Being in the presence of the Son of God does have a habit of showing us who we really are. Not only that, but we, like the criminal need to come to the point where we recognise that all that God does is right. As Abraham declared as he faced the destruction of Sodom: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis 18:25) We may complain bitterly now about the unfairness of life and question God’s competency to Judge, but at the end of time every knee will bow to Him and recognise that He has done right.

However, the criminal didn't just admit his own failures – that was hardly an Einsteinian insight. He was convicted about the perfection of the Man who was dying alongside him. “This Man has done nothing wrong” was an insight that only the Holy Spirit, working upon him, could bring. There was obviously something about this Man that made him recognise that Jesus was different, better, indeed perfect, and he himself was not. Just imagine living in a world where we only met those who had never done anything wrong – what a difference that would make to our politics, to our industrial relations, to our families, to our international relations. This is the kind of world that God wants. This is the kind of world that He is working towards. It is not yet, but it will be so, and it will be so because of what was occurring on that cross.

The criminal then went on to acknowledge that there is life after death. His request for Jesus to “remember me” evidences this. We might want the living to remember us when we are gone, but to expect those who have died before us to remember us is nonsensical. In asking Jesus to remember him, he recognised that this was not an ending for Jesus – or indeed for him, merely the exchange of one reality for another. Our very births mirror this reality. A baby is alive and fully suited to its condition within the womb of its mother. Come the day of delivery, all that it has ever known is changed. There is no going back, indeed it cannot go back and live. However, it has entered upon a new reality and life, and finds itself perfectly suited to its new environment. The day of our death is the day when we exchange the present reality that we have become rather accustomed to, for an eternal reality that our previous lives have been in preparation for.

The criminal also recognised the authority of the Lord Jesus. That might seem strange considering the outward appearance of the situation. Yet, he recognised that Jesus was soon to inherit a kingdom and he wanted to be a part of that. Our monarchs are crowned with great pomp and ceremony in the very grandest of circumstances. Jesus was acknowledged King by a man on a cross, as He Himself was crucified and about to die. All of his life, like most of us, this criminal had wanted to create his own little kingdom, in which he reigned and where things were good. Now he wanted nothing more than to be a part of God's kingdom and as he died, he knew the Man that could make that possible.

Jesus' response to the criminal was wonderful: “Today you will be with Me in Paradise.” Utter simplicity! Utter certainty! For those who think that there must be something for us to do to merit His favour these words cut right across this idea. The criminal was in no place to be told to do something, to try harder, to improve himself. He was about to die, and he needed salvation there and then. For those who think that a certain level of understanding and academic knowledge is necessary for salvation, these words cut right across this idea. The criminal had no books to study, no time to read. And yet salvation was his and it was his right then. For a man whose mind might have been so full of regrets I think that the only one that really mattered at that time was that he would never again have the opportunity to physically bow his knee to the Lord Jesus. Pinned to the cross of his death he could barely move. Yet in his heart he willingly bowed to the authority of Jesus who he may only have met that very day. Today salvation had truly come to this dying man's life.

As Paul could tell the Christian believers in Corinth: “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2). The salvation that God offers is truly for today.

As the poem by Nebila Abdulmelik says:

I knelt to pray but not for long,
I had too much to do.
I had to hurry and get to work
For bills would soon be due.

So I knelt and said a hurried prayer,
And jumped up off my knees.
My Christian duty was now done
My soul could rest at ease.....

All day long I had no time
To spread a word of cheer
No time to speak of Christ to friends,
They'd laugh at me I'd fear.....

No time, no time, too much to do,
That was my constant cry,
No time to give to souls in need
But at last the time, the time to die.

I went before the Lord, I came,
I stood with downcast eyes.
For in his hands God! Held a book;
It was the book of life.

God looked into his book and said "
Your name I cannot find
I once was going to write it down...
But never found the time.""

The criminal had given up on all that would fill his time, his mind, his dreams and found something of altogether greater worth. May it be that we too may find this today Saviour today! How wonderful that the Lord spoke to him in words that were so relevant to him. He did not speak of "the glory" or "the Father's house" or even "Heaven." All his life the criminal had thought that he could create his own paradise by his actions. At that moment, he received it as a free gift because of his faith in the Man alongside whom he was dying. He had this one chance, and he would not let it slip. Dear listener, perhaps today it is your one, and only chance to accept the Lord Jesus as your Saviour. Will He be your Saviour 'today'?

For many of us, however, today will not be the day of our death and you may well have known the Lord Jesus for many years. There is still the sense in which He needs to be a today Saviour! Remember the three characteristics of a man upon a cross – one, there under the authority of another, two, no future of their own to plan for and three, could not look behind them? These are true for the believer today and should be a part of our lives daily no matter whether our days are few or many in number. In Galatians 2:20 Paul writes:

"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me, and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."

This sense of daily death with Christ is something that has almost entirely disappeared from Christianity today as we see it as precious little more than a lifestyle choice, an opportunity to be a part of like-minded friends. But knowing that Jesus is our Saviour today, not just for a day in the future when we may die, means that we are here under the authority of Someone else. Our lives no longer belong to us, and we have a responsibility to spend every moment of every day under the authority of this Man upon the cross. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians chapter 6:19 – 20:

"Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's."

When we accepted Christ as our Saviour, the terms and conditions clearly state that He takes ownership of our lives. Yet too many of us act as illegal squatters, hoping that we can continue to live our lives to please ourselves now and then claim a future salvation when we die. It is not a tomorrow Saviour that we need, for tomorrow never comes. He is a 'today' Saviour.

Remember also that the criminal on the cross had no future to plan for. Everything that he wanted to say to the Lord had to be done there and then. Too often we waste such time planning for a future that never arrives. When I was working, I had a rep who used to visit until one summer. She went on holiday. Then one morning she and her husband got up and, as they went for a bike ride, they were hit by a careless driver. Her husband was killed outright, she catastrophically injured. In the blink of an eye our futures can change, and yet we worry, we over-plan, we delay what could be done for Christ today, in favour of a plan for something more in the future. He is a 'today' Saviour and deserves our best today.

A person on a cross could not look behind him – only forward and maybe to each side. Paul wrote to the Philippians:

“Forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (3:13 – 14).

Have you a lifetime of regrets and missed opportunities? Forget them and resolve to serve Him today. Have you served faithfully for many years and now feel that it is time for someone else to pick up the baton? Forget those acts of service and resolve to continue to serve Christ today. Whether we are 15 or 85 we will all have 24 hours today. He is a 'today' Saviour who waits for us to yield those moments to Him. We like the criminal on the cross have a choice to make. Is there something so attractive about the Person of the Lord Jesus that would lead us to commit ourselves to Him today and for today?

It is worth pointing out that as the criminal looked at Jesus there would certainly be nothing to physically impress him. What he would have seen with his eyes would have been quite horrible:

“Just as many were astonished at You, so His visage was marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men [literally, beyond recognition]” (Isaiah 52:14).

There was something in Jesus Christ, as He died upon that cross that could not be seen by the eyes. Something that captivated this criminal and changed him forever. As the hymn writer Miss Ora Rowan (1834-79) wrote:

“Hast thou heard Him, seen Him, known Him?
Is not thine a captured heart?
Chief among ten thousand own Him,
Joyful choose the better part.”

This was the part that the criminal took and today it is the part that we, too, can take. May we not only see in Jesus a Saviour for another day but a Saviour who is just right for us today.

In closing, I want just in closing to consider one final thought! It was J.C Ryle who famously wrote of this incident in Luke's Gospel, “One was saved so that all may have hope, but only one so that none may presume.”

It is certainly true that this incident from the cross gives all hope. None is too far from God to be beyond being saved today. There is always a way back to God, not only for salvation but also in terms of living a life of pleasing obedience to Him. Sadly, too many think that for one reason or another, they have gotten themselves so far away from God, they have failed so badly, that they are beyond hope. This simply is not true, and the story of the criminal's repentance and salvation should make us realise that He offers hope to all, no matter who they are or what they have done.

It is also true that none of us can presume upon His mercy. There really must be a definite, positive commitment to Him from each one of us. My parent's faith cannot save me. A lifetime of church attendance cannot save me. He is a 'today' Saviour and He alone can save.

However, it strikes me that we simply do not know what happened to the other criminal. Scripture is silent and we should not pronounce on the state of another. Did he, in his final moments, repent? Perhaps – eternity will tell. There are some today who really grieve for a lost loved one whom they think was not saved, when they died. Whilst fully understandable, this is not a burden

we should bear. We do have a responsibility to share the gospel to people whilst they are living and there is still opportunity. However, though an individual may live a life of atheistic rejection of God, we simply do not know what transpires in the closing moments of anyone's life. Who would ever have thought that either of the criminals would have been saved? God is a Saviour God, who desires that all men should be saved, so it is best just to leave these things to Him. I am sure that there will be many in Heaven who we did not expect to see; and perhaps some who we do expect to see will not be there! Christ Jesus is a 'today' Saviour. Let us gladly accept His salvation whilst we can.

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