

Sermon for Sunday, July 20, 1980, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, MO 63105

"THREE CROSSES ON CALVARY"
"The Man Who Was Afraid of God"
St. Luke 23:32-49

Text" "But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.'" St. Luke 23:40,41

The two thieves on either side of Jesus were caught in the terrible pressure of pain, their hands like burning fire from the awful nails, their arms an aching agony, feeling as though they would tear from the sockets from bearing the weights of their bodies. Their feet were broken and bleeding from the sharp spikes which had made their ruthless way through bone and flesh. Both men in their agony cried out to Jesus. Last Sunday we talked about the man who cried out, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" Today I would like for us to think together about the second thief. He said to Jesus, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power." The first man wanted deliverance from where he was. The second man wanted deliverance from who he was.

There is an important difference, isn't there? When we get in trouble--when our sinfulness lands us in hot water--do we cry out for deliverance from where we are? Most of us do, don't we? Perhaps what we need to understand is that what we need most of all is deliverance from who we are.

There on the cross the second thief suddenly realized that life's string had run out for him. Life was over. Death had come. And in the face of that moment he came to the sudden realization that the most appropriate response was fear of God. He could not escape it. Now he must accept the fact that his life is going to be judged by God. When he understood that, it was no longer important where he was. Who he was became everything.

Over in the book of Revelation, the 20th chapter, we read these words: "And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done." In the face of death and the judgment of God this thief said to the other, "Do you not fear God?"

I want to ask you that question this morning: do you fear God? The Bible tells us quite plainly that God will judge us.

The second thing I would call to your attention about this man is that in the face of death and judgment he did the only thing he could do, he turned to Jesus Christ. He brought nothing in his hands. His was an empty, useless life. He had nothing to offer. As the hymn writer put it, "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling." Yet, it was precisely to this man--this man who repented of his life, this man who repented of his sin of whom the Bible says, And Jesus said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Here was a man condemned and forgotten by society. Yet, when he turns to Jesus he is no longer condemned by God, he is never to be forgotten. You have that same possibility this morning. Your life may have been selfish and self-centered, you may have done many things for which you are ashamed. You may have good reason to be afraid of God. Yet, if you will repent and turn to Jesus--though your life is quite empty, though you bring nothing in your hands--he will forgive you and redeem you--you will never be forgotten of God.

I want to share with you this morning what will happen to you when you repent of your sins and turn to Jesus. Jesus said to the thief, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Here is a man facing death, his body cruelly racked by pain and agony. Yet, to this man Jesus said, "Today". Eternal life for him began the moment he turned to Jesus. Eternal life for you this morning is not some far off hope, some distant possibility. Eternal life is right now. Jesus himself said, "He who does not believe is condemned already." Some of us have the idea that when life is over God takes the good and the bad in our lives and balances them. If the good outweighs the bad we go to heaven. If not, we go to hell. Actually, it doesn't work that way at all. Nobody can be good enough to gain heaven. No one shall gain heaven because he has earned it or deserved it. On God's scales all my sin is put on one side--the cross is put on the other side--and the cross always outweighs sin! Eternal life is something you have right now. If you don't have it here, you won't have it there. The only way any of us will gain eternal life is to accept Jesus as our Saviour. That's what the thief did. And the moment he did, he had it. Jesus said to him, "Today..." Do you have eternal life--today?

Then Jesus said, "Today you..." To whom is this "you" addressed? Is it addressed to some saintly soul, to some religious leader, to some good and noble man? No, it is addressed to a thief. If Jesus can turn to a thief whose life is so wicked and evil as to deserve death, surely there is hope for you and me. What does God require of a man to forgive him? Does he require position or wealth, education or knowledge, goodness or holiness? No, he requires that a man repent of his sin and turn to Jesus. The divine forgiveness is even for a penitent thief who turns to Jesus. Eternal life is for you this morning. The only requirement is that you repent of your sins and that you turn in trust to Jesus.

Jesus said to the thief, "Today you will be..." The force of the Greek here means literally, "you will keep on being..." He is speaking to a man whose hands are pierced by nails that fix him to a cross. He is speaking to a man whose feet are cruelly pierced by a spike that tears the flesh and smashes the bone. He is speaking to a man in the latter stages of execution by the Roman government and history records that they always did a thorough job. Yet, in the face of this Jesus says to the thief, "You will keep on being." By the resurrection of Jesus the Bible teaches us that human personality survives physical death. The grave is not the end of that which is called "you". Now, the Bible speaks in a number of ways about what this survival is like. For example, St. Paul in the 15th chapter of I Corinthians speaks of our spiritual bodies. Yet, on one point all of scripture is clear: it is clear on the point that human personality persists; that human personality survives. It is clear that we who are made in God's image are uniquely different and distinct from the rest of creation and that the "me" and the "you" survive eternally. Yes, "today you will be..."--the persistence of human personality beyond the grave. And that is what the resurrection of Jesus is all about--it is God's proof, God's testimony to us that physically death is not the end. As Jesus himself once put it, "Because I live, you shall live also."

But eternally life is not something to be lived in a vacuum. Jesus goes on to say, "Today you will be with me..." Here Jesus speaks to us of a continuing relationship, a continuing fellowship. Would you be afraid of anything if you knew Jesus was going to be with you? Would you be afraid of death if you knew that in the very middle of it Jesus would come to meet you? Isn't this what the Psalmist was talking about? "Yea, tho I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me.." St. Paul wrote to the Romans, "If we live, we live to the Lord; if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

Yes, our Lord said to his disciples, "I go to prepare a place for you that where I am you may be also." Eternal life means to have Jesus with you. It means not only to have him in the future, but it means to have him with you right now, this moment. Thus, St. Paul could write to the Thessalonians that Jesus died for us so that, "Whether we wake or sleep we might live with him." Yes, "today you will be with me..."--the continuation of a divine fellowship.

Notice the last word of Jesus--"Today you will be with me in paradise." What will it be like in paradise--in heaven? When the Bible tries to tell us, human language simply breaks down. St. Paul tells us of a man who was caught up in Paradise--and surely he was speaking of himself--and of that experience he writes, "and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter." (II Corinthians 12:4) In another place he writes, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him." (I Corinthians) The writer of the book of Revelation attempts to describe heaven and he uses beautiful, symbolic language. He writes, "And I saw the Holy City, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.'" (Revelation 21:2-4) And that's what heaven is like.

There were two other crosses on Calvary that day. On one of them was a sinful, wicked man. In the face of death, he cried out to Jesus to deliver him from where he was. Jesus could not help him.

On the other cross was another sinful, wicked man. His life had been no different from the first man. In the face of death, he feared the judgment of God and turned to Jesus. He asked for deliverance from who he was. To this man Jesus said, "Today--the immediacy of eternal life; you--even a common thief who came empty handed can be included; will be--the perseverance of human personality beyond death and the grave; with me--the continuation of a divine fellowship with Jesus; in paradise--a place where God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, no pain, any more, for the former things have passed away.

If you only want to be delivered from where you are without repentance Jesus cannot help you. He will want to help you.. He will long to help you. He will have died in a vain effort to help you. No, Jesus can help you only if you want deliverance from who you are--only if you repent and turn to him. Then--and only then--can he say to you, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

