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## LK 23:32-43 : A CRIMINAL'S SALVATION

*No. EE18*

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Every one of us has at one time or another thought about death and what follows thereafter. What happens to us in the minutes and the hours after we have passed away? What about the period - perhaps centuries - between our death and our resurrection? What about our dear ones that have already passed on? Are they in a state of awareness? Questions, questions, questions!

We are concerned here with the so-called intermediate state, the state of believers - to consider them only - between their death and their resurrection.

The Bible does not tell us much about this state. The apostles looked right through the grave, as it were, and kept their eyes fixed on the resurrection.

This does not mean that the Bible says nothing at all about the subject. There is, for instance, the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. But as this is a parable, one should be careful not to read too much into it. Perhaps it is best to take a proper look at our text - the conversation between our Lord and the criminal on the cross. And in the process we will also gain several other perspectives.

### THE EVENTS ON CALVARY

The Lord was not crucified alone (Mt 27:38; Mk 15:27; Lk 23:32; Jn 19:18), but with two criminals, one on either side of Him. Initially they both insulted Him (Mt 27:44; Lk 23:39), but soon the attitude of one of them underwent a radical change. As the

realisation dawned upon him that this was his last hours on earth and that he stood on the threshold of eternity, he pleaded with Jesus to remember him when He came to his kingdom. And the Lord answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (Lk 23:42-43).

### JESUS' ASSURANCE IN LK 23:43

□ The answer that Jesus gave the criminal was not the muttering of a delirious man. He knew exactly what He was saying.

The Lord started off his pronouncement with a word He often used to place emphasis on something He was saying. The NIV translates the word here as "I tell you the truth", while other versions use words like "verily" or "truly". As always, it leads to a pronouncement that has the full weight of Christ's divine authority behind it.

□ Some people who reject the Biblical revelation about the intermediate state rely on an alternative translation of the text: "*Today* I tell you the truth: you will be with me in paradise". While it might be possible to read this meaning into the Greek text, it really would be a somewhat forced translation. It also would mean that Jesus is saying what is obvious - something one would hardly expect from a dying man, at least not Jesus..

Be that as it may, the intermediate state is also mentioned elsewhere in the Bible.

□ "Paradise" is an interesting word. It is actually a Persian word meaning a walled garden or park. The Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Old Testament made about 2 centuries before the birth of Christ) uses it for the "garden" of Eden.

Apart from our text, the word is used in two other places in the New Testament. In 2Cor 12:4 we read about Paul's rapture to paradise. And in Rev 2:7 we find the promise to the over comers - that they will one day "eat from the tree of life, which is in the *paradise* of God".

□ The words "with me" offer wonderful consolation and encouragement. They lie at the very heart of our blessed hope and immediately bring to mind the words of the Lord's high priestly prayer in Jn 17:24: "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me..." The apostle Paul also expresses the desire to depart and to be with Christ (Phil 1:23).

*We go to our beloved Saviour when we die!*

### THE CRIMINAL'S FAITH

□ We may accept without hesitation that this robber was saved. For this reason the story has been a great consolation to countless spiritual plodders harassed by feelings of inadequacy before God and doubts about the certainty of their salvation.

□ How can a vile sinner like this be saved? Does not this story cheapen salvation? What about the absence of discipleship, sanctification and obedience on the part of the criminal? Is this not just a case of smooth talking in the face of death? Can it all be as simple as this?

Indeed! Because this man had faith - *true* faith!

- He believed that there is a God and that there would be a life after death for all three of them.

- He believed that he was guilty ("We are punished justly ..."). He knew he was a sinner.

- He believed that Jesus was being executed unjustly ("... this man has done nothing wrong"). He was so convinced of this that he sided with the Lord in spite of his own condition and excruciating pain.

- He believed that both he and his friend would have to answer to God for what they had done ("Don't you fear God?").

- He believed that Jesus would rule as King in heaven ("... when you come into your kingdom").

- He believed that Jesus would be able to do something for him in his miserable state. And in his utter dependence he trusted the Lord for this ("Jesus, remember me...").

## WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS SAY TO US?

### 1. This is a clear-cut confirmation of the fact that salvation is by grace alone, without any human merit at all.

One cannot imagine less merit on the part of any man than that of the criminal. Probably he had some knowledge of Jesus's teaching. But there had been no discipleship and no sanctification.

Think for a moment about his life. Remember, only the most serious crimes were punishable by crucifixion. We can accept it therefore that this man in his youth had completely ignored his parents' guidance. He had rejected with contempt the directives of a religious upbringing. He had ignored the lessons of life. He had trampled in the dust the admonitions of his conscience.

Truly, this man had nothing whatsoever to offer God. He only had faith. And even that was not his own merit - it was a mere hanging on to Christ.

### 2. We have here an event which beautifully illustrates the essence of saving faith.

We are not saved by big or strong faith, but by *real* faith. A grain of the real is worth more than tons of the false. This man's faith was pathetically small. And what he had only lasted for a few hours at the most. But as to quality, his faith was the real thing.

What is it that determines the purity of faith? *A basic knowledge and conviction! Earnestness and sincerity! Helplessness and dependence! Total and complete trust - specifically in Jesus Christ, and in Him alone!*

The fact that some have this faith and others not, cannot simply be ascribed to their wisdom, insight or piety. No! Faith cannot be anything but a gift that the Holy Spirit bestows on some and not on others.

*Some saw how Jesus raised people from the*

*dead - and it failed to bring them to faith. The criminal saw Him die - and he believed!*

### 3. We have here an event that has been of great comfort to countless people for many centuries.

Many of us have lost to the grave family or friends who have shown nothing of God's grace in their lives. That does not necessarily mean that they were not saved. A deathbed conversion is most certainly possible. One can be saved a minute before your death.

Many are those who will thank the Lord one day for a final sick-bed. Why? Because numerous dying men and women have set things right with God knowing that they are on the brink of eternity.

But - and this is a vital qualification - none among us may depend on this. As has often been said, *"One is saved, so that none may despair. But only one, so that no one may dare become presumptuous."* There was, after all, another criminal. And he did not receive the grace to repent. He died without God and without hope.

### 4. Even if the rest of Scripture had remained silent about the intermediate state - which is not the case - this event would have compelled us to accept it as a fact.

Undeniably our text implies a conscious and personal life immediately after death. It is impossible to give a different interpretation to Jesus' assurance to the criminal that he would be with Him in paradise on that very day.

How we will experience time in the intermediate state we do not know. Some argue that time as we know it does not exist in paradise. But this is improbable. Think of the martyrs in heaven asking how long the Lord will tarry before He judges the inhabitants of the earth (Rev 6:9-10). These people obviously experience time.

Other references and allusions to the intermediate state can be found in Lk 9:28-33 (the appearance of Moses and Elijah on the mountain of transfiguration), as well as Lk 16:19-31; Acts 7:55-

56; 2Cor 5:1-10; Rev 5:13; 15:2-4; 19:1-8.

## 5. How clearly we see in this event the royal authority and priestly compassion our Lord.

*Jesus Christ is our sovereign King.*

Even in his weakest moments our Lord can with kingly dominion assure the criminal of life everlasting. And surely the man inherits it!

*Jesus Christ is our compassionate High Priest.*

The two men on either side of Jesus both deserve to hang there. They are from the scum of society and nobody can as much as bat an eye at their execution. Yet one criminal gets saved and the other not - both having no religious merit. Does this not imply double standards? It seems as if one is simply excused, while the other has to bear the brunt of his trespasses and failures.

No, not a single sin of the pardoned criminal is being swept under the carpet. How do we know this? The cross in the centre assures us of this. Jesus Christ is being crucified as the guilt-bearing Substitute on behalf of the people His Father entrusted to Him before the foundation of the world. He is bearing the penalty on their behalf. Not for one second is God's perfect righteousness being done violence to! No! Atonement is being made for every single sin of each of God's loved ones.

*The criminal is one of God's elect in Christ!*

## Nico van der Walt

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