

THE WORD OF SALVATION

Lk. 23:42 And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.
43 And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.

We return to Calvary, - the scene God had meticulously planned from before time began. Without consultation with any king or emperor or government, without any notion of chance, or possibility or probability, or accident or fortune, Peter preached to the crowds in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, *Acta* 2:22 Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: 23 Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.

In the Divine will and plan, at Calvary the Saviour was nailed upon a cross with the company of the thieves on either side of Him and an audience cheering every wretch of pain inflicted on Him. “[It was] for crimes that I had done, He groaned upon the tree. Amazing pity! Grace unknown! And love beyond degree!” ... Is. 53:3 despised and rejected ... a man of sorrows ... acquainted with grief ... and yet, 4 he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows ... 5 he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities.

Why do you think God planned it for His Son to be crucified between two criminals? Why was He not crucified on His own? ... God had it planned that way for it emphasised **THE SHAME HE BORE**. ... And why was He not crucified on some other day of the year when there wouldn't have been such a crowd? Why did God make such a spectacle of His only-begotten Son on the cruel cross of Calvary?

The death Jesus was to die was an eternity in the planning for in the Book of Revelation the apostle John describes Him as the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8). Before time began, God had it prepared for Jesus to die *exactly* in accordance with the counsel and intricate will of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. ... Nothing happened that day that should not have happened. Nothing took God unawares, nor interrupted His will. Not the slightest factor had been overlooked ... The pain Jesus endured was the worst ever suffered on earth ... hanging on the middle tree, for the joy that was set before him *[He]* endured the cross, despising the shame (Heb. 12:2).

Look at the criminals on either side of the Saviour. They also had their hands and feet pierced by the nails. They also were suffering the shame of crucifixion. ... Something else they had in common ... Matthew records (27:44) that when the crowds were mocking Jesus, both the condemned thieves were mocking Jesus too. ... Who says the hearts of people about to die grow softer towards

God? It is not necessarily the case. Many who face death would do anything but turn to Christ and repent of their sins. It doesn't matter how weak they are physically, they are strong enough and determined enough to reject Him. ... These crowds, and the other two crucified men, were *enemies* of Jesus. ... In between these wicked murderers, - wholly deserving of their condemnation, - was our Saviour ... lifted up for all to behold **the shame He bore**.

THE SALVATION HE ACCOMPLISHED. Those two men had pursued careers in criminal activities which included theft and bloodshed. They were two nasty 'pieces of work' the world would be better without! No-one, - probably not even themselves, - would have said they deserved any better than to be executed on a cross. They were *hardened*, callous, brutal men ... but the law caught up with them, and they were brought before the court, the evidence was presented against them, the evilness shone from their faces as the judge condemned them. ... They scorned the law and the justice system. They knew they deserved to die the most horrible death, by crucifixion. In fact, one of them acknowledged it, we receive the due reward of our deeds (Lk. 23:41). ... This was the calibre of the company with whom Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was crucified, **Mt. 27:38** two thieves crucified ... one on the right hand, and another on the left ... **Is. 53:12** ... he was numbered with the transgressors.

Consider this though ... Both of them had access to the Saviour, and both of them saw the sign on the cross above Jesus' head, **Lk. 23:38** written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, **THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS**. ... Both of them heard the crowd's swearing and mocking words. Both of them witnessed the hatred on the faces of the people ... And both of them heard Jesus weep, and writhing in agony, and they both saw the heartache of His mother ... Yes, on either side of Jesus, - with equal access to the Saviour, - were two of the greatest sinners of the day who saw almost all that was happening to Jesus.

Each of these men had in equal measure access to the Saviour. We know He heard one of them ... had the other man cried out to Him, Jesus would have heard him too. ... The Gospel is for all who will receive. There is none exempt, and even in such dire circumstances as these, God's grace was available and at work for one of the men began to see Jesus differently. One moment he was joining in with the other crucified criminal and the crowd, but in an instant, he came to realise something special and appealing about Jesus.

Indeed, something happened that one of these men did not plan to happen. God the Father turned His eyes away from His Son and looked upon the condemned sinner ... and the wicked rascal cried out to Jesus, **Lk. 23:42** Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. ... By His grace, God had touched and softened the heart of this condemned man and he called to Jesus for salvation.

Every person has to accept or reject the salvation God offers through the Lord Jesus. Either they receive Him as their Saviour, and all the blessings He promises, or they reject Him and die in their sins. ... No-one can ever say God never gave them the opportunity for even this repentant thief on the cross saw in the crucified Jesus his only hope for eternity. He knew death was rapidly closing in on him ... and he knew he was not right to meet with God. He knew, as he was, he would be shut out of Heaven. ... Are you prepared to meet God? If He was to call you this very moment, how would you answer if He was to ask you, "Why should I let you into my Heaven?" What would you say?

There is only one door of entrance into Heaven and it is through Jesus, for He said, *Jn. 10:9* I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved. ... "There's a way back to God from the dark paths of sin, there's a door that is open and you may go in; at Calvary's cross is where you begin, when you come as a sinner to Jesus". ... On that cross the thief came "as a sinner to Jesus", and he was saved, *Lk. 23:42* Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. ⁴³ And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise. On that cross – beside the cross of Jesus – the grace of God touched that man's life, as it was ebbing away, and he was saved.

Take another look at that man, - He had Jesus on one side of him ... who did he have on the other side? *He had no-one*. His murdering comrades had deserted him. ... Religion certainly did not want him! The crowds did not want him either. There is no mention of his mother and father at his cross. ... *Look* at him ... he had Jesus on one side, no-one on his other side, a dreadful past behind him, and certain death in a lost eternity ahead of him. ... He respected neither the law of God nor the law of man. There was nothing to commend him for he was receiving the punishment he deserved for the crimes he had committed. ... But look again at Jesus. In the eyes of the onlookers, He was as powerless as those two thieves. Yet, on the cross Jesus had the power to save!

Looking at the Saviour from another perspective ... In *Mt. 27:42*, and *Mk. 15:31*, and *Lk. 23:35* the multitudes mocked Him, *Mt. 27:42* He saved others; himself he cannot save. ... Why was that? ... Because if He had saved Himself, He would have saved no-one else!

In the midst of His pain and agony on the cross, God so loved this sin-sick world He gave His only-begotten and eternally-beloved Son so that even when this cruel, wicked, hell-deserving sinner repented of his sin, *Jesus forgave him*, with the promise he would never perish in the eternal torment of Hell but would enjoy everlasting life in Heaven!

What a promise only God can make! What a hope only Christ can bring! Jesus saved him before the lost eternity engulfed him ... He saved him in those last few moments, before the Lord Jesus bowed His head and died ... before He declared, *It is finished* (Jn. 19:30). The man who along with his fellow-criminal had mocked Jesus ... the man who was being punished for his sins *Jesus saved him!* He didn't deserve it ... but *Jesus saved him!*

He left the splendour of Heaven, knowing His destiny,
 Was the lonely hill of Golgotha,
 There to lay down His life for me. ...
 Even in death He remembered the thief hanging by His side,
 Then He spoke of love and compassion
 And He took Him to Paradise.
 If that isn't love then the ocean is dry, there's no stars in the sky ...

The thief on the cross recognised his sin, and that was his first step towards salvation. You cannot be saved unless you confess you are a sinner in need of God's forgiveness, - *you must repent!* That was what the thief realised. Earlier, Jesus had said, Jn. 5:32 I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance ... and this man was by everyone's estimation, - even his own, - a sinner ... but he turned into a repentant sinner on the cross, - next to Jesus. The judge in the courtroom declared him guilty, but when he repented, Jesus declared Him righteous!

Look again at what this man saw that he had never seen before. He was facing death and he was fearful of what was on the other side, Dost not thou fear God (Lk. 23:40)? He admitted his guilt in front of his fellow murderer. He realised the filthiness of his life without God, ⁴⁰ Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds. In contrast to his own sinfulness, he saw the sinlessness of Christ, this man hath done nothing amiss. ... And taking his eyes off his fellow-condemned he focussed his gaze to the One on the cross in the centre, and the first word he said to Jesus was Lord (v.42) ... He recognised the excellency and the majesty of the Saviour.

This same Saviour he had heard a few moments earlier pray for His Father to forgive the sins of those who were crucifying Him, - just a few words Jesus spoke but it was a sermon that touched this thief's heart. And the thief implored the Saviour, Lord, remember me ... Who would want to remember such a man?! ... In fact, Luke does not even record this man's name! Nevertheless, Jesus knew who he was, and knew his name! This criminal pleaded with the Lord, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. He believed in a future with Christ, and by faith he saw beyond the crucified Saviour to the crowned and glorified King.

The shame Jesus bore, the salvation He accomplished ... THE SATISFACTION HE BROUGHT. Nearing the close of his earthly life, this man confessed, he believed in the Saviour, and he trusted Him for eternity. ... The crosses would only have been a few feet apart, so Jesus would not have missed anything the man said. Even in such circumstances God was at work for the man had the Holy Spirit as his Teacher and the Saviour as his Listener. Nothing he said or did went unnoticed! ... And Christ was ready to save as this thieving murderer simply confessed his sin and believed. ... On the cross, - with all His pain and agony, Jesus interceded on behalf of this man so he would be saved. ... And, in a moment, the destination of this man became Heaven instead of Hell! A short time afterwards, the soul of that man, - now saved by grace, - left his earthly body and went to be eternally present with his Saviour.

Jesus did more for him in one moment than he could have done for himself. Jesus did more for him than he or anyone could ever have done. ... And something else, salvation proved even greater than he was able to understand ... He trusted Christ to save him some time in the future, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. But Jesus confirmed his salvation took immediate effect, *To day* shalt thou be with me in paradise.

The very moment he believed, this thief on the cross beside Jesus was *safe because he was saved!* He believed in Christ as his personal Saviour and Lord. He placed his future into the hands of Jesus ... and he was saved – no baptism, no church membership, no catalogue of good works. ... Christ saved him as he was, a repentant sinner. That is the only type of sinner Jesus saves. He doesn't save the righteous, but He saves the person who turns to Him and leaves their sins behind. ... And when the thief died, he went straight from the cross into the glorious presence of God. When the soldiers came and broke his legs to speed up his demise, he *walked* through the valley of death ... and Jesus was waiting for him on the other side. ...

But, what about his former gang member? Yes, up until his last breath, he mocked Christ and would not believe. He had the same opportunity to be saved but he squandered it, and when he died he entered eternity alone and without hope. He left Christ behind, - he did not want anything to do with the Saviour, - ... and once he had gone over the threshold of death, there was no way back. He would never meet Jesus again, until Judgment Day. He would never again have the opportunity to believe for he had left it too late!

As it was then, so it continues today, to get into Heaven, Jesus is the only way ... to believe in Him as your Saviour, to receive Him as your Master, and to have Him with you through your life until He takes you home.

Christian, enjoy this salvation. Enjoy it and speak often about it, as a witness to the Gospel.

What, though, if you profess Christ and the message of the cross bores you? What if you do not see the tears Jesus wept for you, the blood He shed for you ... what if you do not feel something of how His heart was breaking? ... If that describes you, *look again to Jesus!* I urge you, using the words of Peter, **II Peter 1:10** give diligence to make your calling and election sure ... for the Saviour warned, **Mt. 7:23** Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? **23** And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me.

The thief looked at the One on the middle cross, **Lk. 23:42** And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. **43** And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise. ... **The shame our Saviour bore ... the salvation He accomplished ... and the satisfaction He brings** to all who believe in Him and are saved.