

THE WORD OF SALVATION

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

It was a holiday in Jerusalem more than nineteen centuries ago and great multitudes from out of town thronged the streets of the city. These strangers had come to celebrate the Passover.

Rome was going to execute three prisoners that day. The reason for the execution on that particular day was because the largest possible number of spectators was desired. She wanted to let her subjects see what it meant to rebel against the government.

On the way to Calvary the procession went along the main street of the city so that all might see the criminals and be warned against a similar fate. As they passed along, the crowd fell in behind them, with a view to seeing the bloody show. Even the priests forgot their dignity and high office and walked along with the rabble mob, shouting their imprecations and cruel jests. The centurion marched imperiously ahead. The soldiers were on either side of the condemned men and behind them, sometimes roughly pushing the crowd aside, and sometimes with their scourges and their curses urging the three men with the crosses on their backs to get along faster. In the crowd, however, there were a few of the women who had known Christ Jesus and loved Him, and they followed after Him, weeping and wailing. Their tears and their cries were a strange contrast to the curses and blows of the soldiers and the jeers of the spectators.

Just as they were passing out of the gate of the city toward Golgotha, the Lord Jesus, weakened by the loss of blood through the brutal scourging which He had endured, stumbled and fell under the weight of His cross. Seeing that it was impossible for Him to carry it, the soldiers laid hold upon a proselyte Jew from North Africa, Simon of Cyrene, who had come up to celebrate the Passover, and who was standing in the line of march, and ordered him, much against his will, to take up the cross of Christ and carry it for Him. We wonder if Simon said anything to Christ, or if the Saviour said anything to him, as they went along carrying the cross. Did Simon get a glance from the face of Christ which touched his heart and, before they reached the Place of the Skull, made him glad that he had been able to help Him with His cross? Whether that was so or not, forever afterwards Simon of Cyrene will be a name for those who in this world helped Christ to bear His cross. So the procession passed on, out of the gate of the city, and up the steep hill to the Place of the Skull.

When they reached the well-known place of crucifixion, the condemned men were stripped of their clothing. The transverse planks were nailed to the posts, and the doomed men were stretched upon them. Well-hardened to the terrible duty, the soldiers went quickly and methodically about their tasks, driving nails through the hands of the prisoners, and then, drawing up their knees so that their feet were flat against the posts, fastened the feet with spikes. Half-way down the post was a peg known as the seat which gave a degree of support to the body; otherwise the weight of the body would have torn it from the cross.

When they saw Him at length lifted up on His cross between the two robbers, the enemies of Christ sent up a great shout of exultation, and, milling around the cross, coming as near to it as they dared, shaking their fists at Him and making sham obeisance before Him, they mocked the dying King of Grief. "Ha! destroyer of the temple and builder of it in three days, save thyself and come down from the cross!" "He saved others, Himself He cannot save!" "If Thou art the Christ of God, His Chosen, then why does God not save Thee?" "You worked great miracles. Now give us one more miracle! You raised Lazarus from the grave; you restored the widow's son; you brought the daughter of the ruler back to life; now are you not able to save yourself? You healed the woman with an issue of blood; why don't you stop the flow of your own blood? You opened the eyes of the blind; you healed the paralytic; you cured ten lepers; why can't you do something for yourself? Come on now!

Give us just one more miracle! Come down from the cross, and we will believe!" Even the soldiers, usually indifferent to the fate of men on the cross, got up from the ground where they were casting lots for His garments and began to mock Him, bowing grotesquely before Him, holding a cup of vinegar up to His lips and then withdrawing it from Him, and shouting, "If you are the King of the Jews, as you say, why don't you save yourself?"

The careers of the robbers were brought to an inglorious but deserved end. They were suffering and dying upon crosses for their crimes. Christ Jesus, Who was crucified with them, was utterly unlike them in that He had never done a wrong. His entire life had been filled with deeds of kindness and mercy. Even at the brink of eternity the robbers joined the other enemies of Christ in shamefully mocking Him.

When one of the robbers looked from his cross to Christ he saw perfect innocence, and that softened his heart. Ceasing to rail and to mock, a new and strange look came over his distorted features. He ceased to taunt Christ while his comrade in crime kept on reviling Him. Breaking his own silence, he called across the body of Christ to his companion and rebuked him, saying, "Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we received the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss." Thus he admitted that it was the due reward of his deeds that he was receiving. Looking to Christ he prayed, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." When he thus threw himself in simple faith upon the mercy of the Lord, Christ answered him saying, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise." Thus our Lord swung open the gates of heaven and the dying, penitent and believing robber entered.

I. He Wanted To Be Saved.

He was a lost man and knew it. He was not lost because he had sinned against society, but because he had rejected the only Saviour. He had lived a godless life. He had delayed the matter of his salvation a long time. He was dying. Hanging on a cross, his life was ebbing away. Death was just a very short time away, and he was desirous of going to heaven.

II. He Was Saved.

As to how he was saved, let us observe the method from two standpoints:

1. Negatively.

He was not saved by promising the Lord to live a better life. For him there was no escape from death; therefore, he did not go through the foolish procedure of saying, "Lord, if I get down from this cross, I am going to live a better life." That sort of a promise usually is not worth the snap of your finger.

He was not saved by enumerating a list of his good deeds. Many lost sinners will interrupt one who is witnessing to the saving power of Christ in order to tell what fine persons they have been and enumerate a list of the works of the flesh. But this robber did not do that. He certainly did not get into the family of God by any works of righteousness or by any years of service. He had no chance whatever to serve Christ because he died before the sun went down over the western horizon.

He was not saved by being baptized, by joining a church or by partaking of the Lord's Supper. If a man is saved, he ought to be baptized, and, if he loves the Lord as he should, he will be baptized. If a man is saved, he will want to join a church. But, these things do not save.

2. Positively.

(1) He acknowledged his sin.

He did not hesitate to confess that he was a sinner. He confessed that he deserved to die.

- (2) He acknowledged the deity of Christ.
He had heard Christ talk with the Heavenly Father. He had seen the marvelous spirit in which the Saviour prayed for the men who had nailed Him to the cross. Turning to Christ, he cried, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." He not only confessed the sinlessness of Christ, but also that He was God.
- (3) He accepted Christ as his Saviour.
This man had nothing to commend him to the favor of Christ. He was a hardened sinner. He stood, as it were, upon a pin-point of time. His past was dark, his future was hopeless, and there was only one ray of light and this he received. He had nothing but faith in Christ and that was all he needed to obtain salvation and to be admitted to heaven. He had faith in the person of Christ, the power of Christ and the mercy of Christ. When he repented of his sin and received Christ as his Saviour, he received salvation and entered upon life eternal. To him the Saviour promptly, personally and positively said, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise."

During the Civil War a soldier was shot to pieces. Another soldier stopped and placed water on his head. "What more can I do?" he asked. In reply the soldier said, "I would have you write a letter to my father which I shall sign." This he did. The request was that the letter should be taken to the father if the living soldier survived. The war was over and the letter was taken to the home of the famous judge, the father of the dead soldier. The soldier who carried the letter was in rags and the servant refused to admit him. He waited until the judge came out. He was pushed to one side, as if he were only a beggar. Then the father was shown the signature of his son, and it was then that he threw his arms around the soldier and asked him into his house saying, "You may have anything my money can buy and what my influence can procure." It was the name of the son that unlocked the heart of the judge and opened the door of his home to the soldier. This is true in our case. It is the name of Jesus Christ that opens the heart of God and the door of heaven to us.

To reject the one and only Saviour is wrong. It is injurious to the one who does it, depriving him of the greatest joy there is and closing the door of heaven in his face. It has a terribly destructive influence on others, turning them away from Christ and pointing them toward an eternal hell. Besides, it is unfair to Christ. Because He died for us on the cross, He deserves our souls, our lives and our all. I plead with you to receive Him now as your personal Saviour.