

THE WORD OF ASSURANCE

"And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Luke 23:43.

It was a holiday in Jerusalem more than nineteen centuries ago and great multitudes of out-of-town people, who had come to celebrate the Passover, thronged the streets. Rome was going to execute three prisoners on that particular day 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 most frequented streets of the city so that all might see the criminals. 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 with their scourges and their curses urging the three men with the crosses on their backs to walk faster. In the crowd were a few of the women who had known and loved Christ, and they were weeping and wailing. Their tears and their cries were a strange contrast to the blows and curses of the soldiers and the jeers of the spectators.

When they reached the peak of the steep hill, they nailed the three condemned men to their respective crosses and then placed the crosses in the holes in the ground which they prepared for them. When Pilate gave orders to crucify Christ between the two malefactors or bandits, unknown to himself he was fulfilling the prophetic Word. Seven hundred years before this command was given, God had declared through His prophet that His Son should be "numbered with the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12). In diabolical malice and relentless hatred they crucified Christ with a notorious criminal on each side. 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. 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 Saviour.

The robbers who were crucified with Christ joined the multitude in casting contempt upon Him. Among the cruel taunts to which Christ listened were these: "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 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 weary hours dragged on, and the reproaches were still heard. On the cross to the left was hanging a criminal, who was a fearful example of the terrible power of sin. He was on the very brink of eternity. His moments were fast fleeting. He had only a very short time left to get right with God. But instead of employing these moments in a wise manner by repenting of his sins, he wasted them by looking at the fellow-sufferer next to him, and speaking in a taunting and mocking way to a man who had never done him any harm said, "If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us." In those words he was simply urging self-preservation. Instead of a plea, this prayer was actually a command. The word "save" here is an imperative, and is the same word which the soldiers used in derision. This was unparalleled turpitude. Think of it -- a man in his dying hour deriding the suffering Saviour! O what a demonstration of human depravity and of the native enmity of the carnal mind against God! What a pity that a man should go to hell reproaching Christ and commanding Him what to do!

These two robbers were equally near to Christ. Both of them saw and heard all that transpired during those fateful six hours. Both were notoriously wicked; both were suffering acutely; both were dying; and both urgently needed forgiveness. Yet one of them died as he had lived -- hardened and impenitent.

The other robber on the cross to the right of Christ turned to his companion in crime and crucifixion, and rebuked him for continuing to shout his maledictions upon the Saviour. He said, "Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss." Thus he acknowledged his guilt and the justice of his punishment.

It was not a small thing that this bandit did when he rebuked his coarse companion in crime, who, like himself, had been living in open defiance of God and man. He admitted that the punishment which he was receiving was the due reward of his deeds. This vile and wretched man did not offer any excuses for his wasted life of indulgence, sin and crime. He readily acknowledged that he was justly judged, condemned and punished.

While suffering the pangs of death, he looked from his cross to Christ and there he saw perfect innocence. Upon observing how Christ acted in love toward and prayed for His enemies, he readily defended Him saying, "this man hath done nothing amiss."

This robber did not have any hope that either he or Christ would be delivered from the cross. He did not even ask to be taken down from his high place of suffering. Having ceased to think of any prolongation of his earthly life, and knowing that he had only a few hours to live, in the extremity of his need he decided to call upon the Lord for help. He was fully convinced that life would not terminate with death and the tomb. After looking into Christ's face and listening to His prayer: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do," and reading the inscription above the cross, "This is the King of the Jews," he was convinced of the truth that here is that King of the everlasting kingdom. Conscious of his absolute helplessness and believing in the sinless Christ, who possessed great wisdom and power, and wanting to be saved from his sins, he besought the Lord to show pity, saying, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." Thus he evinced his belief in the future triumph of Christ. It is doubtful if there is a more marvelous example of faith in the entire Bible or in all secular literature.

When this ruffian thus threw himself in simple faith upon the mercy of the Lord, Christ gave him a most satisfying answer saying, "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." To his amazement, Christ assured him that his sins were forgiven and that he was a fit subject for His kingdom. There was no question or doubt about His statement. It was clear, positive and definite. That morning he was justly condemned, but before the sun had set, he was pardoned, cleansed and saved. Christ's gift to him was complete forgiveness of his sins, the assurance that life continues beyond the grave, the guarantee of a speedy entrance into Paradise and the pledge of fellowship in the joy of His Lord. Christ thus made it clear that all of those who received Him would be forgiven and saved instantly. At the death of all believers in Christ their disembodied spirits are received immediately into a place of happiness and a state of blissful rest. The most enjoyable thing about Paradise is an abiding fellowship with Christ.

This robber was aware of his sinfulness in rejecting Christ, recognized that his sin merited punishment and was desirous of being saved. As to how he was saved, let us observe the method from the negative standpoint. 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 promise is worthless. This man was not saved by any works of righteousness or by any years of service. After his conversion, he did not have any opportunity to engage in the service of Christ because he died before the sun went down over the western horizon. He could not walk in the paths of righteousness because his feet were nailed to the cross. He could not perform any good works because his hands were nailed to the cross. He was not saved by being baptized because he died before he was taken down from the cross. He was not saved by joining a church. If a man is saved, he ought to be baptised, and, if he loves the Lord as he should, he will be baptised. If a man is saved, he will want to join a church. But, these things do not save. Christ alone saves.

Let us note from a positive standpoint how this man was saved. Aware of his sinfulness, he acknowledged his sin and admitted that he deserved the punishment which he was receiving. He recognized the deity of Christ. He exercised faith in the person, the power and the mercy of Christ. When he repented of his sin and received Christ as his Saviour, he instantly received salvation or eternal life. To him the Saviour promptly, personally and positively said, "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Even now we stand amazed at both the greatness of that robber's faith and the richness of Christ's mercy.

In the statement of Christ, "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise," is the profound truth of New Testament teaching that the soul can and does have divine assurance of sins forgiven, the possession of eternal life now and the promise of life hereafter. Some, who do not believe what God has said in His Word, and others, who have never been saved, boldly say that a person cannot know that he is saved here and now. What a pity that any person would deny the experience of another or dispute what God has said in His Word about that which he does not know anything!

To reject Christ as Saviour is wrong. It is tragic to the ones who do it, depriving them of the greatest joy there is and closing the door of heaven in their own faces. It has a terribly injurious effect and destructive influence on others, turning them away from Christ and pointing them toward an eternal hell. Besides, it is unfair to Christ the only Saviour. Because He died for us on the cross, He deserves our souls, our lives, our influence and our all. Unsaved friend, won't you receive Him now as your personal Saviour?