



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Luke 23: 32-43

“Christ Among the Bandits”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] The Scripture reading for today is Luke chapter 23 and verse 32 through 43. And our subject is, “Christ among the bandits.” Some of you may remember that some years ago, I don’t remember exactly when, I preached on this topic in Believers Chapel, but some of the topics that I preach on are my favorite ones and so in this period of time in which I’m giving messages of a different type each Sunday morning for a while, this one I think will fit in very well. Christ among the bandits, and we’re reading Luke chapter 23 verse 32 through verse 43. The evangelist writes,

“And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death. And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. Then said Jesus, Father, release them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots. And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Messiah, the chosen of God. And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him, and offering him vinegar, And saying, if thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself. And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. And one of the

malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, if thou be Messiah, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, 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. And he said unto Jesus, Lord; remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.”

And there are just two points I'd like to say about that particular verse. In the original text there are variant readings among the manuscripts or copies. And some of them do have, “Lord remember me when Thou comest into the kingdom.” But those that are generally more highly regarded today have something a bit different. “And he said unto Jesus, Jesus, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.” Now one might think at first that this is a lowering of the dignity of the one to whom the prayer is made. But if you reflect for just a moment, you'll see that that is not true. Because in the first place, any one who could remember me so far as life after death is concerned in the sense that he is using the term remember me, that is do something for me, has to be more than simply a man. So it's obvious that only the Lord could do something like that. And furthermore when he says, “Jesus remember me when you come in your kingdom,” and the kingdom we are taught all through Holy Scripture is the Kingdom of God. Then of course he in no way is lowering the dignity of our Lord when he says, “Jesus remember me when you come in your kingdom.” Of course also if we remember the term was given to him because he saves his people from their sins, we would remember that there is a dignity that is connected with that name that is truly significant.

Verse 43, “And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise.” May the Lord bless this reading of his word and let's bow together in a moment of prayer.

[Prayer] Father we are so grateful to Thee that we have the opportunity to gather together to sing together hymns that give honor and glory to our Lord and Savior Jesus

Christ that magnify the name of our Triune God. We thank Thee for the reality that Thou hast brought into our lives, delivering us from our sins, their guilt, their penalty, and bringing us into the possession of a relationship to Thee that is described in Thy word as Sonship, children of God, priests of God, magnificent exaltation of sinners. Lord, how could we ever give Thee the thanks appropriate for that which Thou hast done for us? We thank Thee for the word of God and its ministry to us. And we thank Thee for the Holy Spirit who has used that word to bring enlightenment to us and to grant us faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We give Thee thanks, we praise Thy name.

We thank Thee for each one in this audience, for those who know Thee as their own savior and for others who may be seeking, we pray for them. We ask Lord Thy blessing upon this church, upon its leadership, upon the elders upon the deacons, upon the members and friends and visitors here with us today particularly. May the ministry of the word of God be fruitful in the lives of all of us. Give us listening ears and open hearts to the Scriptures.

We thank Thee for this country that Thou hast placed us in and we pray Thy blessing upon it as well and upon our leadership, the President and others. We pray for the whole church of Christ, wherever the Lord is proclaimed in this city, in this state in the United States and to the four corners of the earth, wherever believing people gather in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Oh God may Thy presence be with them and may there be blessing. May the church be strengthened and edified and enlarged as it should please Thee. We look forward to the day when our Lord shall come again and we pray Lord that Thou wilt hasten that day if it should please Thee.

We pray for the sick, we ask Thy blessing upon them. For those who are in our calendar of concern, who have requested our prayers, we especially pray for them. Lord, minister to them out of the riches of divine power and grace. May their needs be met. We commit our meeting today to Thee and the meeting around the Lord's Table this

evening and the baptismal service that follows. May our Savior be exalted, in the word and in the ordinances for Jesus' sake. Amen.

[Message] The subject for today as we turn to Luke chapter 23 is, “Christ among the bandits.” The dying thief, the one of whom we are speaking, although a criminal, was perhaps the noblest theologian of Jesus' day. A man who at the conclusion of his journey of faith, came to know more than Peter and see more than John. At the moment of his death, the dying thief stands out as a magnificent believing man who has comprehended that which the Apostles themselves and others so far as we know had largely failed to comprehend.

There are lots of questions we would like to ask about the thieves on the cross. The reticence of the biblical narrative is striking. Fortunately, if you are interested in tradition and stories which have actually little historical validity so far as we know, there is information about their birth, about their youth, about their growth, but so far as the Scriptures are concerned, very little is said about them. Tradition says that their names were Zothan and Comatot other tradition also says that their names were Dismas and Gestes, and some say Gestas. Still other tradition says their names were Titus and Dumachus. And so it appears evident that we don't really know their names at all.

What is so striking to me about this is that it would be the normal thing for someone writing a story like this, the gospel, to fill in lots of detail. But the gospels center attention on the things that are really important. And so consequently we don't have answers to the questions we would like to ask. The evangelist, Luke is absorbed in the spiritual meaning of what is taking place. The picture as anyone knows who thinks about it for a moment or two is profoundly typical or illustrative, it's illustrative of men. We have God's man, the Lord Jesus Christ, in between the two thieves. We have on one side of him the man who responds to the gospel, accepts the message and becomes a

believing man. And on the other hand we have a man who so far as the account goes, rejects our Lord and persists in that rejection.

We have also an illustration of the way of life. Paul tells us, “For by grace we are saved through faith, that not of ourselves, it’s the gift of God not of works lest anyone should boast. And this particular incident certainly illustrates that because this is a man who did not have any works and yet by the grace of God, Jesus says to him, “Today thou shall be with me in paradise.”

In one sense too, it’s illustrative of the way of death, and the way of death simply because in the case of the other thief, there is a constant rejection and a final rejection so far as we know of the claims of Christ. And John the apostle writes in the third chapter of his gospel, “He that believeth on him is not condemned but he that believeth not is condemned already because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”

The three crosses of illustrate some very significant theological points. When I first became a Christian, one of the first things that I read was the story of the three crosses pictured in vivid form in one of the books that I was reading. Arthur T. Pierson has a little book in which there’s an account of the three crosses. The crosses are drawn, and on one of the crosses are the words, “In not on” written on the cross. And then the central cross upon which our Lord was hanging there are the words, “on not in.” And then on the third, on the other side of our Lord, the little preposition in and the preposition on. And so we have, “in not on,” “on not in,” “in and on.” And the point as the explanation was made was simply that in the case of the dying thief that we are discussing, sin was in him but it was not on him because having believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, the benefits of our Lord’s saving work are reckoned to him, imputed to him. In the case of our Lord, sin was upon him, as he died for the sins of his people, but sin was not in him being the holy harmless undefiled Son of God. But in the case of the third, the other thief hanging on the other side, the prepositions that characterize him are

on and in. In other words, he was a sinner, and he also because he does not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ must also bear his sin, sin being upon him.

You know in an interesting way, I think it was in the account, it's been many years since I read this, but as you look at those three crosses, you can in a sense you can see a little picture of the direction a person goes when he is saved. Because he comes as a man who is an unbelieving man but he finds his salvation through the central figure, the Lord Jesus Christ. So sin being on him and in him, he finds deliverance through the one in the center and becomes as the dying thief that we discuss today, one who has sin in him but not on him. So even the direction in which one looks one has a kind of picture of what happens when the Lord Jesus Christ ministry is explained to us in the word of God.

Well now there are two thieves hanging by the side of the Lord and I'd like to say just a point or two concerning the unrepentant thief. We read in verse 32 and verse 33, “And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death. And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.” And then in verse 39 we read, “And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, if thou be Christ, save thyself and us.” Now this is the malefactor who so far as the account goes, does not come to repentance. I think it's so interesting that our Lord dies between two criminals. That might seem strange to us, but the more you read the word of God, the more appropriate it becomes. When the Lord Jesus was born, he was born as a little baby lying amidst shepherds, amidst the wise men, magi, the temple guests, but when he left this earth, he was hanging on a cross in the midst of bandits. Isn't that interesting?

In other words, he dies with those who have been exposed as illegal operatives in the society of the Lord's day. These were Simon pure bandits too. The chances are that these were individuals who were really patriots in order to work toward the deliverance of the people from Roman rule, they had engaged in things that were contrary to Roman

law. And is often the case, individuals who are patriots seeking to overthrow the particular government under which they may find themselves sooner or later are forced in order to survive, to do illegal things. We see so much of that today that requires no illustration at all. But in this case, these individuals were probably of that kind. So, they were members of the bands of Jewish rebels and marauders who were so common at the time.

Now, there are two sides to this scene that ought to be noted too. Pilate the Roman procurator is an individual who sins by putting the Lord Jesus on a par with the malefactors. Isn't it interesting how the world in general has the Lord Jesus move around its own arrogant ego? If you will look at the way in which the Christian faith is treated in our society, in our newspapers in the public events, in the thinking of the men who are often in the forefront in the thinking in the world of which we are a part in this country. You will find just exactly that that the world has the Lord Jesus move around its own arrogant ego.

There's a kind of delicious mockery in this incident too. That Pilate has the Lord Jesus crucified between two thieves and then puts above the cross, "This is Jesus the king of the Jews." And so Pilate would like for the Jewish people of the day and he was no friend of them and they were no friends of his, he wants them to in this mocking way, realize who's really in charge in the city of Jerusalem. And so he mocks them by putting the superscription over the cross, "This is Jesus, the king of the Jews." And further more, he gives him his subjects, because a king should have subjects. And his subjects are the two thieves on the side of him. It's Pilate saying to the people of his day, "This is the kind of king you have, we're crucifying him, we're crucifying him as a criminal, and this is the kind of subjects he has in his kingdom." Of course, the Jewish people did not like that, but Pilate got his own kind of fun out of it.

But the Lord God is the one behind all that is transpiring and I'm sure it's no surprise to Pilate now, but it certainly was a surprise to him when he found out that it was

not he who was determining these events, but it was the Lord God in Heaven who was determining these events even then. Pilate had written, “This is Jesus, the king of the Jews.” The Jews requested that he should change the wording, because they didn’t like this criminal in their eyes to be called the king of the Jews naturally. But Pilate said, “What I have written I have written.” And if I were writing something now, and I cannot write Scripture, I would like to add a little text there in which we have, “What Pilate has written, he has not written.” It was God that wrote through the Roman mannequin and actually put those words up there. “What I have written I have written.” And, “This is Jesus king of the Jews,” was God’s way of controlling precisely what was happening at that scene. It was truly Jesus the king of the Jews. Pilate of course, did not know it.

Now, the Lord Jesus makes reference to the fact that he was reckoned with the transgressors. He turns to the passage in the Old Testament in Isaiah 53 and applies it to himself. And says in effect that we must fulfill Scripture and Isaiah has said, “He was reckoned with the transgressors.” Even in the event of the cross, the fulfillment of the prophets takes place. It is true; he was with the transgressors in his death. But we sometimes forget that this is the inevitable company of the Lord Jesus Christ. And why does God who controls the events, why does he do this? Why does he put the Lord Jesus on the cross in the midst of two transgressors of the law? Well for the simple reason that it’s important for you and I be humbled to realize that we are no better than the two thieves who are hanging by the side of the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, this is his inevitable company. “Call him Jesus; he shall save his people from their sins.”

Crucifixion was a horrible way to die, the Romans made it horrible. The things that were done at crucifixions were the worst things that could be done to individuals. The Romans went out of their way to make it cruel and brutal. And there was nothing in the ancient world that was feared any more than to be crucified by the Romans. And so the crucifixion takes place. Things often became so bad because individuals who were crucified wanted in their few remaining hours to take out their hatred of the people about

them in any way they possibly could and so they cursed their particular place on the cross, the fact that they were there. They cursed the people who were crucifying them; they would curse the Roman authorities. They would curse the Roman soldiers. In fact, in some crucifixions they did so much cursing that those who were crucifying them would have to cut out their tongue. And they would do that so they could not curse. It was not a pleasant place to be but there was always a crowd about to see the suffering. And when a person was put on the cross, he was placed on the cross first, on the long central beam of the cross. He was placed there and his arms were stretched out on the ground and then the men took up the cross having dug a hole, and then they would plunge it in to the hole. And of course the individuals who were on it were hanging by being impaled upon the cross, and there would be a tearing of the flesh and a spurting of the blood as a result of it. So that will give you some idea of the men and the suffering that were going on.

This man was called a malefactor. Was a patriot probably, he had much patriotic fervor no doubt. But as a result of being a patriot and not having the access to food and the things that were required to live, he began to plunder. The Romans had arrested him and now they were putting him to death. The other man, the man who comes to faith no doubt was of the same character and probably in the light of what transpires a man of unusual abilities, unusual gifts. I think there was a Latin proverb that goes something like this, “*corruptio optimi es pessima*,” the corruption of the best is the worst. And we know that from our society, that the man who has exceedingly wonderful gifts if he becomes corrupt, his corruption is the worst kind of corruption. We have lots of that today. He is a man who had broken the law, but he discovers that when you break the law the law breaks you. And so the two men are hanging upon the cross.

One of them is an unbeliever and Matthew tells us very interestingly I think, that in the beginning as they were hanging on the cross, both of the thieves railed upon the Lord Jesus. That is both of them spoke out against him, cursed him, both of these, both

the one who comes to faith and the one who does not. But one of them continues, and we read in verse 39, of our section that we’ve read, “One of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, if thou be Messiah, save thyself and us.”

Now we turn just to give our attention to the thief who did repent. You know it’s almost like two men who hear the same sermon. Here is the Lord Jesus standing or hanging on the cross, on one side of him is an individual who sees everything that transpires who hears all the words that are spoken and on the other side, one hanging upon the cross by the Lord Jesus, he sees the things that are happening, hears all the words spoken, he knows the situation just like the other one. But the ministry comes to one that does not come to the other. Just as when a man stands in the pulpit and preaches the word of God, there are individuals who respond and there are individuals who hear the same thing but who do not respond. And here we have a man who heard the sermon. He’s in agony; his eyes are on the unreviling Jesus. He hears him say, “Father release them for they know not what they do.” That must have struck the men about the cross and especially this man with great power. No one hanging on the cross being crucified by the Romans would say words like this. But this man does in the center of them.

And the heart of this great long bound man of magnificent mind, there’s no question about that as you look through this incident and think about it, of piercing perception, keen and incisive speech, who could ever say anything better than Lord or Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom? Magnificent, even the apostles didn’t say things like that. A man of great courage, he can stand out in the midst of this crowd, all filled with hate against our Lord and the ministry that he represented, both Romans and the Jews. So he had a noble kind of courage, and a brilliant kind of foresight as he looked into the future. And one can as you examine him and think about him, reflecting upon him, realize that the heart of this great man begins to stir as he’s

hanging on the cross like someone has said, like the arctic snows begin to stir in the spring when the sun begins to fall upon them.

And I'd like to suggest to you that you can trace his birth, spiritual birth, you can trace his spiritual birth in the words that he expresses in the account. And first of all, when the other malefactor continues to rail upon the Lord Jesus, and he had been doing that so Matthew tells us, he turns to the other one and he says, “Doest not thou fear God seeing that thou art in the same condemnation?” In other words there has gripped his heart now something that is entirely new to him, it's the fear of God. And the fear of God is an evidence of life stirring within the heart of this man in efficacious grace. As you well know, in the New Testament, the writers of the New Testament and the Old Testament set forth very strongly the effectual grace of God in the conversion of sinners. And here is the beginning of it in this man. He turns to the other thief, “Don't you fear God? You are in the same condemnation.” And furthermore he says, “And we indeed justly.” So he recognizes the justice of God, he also looking within, his conscious stirs. And the two, the fear of God and his conscious are like two eternities that have come to life within his heart. God is the great holy and just God and we are sinners.

Thinking of the Lord Jesus, he goes on to say in the 41st verse, “And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.” Now, I'd like to suggest to you that this statement that he hath done nothing amiss, spoken in that crowd was something that crowd was something that was absolutely unique to that crowd, because the priests and the priestly crowd had been shouting their obscenities at our Lord, they had been calling upon him to come down from the cross, save himself, if he's the chosen of God. The soldiers had been mocking him saying the same kind of thing, “If you be the king of the Jews, save yourself.” And so all of them were shouting terms like this but here is one man in the crowd who speaks out and who says, “This man hath done nothing amiss.” And in so saying that he has condemned the crowd about him. He puts himself alone in that crowd. Stands out with the noble

courage I mentioned earlier, able to say a word for the Lord Jesus in the midst of the enemies. The same thing that you young people sitting up here in your school, you young men and young women are called upon to do in the midst of the society in which you find yourself, to stand and give testimony to the grace of God in our Lord Jesus Christ.

He sees God, he sees God's justice, he sees his holiness. “This man has done nothing amiss,” that individual is not far from the Kingdom of God, his repentance actually has come. His mind has been changed, and as we shall see, it issues in the kinds of things that express the fact that the new life has come to him. He turns to the Lord Jesus and he says, “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom.” We have no indication that this man had any previous theological instruction. He certainly had not been to Believers Chapel. Ah, if he'd been to Believers Chapel he wouldn't be on that cross, and he'd know a lot about the Kingdom of God I would hope and he certainly would know something about the Lord Jesus as the only Savior.

But hanging upon the cross, looking about, I'm just going to suggest, we don't know it precisely, I have to speculate a little bit so far as the details are concerned, but he would have seen the superscription, this is Jesus the King of the Jews. He would have heard some of the things that had been spoken. He would have heard our Lord say, “Father release them for they know not what they do.” And so I suggest to you that listening to the crowd shout out “if he's the messiah, let him come down from the cross.” “If he's the king of Israel, come down from the cross.” So he would have had these terms thrown around, Messiah, king, King of the Jews, he would have had ample opportunity to reflect. And then in comparing the things that he hears and sees with the one who is hanging by his side and noting his face and noting his response would surely have opportunity to think about his own condition and think about this individual, this remarkable person who is standing by his side. He no doubt would have heard

something of the rumors of the miracles that he had preformed and the remarkable messages that he had given.

So I suggest then that listening, seeing the superscription, he comes to a deeper experience of repentance and faith, he regards the Lord Jesus as the almighty God, only he could remember him. He saw him as a king to because he says, “Remember me when you come in your kingdom.” And so the faith of this man, this malefactor hanging by the side of the Lord Jesus Christ, reverses the judgment of the court, the political court, reverses the judgment of the High Priest, who had condemned him also to death. It reverses the judgment of the mob about, reverses the judgment of his own friends who may have been standing about, and seeing by his side the majesty of the Messiah, the King of Israel, the true Messiah, the true King of Israel, he calls out, “Jesus remember me when you come in your kingdom.”

He hears the Lord Jesus say, “My God my God why hast Thou forsaken me?” But he recognizes that’s not a cry of dereliction, that’s not a cry of desolation, that’s a cry which he may not have fully understood yet, but he may have understood at least that there was something about the forgiveness of sins associated with this man. But he sees the Lord Jesus as one who is the Son of God reigning upon a tree.

The Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 10 and verse 9 says, “That if thou shall confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord and shalt believe in thine heart that God has raised him from the dead, thou shall be saved.” Here is a man confesses with his mouth Jesus is Lord and in that confession has come into the possession of eternal life. True repentance and faith has come to him, he has been made willing by the Lord God himself. Alfred Plummer in his commentary on Luke comments, “Some saw Jesus raise the dead and did not believe, the robber sees him being put to death and yet believes.” Isn’t that remarkable?

In one of the sermons of a well known British preacher, these words are found, and I think they are very expressive. He says, “Was ever faith so wonderful? There is the

King and he has no throne but a cross. He has no crown, but the thorn marks. He has no scepter save the nails that pinion his hands. He has no retinue but a cheering and howling mob. His whole royal wardrobe is in the hands of the Roman crap shooters. And yet this man penetrates the disguise of nakedness and the disguise of shame and even the dusky disguise of death itself and sees in him the King Eternal whose head is to be crowned with many thorns.” Remarkable, that’s why I think that this man is truly a remarkable theologian.

In fact, it’s remarkable to me the things that some have said about him. For example, John Calvin, no mean theologian himself, has said, “How clear was the vision of the eyes which thus see in death life, in ruin majesty, in shame glory, in defeat victory, in slavery, royalty. I question (Calvin continues) if ever since the world began there has so bright an example of faith.” Martin Luther adds, “This was for Christ a comfort like that supplied to him by the angel in the garden, God could not allowed to be destitute of subjects and now his church survived in this one man. Where the faith of Saint Peter broke off, the faith of the penitent thief commenced.” It may be a little strong, but it certainly expresses some significant things about this man.

“Remember me.” Think about that for a moment. What does that mean? Well it means he saw the certainty of life after death. “Remember me when you come in your kingdom.” Further more, he fearlessly faced the death that would soon come to him. He says, “Remember me when you come in your kingdom.” No if, not remember me if you come in your kingdom, “remember me when you come in your kingdom.” An indefinite relative is used it’s almost as if we could render it, “Remember me whenever you come.” He may not know precisely when that kingdom comes but, “remember me whenever you come into your kingdom.” He knows he’s coming. He doesn’t know the time. No if about it. He saw the true blessedness of life is not to be taken down from the cross to this life.

You might have thought that the greatest thing that could have happened would have been for the Lord Jesus to have come down from the cross. He was the eternal God; surely he could have done that that might have been the greatest thing that could have been done. No, no, it was not the greatest thing for you and for me. It was important that he stay on that cross. And here is an individual who sees that true blessedness is not always to be taken down from the cross to this life, but to keep Jesus' company in the life to come, that's the important thing. And the important thing for you and for me is to remember that too. It's not the miraculous that's important; it's the relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Remember me when you come in your kingdom,” he said. So he saw the messianic realm beyond the cross, he asked a place in it for himself. And I have to say again, what a magnificent theological man this man is. I have in my notes a statement with regard to that let me see if I can find it here in connection with what this man in the minds of some attained to. One of the men that I've enjoyed reading through the years has said this with reference to him,

“Ah, thou first of all Christian theologians, there is no honor man can pay you which can make a crown for thy brow. We may honor and praise Paul and James and John and Augustine and Origen and Luther and Calvin and Knox and Chalmers, but which man of these had mind and eyes and heart like this. No man's breath can praise thee, the word of our Lord himself sets thee in thy place with the high reward, today thou shall be with me in paradise.”

If you'll read of the apostles at this time, and the little faith that they had with reference to the future, you'll realize how remarkable for this man to attain to the sense of the Messianic Kingdom. The same gospel writer in an earlier chapter when the Lord Jesus tells the apostles he's going to Jerusalem, he's going to suffer, he's going to die, he's going

to be buried and he’s going to rise again from the dead on the third day he adds, “The apostles understood none of these things.” You see how great is the faith that God gave to this remarkable man.

There’s a story that I’ve loved to tell through the years, and I know that some of you have heard it before. Of course you may have forgotten it. And it’s such a great story, George Hetley wrote a book he told some of his experiences as a young boy as a missionary in China. Mr. Hetley was there, his father was the missionary. And he said that in his earliest days he could remember that his father would in various places show a magic lantern with pictures upon it. Now, I look out over the audience, there may be three of you who remember the stereopticon lantern and the magic lantern and the pictures that were thrown on a screen from them. The beginning of the video days I guess. But at any rate, he said, I can remember way back in a village beside the Grand Canal in China, we were gathered in a room; there were many Chinese people there. My father used the magic lantern and he said, “Even as a small boy I knew the pictures were pretty crude that were being thrown on the screen.” And he said, “My father would explain and expound the pictures.” And then he said, “I can remember the three crosses being thrown on the screen by my father, there flashed before us three crucified men, two thieves and between them the Lord and love.” So Mr. Henley says. “And all at once, an old woman got up, stumbled forward with her feet bound up in cloth, she was that poor. And she went forward, she cried out to his father, I always knew there must be a God like that.” What a magnificent thing, God the Holy Spirit piercing the heart of a Chinese woman who knew very little about Scriptural things, but when she saw the reality of the word of God put before her, something within her heart enlightened illuminated, made alive by the Holy Spirit, brought her to trust in the Son of God.

Well, the promise that follows is a very undeserved promise. No man deserves this, certainly the thief didn’t. The Lord Jesus replies, “Verily I say unto thee, today thou shall be with me in paradise,” the ultimate reward for the faith that is given by God.

Some have suggested that this should be punctuated a little differently. That we should rather read it, “Verily I say unto Thee today, thou shall be with me in paradise.” In other words, this is not a promise of an immediate that day reunion of the two beyond this life. But let me ask you, aside from some technical points, if the text reads, verily I say unto thee today what does the day, today add? Obviously he’s talking today isn’t he? There’s no need for our Lord to say, “Verily I say unto thee today.” Because of course he’s talking today. How much more significant is the statement, “Verily I say unto thee, today thou shall be with me in paradise.” In other words, the text is, it seems to me, a clear statement, there is no such thing as purgatory, there is no such thing as soul sleep, there is no such thing as conditional immortality. When a believer dies, as the apostle says, “To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.” “Today,” our Lord spoke to the thief, “thou shall be with me in paradise.” What an infallible basis of a statement, I say unto thee.

This is the faithful witness John tells us in the Book of Revelation. Our Lord’s mother said to the servants, “Whatever he says to you, do it.” That’s a good word for all of us isn’t it? Whatever you find in the word of God, do it. And Mary, the virgin mother of our Lord said that with reference to him. Today, no purgatory, no soul sleep and so forth, a promise of infinite bliss, paradise, communion with the Lord and consciousness of it.

I’d like to suggest to you that the pilgrimage that this man made on that day was the most remarkable pilgrimage that anyone ever made. The morning when he awakened, he awakened in a Roman cell, dirty filthy, other criminals about him shouting curses at their guards. That’s the way his day began. Then they come for him, they put him within the crowd going out to the cross beyond the city gates. The people cry out with their curses, he reaches the place. He is placed upon the cross the beam is taken up, plunged into the ground. There is the searing of the flesh, the spurting of the blood, and then standing beside him on the cross is Jesus of Nazareth. And the man, who began

his day in a Roman cell, ends his day in paradise. What a journey, from a Roman cell to paradise, in one day.

He heard the six other words of our Lord, evidently our Lord died earlier, he heard the other things Jesus said, and then after that as he himself expired, he was welcomed in paradise by the one who was hanging on the cross beside him. Oh the riches of God's grace in salvation. He wasn't a religious man, he wasn't a good man, he had not been baptized. He was not an educated man so far as we know, not a cultured man necessarily. Did not weep, did not cry, did not join a church, had no opportunity to join a church, but yet Jesus said to him, "Today thou shall be with me in paradise." For, fundamental to his relationship to God is faith in Christ.

I want you to notice also, how he topped every one of this man's requests. The dying thief said, "Lord, remember me." Jesus said, "You not only will be remembered, you will be with me." The dying thief said, "When you come in your kingdom." Jesus said, "Today." The dying thief said, "When you come in your kingdom." Jesus said, "Not only kingdom, but paradise, with me, today." I'm overwhelmed; I'm overjoyed as I think of the magnificent provision for sinners by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our time is up, I don't want to waste your time, but nothing can be more remarkable than the salvation of the dying thief. And nothing could be more encouraging it seems to me for the salvation of any other person who has no more claims than the dying thief did on the mercy and grace of God. But who nevertheless, finds from Holy Scripture, that such mercy and such grace stands there for sinners. So if you as this dying thief have recognized your sin, come to Christ, believe in him, trust in him. No better prayer could be offered I don't suppose then, "Lord, remember me when you come in your kingdom." May God in his grace touch your heart and may you respond. No better time to respond than right now as we bow our heads in a closing benediction. May we stand?

[Prayer] Father we are indeed grateful to Thee for these magnificent accounts. The inspiration of them is so obvious. We thank Thee for the greatness of the grace shown to the dying thief, and we know Lord that Thou art the same God so willing to show grace to sinners. And Lord if there are some in this audience, young or old, who've not yet come to faith in the Lord Jesus, may at this very moment they offer the petition to Thee, “Remember me Lord, when you come in your kingdom.” I need salvation too. For those of ...

[AUDIO ENDS ABRUPTLY]