



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 27:32–44

Gospel of Matthew

“The King Crucified”

TRANSCRIPT

Now for the Scripture reading this morning will you turn with me to Matthew chapter 27? Matthew chapter 27. We are reading and studying the account of the passion of our Lord as given by the evangelist Matthew, and we have come now very close to the climax of our Lord’s sufferings. Today our subject is, “The King Crucified,” and we are looking at the events that now surround the death of our Lord. Beginning with verse 32 we want to read through verse 44:

“And as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name: him they compelled to bear his cross. And when they were come unto a place called Golgotha, that is to say, a place of a skull, They gave him vinegar to drink mingled with gall: and when he had tasted it, he would not drink. And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots. And sitting down they watched him there; And set up over his head his accusation written, “This Is Jesus, the King of the Jews.” Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left. And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their

heads, And saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross. Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said, He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God. The thieves also, who were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth.”

May the God the Holy Spirit who illumines the Word illumine our minds as we think about our Lord’s sufferings. Let’s bow together in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are indeed grateful to Thee for these records that give us the events that have to do with our redemption. We praise Thee and thank Thee for the assurance that we have that the Son of God truly did suffer for our sins, and by them we are justified forever. We praise Thee for the work that our Lord accomplished, and we rejoice Lord in the assurance that has come to us, that we now do have the forgiveness of sins and possess everlasting life through that which he accomplished.

And we pray Lord that if there are some in this auditorium who have not yet come to a relationship to him, that through the Holy Spirit they may be brought to a true knowledge of themselves as those who are under sin and guilt and condemnation. And then Lord we pray that that Thou wilt bring illumination of our Lord Jesus as the remedy for all of our needs. O God illumine blinded minds and hearts for the glory of Thy name.

We praise Thee for that which Thou hast done for us, for we truly were blind, and Thou didst open our eyes and give us the knowledge of salvation as it exists in Christ.

And we thank Thee, too, Lord for all of the other blessings of life that are ours, for the assurance that we have, for the confidence that we have in Thee, for the assurance that we do belong to Thee and in the experiences of life may count upon Thee.

We pray for the sick. We ask Thy blessing upon them encourage them and console them. Supply the needs that exist and give healing. We know Thou art the God of healing, and Thou are well able to heal in accordance with Thy will. Do that which is Thy will. Do that which is for our good, regardless of what that may be specifically.

We pray, Lord for our country, for its leadership, and especially do we pray for the whole church of Jesus Christ. Lord we pray that through the teaching of the Word of God we may be deepened in the knowledge of spiritual things. Help us Lord to realize the importance of the Word of God and enable us in our daily life Monday through Saturday, to truly live under the Scriptures. May they really speak to us and may they really be the guide of our lives.

And in all of the difficult problems of life may our appeal, always Lord, be to ‘thus saith the Lord’. Help us Lord to be obedient to the Word of God. Now we thank Thee for this privilege and opportunity. May our time together be pleasing to Thee and an enjoyment spiritually for each of us.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

[Message] Our subject this morning is “The King Crucified.” The converging point of all ancient history is surely Golgotha. It is also the origin of all modern history.

The Roman gibbet was the goal of Moses and the prophets, for they wrote of him and of his sufferings, and it is the anchor of Paul and the apostles, for in all of the apostolic literature, the appeal for doctrinal teaching is always to the cross of the Lord Jesus.

Nineteen centuries of our Western civilization have failed to blot out the memory of Jesus of Nazareth, even among those who do not have any personal faith in him at all. Every one of our calendars reflects the fact that Jesus of Nazareth has been here. All of our newspapers with their notation of the date upon them acknowledge our dependence upon the events of our Lord’s life. Every letter that you and I write, which we usually begin with a date, acknowledges the fact that the

Lord Jesus Christ was here over nineteen hundred years ago. Every check that we write to pay a bill, even those that come back marked insufficient funds [laughter], they also acknowledge that Jesus of Nazareth has been here: A.D., *Anno Domini*, in the year of the Lord. So we acknowledge in almost everything that we do that our civilization is related to Jesus of Nazareth.

There are those who say that his life and his ministry is all a fiction, but one of the French skeptics—was is Rousseau?—exploded that when he said, “It would take a Jesus to forge a Jesus.” A very perceptive comment, because it does reflect the fact that there is no one, at least to our knowledge, who would have the inventiveness and creativeness to actually create a Jesus of Nazareth.

Our Lord was crucified on a hill north of the city of Jerusalem. That in itself incidentally was probably not without purpose, because in the first of the offerings of the Old Testament, in the burnt offering, it was said that the animal should be sacrificed on the altar northward, and so probably even the direction from the center of the city at which our Lord was crucified is according to Scripture.

The topography of Golgotha may also have some significance, because two roads left from Golgotha. One of them led to Mount Zion, and the other led to Gehenna. It’s almost as if to say, from the place where our Lord was crucified there are two objectives. There are two places to which one may go. One may go to Zion, the place of communion, or one may go to Gehenna, the place of everlasting fire.

Most of the studies of our Lord’s sufferings lay great stress upon the human side of his pains. They stress the shame: the spitting, the scourging, all of the physical sufferings that he underwent. There is reason for stressing that, of course, but we have been trying in the exposition in Matthew to stress the hand of God in his sufferings. We’ve been laying stress upon the statements of the Old Testament: It pleased the Lord to bruise him; Thou has brought me into the dust of death.

And we’ve been trying to point out the striking irony in the events of our Lord’s passion, pointing out that often words had double meanings and in fact, the more important meaning is that

second meaning, and that’s what we want to try to stress again today as we come to the subject, the King Crucified, and deal really with a number of things that have to do with those sufferings.

In the first verse of the account, reference is made to a man whose name was Simon of Cyrene, and the incident regarding Simon is a very interesting one because Simon’s own life can be pieced together by reference to several other of the texts that have to do with him. Mark, for example, adds the fact that Simon, when he met the procession that was moving out to Golgotha, had come from a place in the country and that he happened to be passing by. And then in one of the other accounts in the Gospel of Luke, stress is laid upon the fact that when our Lord Jesus was going out towards Golgotha, he turned and spoke to the women, the weeping women, and told them not to weep for him but to weep for their children, and announced to them that more terrible things were soon to come, and that they should pay attention to them and not to that which was happening to him.

And then in that Markan passage it is also stated that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus of which the Gospel says nothing else, but simply that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus. Evidently these two young men were well known to the readers of the Gospel of Mark, who incidentally were Romans according to tradition. And then in Romans chapter 16 in a very isolated passage, that last passage of the Epistle to the Romans in which the apostle gives personal greetings to a number of people in Rome, whom he probably had never met face to face for the most part, another reference there is made to Rufus, and the Romans are asked to greet Rufus, and he is called and elect saint, a chosen saint. Someone has translated it, “a choice saint,” but the chances are that the word elect there is a word that really refers to the doctrine of election, an elect saint. And then Paul tells the Romans to greet also Rufus, his mother and mine, suggesting that the apostle himself knew Rufus and also knew Rufus’s mother, who if the Rufus is the same, and there seems to be no reason why they should not be the same since Romans was written to the Romans and Mark was also written to the Romans, it would be evident from that that the Apostle Paul himself came later to know the wife of Simon of Cyrene.

The unexpected things in our lives are often the most significant. Someone has called these unexpected things the bludgeonings of chance. Simon learned from the experience that he had the benediction of the accidents of providence. There are three acts in the play of Simon’s life, and I would for a few moments like to lay a little bit of stress upon them. Let us assume, and a part of what I am going to suggest to you is manufactured out of my own imagination, but I think the facts substantiate the important points. Let us just imagine that Simon had come to the city of Jerusalem from Libya, from Cyrene—modern Libya—and let us assume that he was a Jewish man who had come to celebrate the feast of the Passover. That certainly seems reasonable. It was the desire of Jews who were scattered all over the ancient world to at least go home for one service of the Passover in their lifetime, because it was of course the heart of their faith. Let’s assume that Simon had come to Jerusalem.

Let’s assume that being a Jewish man he probably had friends in the city of Jerusalem and relatives in the vicinity, and let’s assume since Mark says that he came from the country that morning, that he was staying with someone out in the country, because Jerusalem at the time of the Passover was as crowded as New Orleans is today. And the result was that frequently they did have to put up a tent out in the fields or perhaps he lived with someone who lived outside of the city.

At any rate, on Friday morning, he came into the city to enjoy the weekend of the feast, and as he was coming in he noticed a commotion, a rather disorderly procession of people. He noticed that in the midst of them there were yapping Jews who were shouting insults at one of the men who was carrying his cross. He recognized it was a crucifixion procession. He noticed the hard Roman soldiers that were there. He noticed weeping women who were the dismayed followers of one of the men. He also noticed on the fringes of the crowd some other men who seemed to be disturbed over what was happening.

And his attention was attracted to one man in the center, a pathetically weakening man who was seeking to carry his own cross. As Simon stood on the corner, and the procession was going by, thinking about the rest of the day for him, he was disturbed to feel on his shoulder the hard hand of

a Roman soldier who immediately commandeered him to take the cross. He was compelled to bear the cross of our Lord Jesus.

The word that is used to describe this compelling is a word that is ultimately traceable to Persia. The Persians had the greatest mail system in the ancient world. They could teach our mail system quite a few tricks. But I don't know whether we would have been willing to pay for their service. They had the right—the Persians had the right—to requisition any piece of property necessary for the successful carrying out of their mail system. It was a system in which horses were used, of course, and if a horse became sick or died or became tired, and they needed another horse, they had the right to requisition anyone's horse. They had other rights. And the word that was used for the requisitioning of horses by the mail service was the word that came over into the Greek language as *aggareuo*, and that is the word translated “compelled” here. So this was a kind of requisitioning of Simon for the service of the Romans.

Now I am sure if I know Simon, if I know a Jewish man who intended to enjoy that weekend, and had a set aside a great deal of money, and looked forward for it for months, even years, I'm sure that he offered the protests that you might expect him to offer. But his protests, his expostulations were unavailing, and soon Simon is carrying the cross of our Lord Jesus out to a place that was the last place that he wanted to be on that morning.

On the way out, he had occasion to look at the men around him and sooner or later he had occasion to look upon the face of our Lord Jesus Christ. He heard him, for example, say to the women those strange words which probably he thought were the strangest words that anyone being crucified should ever have uttered, for he turned round and looked at the women who were following him weeping and said to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem weep not for me but weep for yourselves and for your children.” And Simon got a look of the face of our Lord Jesus Christ, and he saw a face that, let us say, must have impressed him for as long as he has lived. It was a face of tenderness, but in the midst of the tenderness there was majesty: a kind of command of the situation

in which he seemed to be the victim. He was fascinated by the dignity by the humility and by the bravery of this man who was able to be so majestic in circumstances such as this crucifixion.

Let's say that's Act One. Act Two is seven weeks later. It is the day of Pentecost. The day of the feast day of Pentecost, the last of the feasts that Simon would celebrate on his visit to the city of Jerusalem. His visit's almost over now. He probably has heard a great deal about Jesus of Nazareth. He has heard these rumors. He has heard no doubt some friends of his speak, and he has heard many of the enemies of our Lord speak. He has reflected upon the life and works of this man as other things have been said about him. He also has noticed a kind of hush hush attitude on the part of the Jewish leaders and Jewish priests and scribes when the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth has been mentioned. But on the day of Pentecost, he's in the temple area, and in the midst of the temple area suddenly strange things begin to happen. A large crowd has gathered. Men have begun to speak in tongues.

Now we know there were men from Libya who were there, because in the 10th verse, we read in Acts chapter 2 there were men from Phrygia, and Pamphylia in Egypt, and in the part of Libya about Cyrene. Let's just say that that is a reference to Simon of Cyrene. He stands on in the temple area and he hears this strange, unlettered—that is, untrained—Galilean named Peter get up and give this amazing address in which he puts together important messianic passages from the Old Testament in such a revealing way that Simon deep down in his heart was giving out expressions of, I've never heard anyone explain the Scriptures like this. The scribes and the Pharisees and the chief priests never have been able to explain the Old Testament as he is explaining it to me.

And finally he hears this man reach the climax of his sermon and say, “This Jesus hath God raised up whereof we are all witnesses. Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted and having received from the Father the gift or promise of the Holy Spirit, he has shed forth this which he now seeing here, for David is not ascended into the heavens but he saith himself, the Lord said unto my Lord sit thou on my right hand until I make thy foes thy footstool. Therefore let all the house of Israel know, assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus whom ye have crucified both Lord and

Christ.” The striking thing about this evangelistic meeting is that instead of the preacher giving the invitation as often happens, the crowd gives the invitation here. “When they heard this, they were pierced in their hearts and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren what shall we do?”

Now that I think is preaching under the power of the Holy Spirit. There is no need for lengthy appeals for individuals to come forward to the front of a meeting. After all, the Bible teaches us that the proper way to respond to the gospel message is not to raise your hand in a meeting, not to sign a decision card, not to come down front in a so-called altar call, but to request baptism of the elders and be baptized in testimony to the faith which you have come. They cried out, Men brethren what shall we do?

And Peter responded by saying to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus for the remission of sins and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” And thousands apparently were responsive to the word that Peter preached and came to faith in the Lord Jesus, and among them, we shall say, was Simon of Cyrene.

Act Three. Now Simon was from Libya. Let’s assume that he went back to Cyrene. Now we could assume that his wife and children had come with him. That is possible of course, but the facts are these, that through Simon, evidently the wife and the sons heard the strangest story that pilgrim to the city of Jerusalem had ever told them. He came home he told them how he was standing on the street corner how contrary to all of his desires a hand was put on his shoulder. He was forced to carry the cross of this man from Nazareth. How he was the strangest person he had ever looked upon. How he convinced him as he gazed upon him that he was something other than human. How he went out to see him crucified. He heard him utter those strange statements on the cross, “Father let them go for they don’t know what they’re doing. My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?,” The passage we shall look at next Sunday. And finally, “It is finished.”

He told them how he pondered the things that he had been saying how he came in contact with others who explained that he had claimed to be the Messiah and had done the mighty miracles

that the Old Testament prophesied. He told finally of the preaching on the day of Pentecost and how he had come to faith in the Lord Jesus as he saw the miracle of men speaking in his own tongue who had never studied the tongue that he spoke, and finally how he had been saved. They heard the story, and evidently they responded to the ministry of Simon of Cyrene, because as Mark writes, Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus well known to the church in Rome.

Now we know that the Markan gospel is probably the gospel that Peter preached. Our contemporary New Testament scholarship is generally agreed that the Markan gospel is the gospel that Peter himself would have preached if he were here with us. It was written for the Romans. There are indications in it, incidental indications in it, that it was designed specifically for Romans. And Alexander and Rufus must then have been well known to the church at Rome.

Evidently, Simon’s family, the remainder of them, had come to Rome, the chief city in the Roman empire. Tradition has it that Alexander was martyred; Rufus was still living. Then the Apostle Paul speaks in Romans chapter 11 and he writing to the Roman church some years later says that asks them to greet Rufus, the elect servant or saint, and then his mother and mine.

So it seems then that what happened was that Simon led his wife to the Lord and also his sons. And the amazing fact is that as a result of this chance—well that’s what an Armenian might say—this chance encounter, some good luck that he had on Friday morning. He happened to meet that procession out towards Golgotha. As a result of it, Simon came to know the Messiah, his sons came to know the Messiah, his sons evidently became prominent in the church at Rome and not only that, but his wife had the opportunity later on to minister to the Apostle Paul who speaks of her as not only Rufus’ mother but his own mother. And so as a result of this “chance encounter” the names of Simon his wife Alexander and Rufus go sounding down through the centuries along with the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

Now we talk about the accidents of divine providence. Do you know, my Christian friends, that often the little, incidental thing that seems so small to us, that often is an irritation may well be the important thing in our life. Out of the frustration of having to take up that cross, there came

ultimately the illumination and revelation of a Savior and from that salvation for Simon and for his family and no doubt blessing to many others. What an amazing story there is in the story of Simon of Cyrene. You can put it together very much like a detective puts together clues to arrive at the villain who did the deed.

Now next Matthew writes about the vinegar and gall. It was a humane custom of the Jews to give stupefying drink to sufferers, and so we read in verse 33, “And when they were come unto a place called Golgotha, that is to say, a place of a skull, They gave him vinegar to drink mingled with gall: and when he had tasted it, he would not drink.” It was humane. We do things like this if we’re going to shoot somebody, we blindfold them. We do them a little good deed just before we put them out of their misery. Was it not Huckleberry Finn or was it Tom Sawyer when they were getting ready to drown the cat, one of them insisted that they should heat water and drown the cat in warm water because it would be distasteful and bad to drown the cat in cold water. So it was the custom then to give those who were being crucified vinegar mingled with this drug, gall.

But the Lord Jesus would not take it for the simple reason he had said, remember, the cup which my Father hath given me to drink shall I not drink it, and for our Lord to drink the cup of the crucifixion death without having the fullness of his senses, would be to dull the sufferings, and he will not dull the sufferings in any way. Later on, he will take some of the everyday kind of weakened wine that the workers used with their with their meals for the simple reason that he was in such a weakened state that that refreshed him so he could suffer to the fullest the remaining dregs of his sufferings.

Then Matthew writes of the crucifixion and specifically of the parting of the garments. We read in the 35th verse, “And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots.” It is rather striking to me that the crucifixion account is so simple. These simple words: And they crucified him show the restraint of the New Testament record. If we had been writing an account like this, not under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we would have

glamorized and romanticized the sufferings of our Lord Jesus. The simple words, “and they crucify him” are no glamorizing of the “most wretched of all ways of dying,” so Josephus said.

Cicero, the Latin, said, “was the cruelest and most loathsome punishment,” and it’s reflected in the use of a word which we commonly use. In fact this morning just before the meeting, we were sitting in a the office of the Chapel here and talking about back difficulties, because some in the group had had some trouble with their backs, and one of them was saying the pain was excruciating. That’s the word derived from the word, cross: excruciating. C-R-U-C, the Latin word *crux* is the word for cross, and *crux crucis*, the genitive case. Excruciating—that’s a word that we reserve for the greatest of pains derived from the suffering of our Lord at the cross.

Now the reference is made here to the fact that they parted his garments. Now that’s rather striking, and John adds the fact that these Roman soldiers shook the dice and as a result of playing with the dice, they divided up his garments and each of the soldiers obtained part of his garments.

Now these accounts are designed to teach us spiritual truth, and there are two important truths that are taught by this. In the first place, has it ever surprised you to know that our Lord Jesus died naked? They took his clothes off on the cross, and he died naked. That was not an accident. That was intentional with the Father. We read in the Garden of Eden, in Genesis the 2nd chapter, that Adam and Eve did not have on any clothes. They were naked, but they were not ashamed. Now whether they had a garment of glory that covered their nakedness, the Genesis account does not say. But they were naked and were not ashamed for the simple reason that they had not yet sinned, and the guilt and reproach of sin was not yet theirs, but as soon as the act of sin has taken place, they discover that they are naked, and as a result, they seek to cover their nakedness with the fig leaves. Nakedness was a sign of the reproach and shame of sin.

Now when the Lord Jesus dies on the cross, he must die naked, for he must not only die under the guilt and penalty of sin, but he also must die for all of the consequences of it, and the consequence of shame he must also bear. So he dies naked, symbolic of the fact that he bears all of

sin and its effects. Shame and reproach, then, become suggestive throughout the whole of the Old Testament of judgment.

But now there is one other thing here. Incidentally, someone has said that’s a redemptive sign just as much as the sign of the babe in the manger was. Someone has said in corresponding to this, shall be a sign unto you, you shall find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, you might just as well have said, this shall be a sign unto you: you shall find the surety or the Mediator hanging upon a cross and naked. It is the sign of the bearing of sin and its consequences.

But now there is another thing here. You see, the garments of our Lord were taken and were given to the soldiers. In the Garden of Eden, garments are suggestive of the robe of righteousness. God slew an animal and clothed Adam and Eve. That was symbolic of the fact that by the slaying of the animal sacrifice which pointed forward to the redemption of the Lord Jesus, there was covering for the shame of sin, for all of the effects of sin. And so in the Old Testament, all down through the Old Testament, garments become figurative of the clothing of sinful individuals with robes of righteousness, and in Isaiah in the 61st chapter and the 10th verse, we have the prophet there expressing this very specifically, for he writes in the 10th verse, “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord my soul shall be joyful in my God, for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation. He hath covered me with the robe of righteousness as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments.”

So the robe of righteousness, garments become figurative of salvation, and the fact that the Roman soldiers tear the clothes off of our Lord Jesus, it was, incidentally their right to do that according to Roman customs, and divide them up among themselves is a vivid Texas-sized object lesson of the fact that through the suffering of the one who’s hanging upon the cross, men receive a robe of righteousness. And so these Roman soldiers playing with the dice play out a story that they do not understand, but which God intends by the events of our Lord’s suffering. So the nakedness reflects his death for sin and the clothing the parting of the garments and the giving of them to each of the soldiers illustrates the robe of righteousness which we have by virtue of faith in this one who dies.

Do you have this robe of righteousness? Is it yours? Have you been justified by faith in our Lord Jesus and therefore clothed in a righteousness that is acceptable to him? Was it not William Cunningham who said, “The righteousness of God is that righteousness which his righteousness requires him to require.” And this is what we have when we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. A righteousness that is acceptable to this righteous God, because it is provided by God, and satisfies all of his claims.

Well after that we read of the superscription, and sitting down, they watched him there and sat up over his head the accusation written, This is Jesus. The other Gospel writers add: of Nazareth; This is Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews. Then there were two thieves crucified with him one on the right hand and the other on the left.

Jesus, or rather the Jews incidentally, knew that when Pilate put this accusation over the cross, that he didn't believe that. He was mocking them. He was saying, you Jews—he didn't like the Jews—he said, “You Jews have a king; this is your king. This is the kind of king you Jews have, and this is the kind of subjects that he has, and so in putting the sign, This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews, he mocked and derided them. You have a king but his crown is a crown of thorns. He has a scepter, but it is nails and he is pierced and attached to this Roman cross. He has subjects but they are this motley crowd hanging around the cross here. So he was making fun of them.

The Jews incidentally, went to Pilate and said, “Don't put on the cross, This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews, but that He said he was King of the Jews.” He said, “What I have written I have written.”

The facts are of course what Pilate wrote, he had not written. It was God who wrote. It was God who, in effect, put the thought in the mind of that Roman puppet and he put, This is Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews, because what he thought was mockery was a fact. He was Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. And he wrote it in Hebrew; he wrote it in Latin; and he wrote it in Greek. And God in this way was universally proclaiming that he is Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews.

And he put him between two thieves. God did that too. It was as if he reached down into humanity and he picked the lowest form of humanity: thieves, robbers, insurrectionists and murders. Those are the words that are used to describe those two men with whom he was crucified. But remember, he is our representative when he dies. He is our substitute. And so if he is our substitute, his death is our death. It is in his death that I die my death unto the judgment of sin, and so he puts me with my company. It is our Lord's inevitable company that he should die with crooks and thieves, because my dear, nice, Dallas friends, that's what you are. That is exactly what you are. He is giving you a picture of yourself as our Lord is crucified in the midst of the thieves.

Well, as our Lord is hanging there, the passers by come by. They make profound salam, or a scornful jerks of the head. The leaders also mock him, and even their words have double meanings. They say, he saved others himself he cannot save. Aha, here is a man who raised people from the dead; can he not save himself? Of course he can. But in one sense he cannot, because if he is to be the sin sacrifice, he cannot save himself. Even these words have double meanings. And isn't it interesting too, how they preach the gospel in the words that they use to condemn him. He saved others. They admit in the things that they say that he really did what it was claimed that he did.

General Booth the founder of the Salvation Army said, “The Jews say they would have believed in Jesus if he would come down from the cross. We believe in Jesus because he would not come down from the cross.” And that of course, is true. Someone also has said this is the ancestry of the God-is-dead theology, because they say, he trusted in God; let him deliver him now if he will have him. As if to say, as the psalmist himself said, Where is thy God, his enemies were saying.

Now the robbers begin to deride him. “The thieves also who were crucified with him,” Matthew writes, “cast the same in his teeth.” What a beautiful picture this is. I have no doubt in my mind that the dying thief—incidentally, we sang that hymn about the dying thief this morning. There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emanuel's veins / and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all his guilty stains. The dying thief rejoiced to see that savior in his day. And there may I though vile is he / wash all my sins away. I have no doubt but that this dying thief was perhaps the noblest

theologian who existed aside from our Lord at the time of his death. He knew more than Peter. He had seen more than John. His understanding of spiritual truth reached heights that the apostles did not reach at that time.

When he cried out, “Remember me when you come in your kingdom,” he was saying truths about the life after death and about the messianic kingdom that the apostles had not yet come to understand. Calvin and Luther agree in the fact that this man uttered one of the most amazing statements of faith that we have record of in the Word of God.

I have no doubt but that this man was a man of magnificent mind, of piercing and incisive speech. Listen to these things that he said as he was hanging by the side of the Lord Jesus. He began by blaspheming him, railing upon him as the other thief did, but Luke tells us that finally, he said, as the other thief continued to condemn our Lord, “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, Jesus remember me when you come in your kingdom.”

Now I wish it were possible for me to trace the birth of this man in these words that he uttered. I'll just give you a few highlights. But you can see that this is a kind of picture of a man's spiritual birth. The first thing that he comes to is the fear of God. Dost not thou fear God? We are told in the Old Testament, “The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.” And then, having come to the fear of God, his conscience begins to act. He does not have any excuses, incidentally. He says we are in the same condemnation, and furthermore, we are in it justly. He does not look around and say well I'm not quite as bad as that other thief over there. He's continuing to rail on him. Or he doesn't say I'm like these religious leaders these priests and elders here who are so vile in the fact that they claim to be religious men, but they are putting this good man to death. He says, we are in our just condemnation.

And furthermore, he goes on to say and mind you he was saying this in the crowd, because others heard this, this man has done nothing amiss. And when he said that, that was a magnificent

statement of courage, because it took him out of that whole crowd and put him over by himself. In those words, he condemned the other thief, he condemned the chief priests and elders, he condemned the Romans, in a sense he just put himself out alone as the most courageous man around that cross. We indeed justly; this man has done nothing amiss.

And then turning to the Lord Jesus. Where he came to the knowledge of this we don't know. He may have reflected on that superscription. He may have heard about our Lord Jesus. He heard them say, you say you're the king of Israel; come down from the cross. But the Holy Spirit illumined his mind and faith, reversing the judgment of the court, reversing the judgment of the high priests and the elders, reversing the judgment of his own friends, sees in the Lord Jesus the Messiah, and he says to him, “Remember me, not if you come in your kingdom, Remember me *when* you come in your kingdom,” acknowledging that there is life after death, acknowledging that true blessedness is not to be taken down from the cross and continue in this life, but to go on into the life that is beyond this life in the presence of our Lord and asking a place in the messianic realm.

Ah thou greatest and first of all Christian theologians. A man greater than Augustine, greater than Luther, greater than Paul, greater than Whitefield, greater than Hodge, Shedd, Warfield, Johnson [laughter]. It's magnificent, that faith to which the Lord Jesus brought him on the cross. And will you notice the response of our Lord to him? He said, “Today thou shall be with me in paradise.” You see it's not a question of tomorrow. It's a question of today. It's not a question of remember; it's a question of you shall be with me. It's not when I come in my kingdom; it's today. It's not simply kingdom, but it's kingdom and paradise. Today you shall be with me in paradise.

Well it's a great story and of course it's now easier to see as we reflect on the things that happened around that cross why Calvary is the converging point of the human story. The only way of salvation is through the one who was hanging in the midst of those thieves, and the fact that this thief, no religious man, no baptized man, no man of religious experiences at all, the fact that this man was able to come to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus—was brought to that by the power of the Holy Spirit—the most unlikely man in the most unlikely of circumstances, that is evidence that anyone

may be saved. You may be saved in all of your sin. May God give you grace to come. Lord remember me. That was the essence of this man’s petition. Lord remember me. May God the Holy Spirit speak to your heart in the midst of your own condemnation, guilt, sin—your destiny as separated from God.

May God by his mighty grace speak in the midst of your heart and bring you to the place where you say, Lord remember me, in the midst of my guilt and through the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross save my soul. May God speak to your heart.

If you’re here this morning and you have never believed in him, we remind you that belonging to the church will not help you; being baptized will not help you; doing good works will not help you; praying through will not help you; coming down in a meeting in a church at the response to an altar call will not help you. The way of salvation is through faith in a Savior who offered a sacrifice that is sufficient for sinners, and only the Holy Spirit can illumine your heart and bring you to trust in him. May he do it. Shall we stand for the benediction?

[Prayer] Father, we are so grateful to Thee for these words from Holy Scripture which so beautifully express the greatness of the atoning sacrifice. Our human words can never fully expound the depth of the divine revelation. We only give little children’s babblings. We thank Thee for all that the Son of God has done, and we know, Lord that at the center of all human history is what happened on Golgotha. Father, if there should be someone here who has not yet come to faith in Jesus Christ, may at this very moment the Holy Spirit bring them, in their inmost being, to utter the petition, Lord remember me.

May grace mercy and peace go with us.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.