

A WONDER OF GRACE

3. The Dying Thief The Lone Witness

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By C. H. Spurgeon

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The dying thief was certainly a very great wonder of grace. He has generally been looked upon from one point of view only, as a sinner called at the eleventh hour, and therefore an instance of special mercy because he was so near to die. Enough has been made of that circumstance by others: to my mind, it is by no means the most important point in the narrative. Had the thief been predestined to come down from the cross and live for half a century longer, his conversion would have been neither more nor less than it was. The work of grace which enabled him to die in peace would, if it had been the Lord's will, have enabled him to live in holiness. We may well admire divine grace when it so speedily makes a man fit for the bliss of heaven, but it is equally to be adored when it makes him ready for the battle of earth. To bear a saved sinner away from all further conflict is great grace; but the power and love of God are, if anything, even more conspicuous when, like a sheep surrounded by wolves, or a spark in the midst of the sea, a believer is enabled to live on in the teeth of an ungodly world and maintain his integrity to

the end. Dear friend, whether you die as soon as you are born again, or remain on earth for many years, is comparatively a small matter, and will not materially alter your indebtedness to divine grace. In the one case the great Husbandman will show how he can bring his flowers speedily to perfection; and in the other he will prove how he can preserve them in blooming beauty, despite the frosts and snows of earth's cruel winter: in either case your experience will reveal the same love and power. There are other things; it seems to me, to be seen in the conversion of the thief, besides the one single matter of his being brought to know the Lord when near to death's door.

Observe the singular fact that our Lord Jesus Christ should die in the company of two malefactors. It was probably planned in order to bring him shame, and it was regarded by those who cried, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" As an additional ignominy. Their malice decreed that he should die as a criminal, and *with* criminals, and in the centre, between two, to show that they thought him the worst of the three; but God in his own way baffled the malice of the foe, and turned it to the triumph and glory of his dear Son; for, had there been no dying thief hanging at his side, then one of the most illustrious trophies of his love would not have been gained, and we should not have been able to sing to his praise: —

*“The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day;
And there have I, though vile as he,
Washed all my sins away!”*

His enemies gave our Lord Jesus an opportunity for still continuing the seeking, as well as the saving of the lost. They found him an occasion for manifesting his conquering grace when they supposed they were heaping scorn upon him. How

truly did the prophet in the psalm say, “He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh, the Lord shall have them in derision;” for that which was meant to increase his misery revealed his majesty. Moreover, though it was intended to add an ingredient of bitterness to his cup, I do not doubt that it supplied him with a draught of comfort. Nothing could so well have cheered the heart of Jesus, and taken off his mind for just an instant from his own bitter pangs, as having an object of pity before him, upon whom he could pour his mercy. The thief’s confession of faith and expiring prayer must have been music to his Saviour’s ear, the only music which could in any degree delight him amid his terrible agonies. To hear and to answer the prayer, “**Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom,**” afforded our Lord a precious solace. An angel strengthened him in the garden, but here it was a man, nailed up at his side, who ministered consolation by the indirect, but very effective method of seeking help at his hands.

Furthermore, the long continued testimony and witness for Christ among men was at that time exceedingly feeble and ready to expire, and the thief’s confession maintained it. The apostles, where were they? They had fled. Those disciples who ventured near enough to see the Lord scarcely remained within speaking distance. They were poor confessors of Christ, scarcely worthy of the name. Was the chain of testimony to be broken? Would none declare his sovereign power? No, the Lord will never let that testimony cease, and lo! He raises up a witness where least you would expect it — on the gibbet. One just ready to die bears witness to the Redeemer’s innocence and to his assured coming to a kingdom. As many of the boldest testimonies to Christ have come from the stake, so here was one that came from the gibbet, and gained for the witness the honour of being the last

testifier to Christ before he died.

Let us always expect, then, dear friends, that God will overrule the machinations of the foes of Christ so as to get honour from them. At all times of the world's history, when things appear to have gone to pieces, and Satan seems to rule the hour, do not let us despair, but be quite sure that, somehow or other, light will come out of darkness, and good out of evil.

We will now come close up to the dying thief, and look, first, at *his faith*; secondly, at *his confession of faith*; thirdly, at *his prayer of faith*; and fourthly, at *the answer to his faith*.

First, then, may the Holy Ghost help us concerning this dying malefactor, to consider HIS FAITH,

It was of the operation of the Spirit of God, and there was *nothing in his previous character to lead up to it*. How came that thief to be a believer in Jesus? You who carefully read the gospels will have noticed that Matthew says (Matthew 27:44), "The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth." Mark also says, "They that were crucified with him reviled him." These two evangelists plainly speak of both thieves as reviling our Lord. How are we to understand this? Would it be right to say that those two writers speak in broad terms of the thieves as a class, because one of them so acted, just as we in common conversation speak of a company of persons doing so and so, when, in fact, the whole matter was the deed of one man of the party? Was it a loose way of speaking? I think not: I do not like the look of suppositions of error in the inspired volume. Would it not be more reverent to the Word of God to believe that the thieves did both revile Jesus? May it not be true that, at the first, they both joined in saying, "If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us," but that afterwards one, by a miracle of sovereign grace, was led to a change of mind, and became a

believer? Or would this third theory meet the case, that at the first the thief who afterwards became a penitent, having no thought upon the matter, by his silence gave consent to his fellow's reviling so as fairly to come under the charge of being an accomplice therein: but when it gradually dawned upon his mind that he was under error as to this Jesus of Nazareth, it pleased God in infinite mercy to change his mind, so that he became a confessor of the truth, though he had at first silently assented to the blasphemy of his companion? It would be idle to dogmatize, but we will gather this lesson from it — that faith may enter the mind, notwithstanding the sinful state in which the man is found. Grace can transform a reviling thief into a penitent believer.

Neither do we know the outward means which led to this man's conversion. We can only suppose that he was affected by seeing the Lord's patient demeanour, or, perhaps, by hearing that prayer, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Surely there was enough in the sight of the crucified Lord with the blessing of God's Spirit to turn a heart of stone into flesh. Possibly the inscription over the head of our Lord may have helped him — "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Being a Jew, he knew something of the Scriptures, and putting all the facts together, may he not have seen in the prophecies a light which gathered around the head of the sufferer, and revealed him as the true Messiah? Possibly the malefactor remembered Isaiah's words, "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not." Or, perhaps, the saying of David, in the twenty-second Psalm, rushed upon his memory, "They pierced my hands and my feet." Other texts which he had learned in his youth at his mother's knee may have come before his mind, and putting

all these together, he may have argued, “It may be. Perhaps it is. It is. It must be. I am sure it is. It is the Messiah, led as a lamb to the slaughter.” All this is but our supposition, and it leads me to remark that there is much faith in this world which cometh, “not with observation,” but is wrought in men by unknown instrumentalities, and so long as it really exists it matters very little how it entered the heart, for in every case it is the work of the Holy Ghost. The history of faith is of small importance compared with the quality of faith.

We do not know the origin of this man’s faith, but we do know that *it was amazing faith under the circumstances*. I very gravely question whether there was ever greater faith in this world than the faith of this thief; for he, beyond all others, realized the painful and shameful death of the Lord Jesus, and yet believed. We hear of our Lord’s dying upon the cross, but we do not realize the circumstances; and, indeed, even if we were to think upon that death very long and intently, we shall never realize the shame, and weakness, and misery which surrounded our Lord as that dying thief did, for he himself was suffering the pangs of crucifixion at the Saviour’s side, and therefore to him it was no fiction, but a vivid reality. Before him was the Christ in all his nakedness and ignominy surrounded by the mocking multitude, and dying in pain and weakness, and yet he believed him to be Lord and King. What think you, sirs? Some of you say you find it hard to believe in Jesus, though you know that he is exalted in the highest heavens; but had you seen him on the cross, had you seen his marred countenance and emaciated body, could you then have believed on him, and said, **“Lord remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom!”** Yes, you could have done so if the Spirit of God had created faith in you like to that of the thief; but it would have been faith of the first order, a jewel of priceless value. As I said before, so

say I again, the vivid sympathy of the thief with the shame and suffering of the Lord rendered his faith remarkable in the highest degree.

This man's faith, moreover, was singularly clear and decided. He rolled his whole salvation upon the Lord Jesus and said, ***“Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.”*** He did not offer a single plea fetched from his doings, his present feelings, or his sufferings; but he cast himself upon the generous heart of Christ. “Thou hast a kingdom: thou art coming to it. Lord, remember me when thou comest into it.” That was all. I wish that some who have been professors for years had as clear a faith as the thief; but they are too often confused between law and gospel, works and grace, while this poor felon trusted in nothing but the Saviour and his mercy. Blessed be God for clear faith. I do rejoice to see it in such a case as this, so suddenly wrought and yet so perfect — so outspoken, so intelligent, so thoroughly restful.

That word “restful” reminds me of a lovely characteristic of his faith, namely, *its deep peace-giving power*. There is a world of rest in Jesus, in the thief's prayer, ***“Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.”*** A thought from Christ is all he wanted, and after the Lord said, ***“Today shalt thou be with me in paradise,”*** we never read that the petitioner said another word. I did think that, perhaps, he would have said, “Blessed be the name of the Lord for that sweet assurance. Now I can die in peace;” but his gratitude was too deep for words, and his peace so perfect that calm silence seemed most in harmony with it. Silence is the thaw of the soul, though it be the frost of the mouth; and when the soul flows most freely it feels the inadequacy of the narrow channel of the lips for its great waterfloods.

“Come, then, expressive silence, muse his praise.”

He asked no alleviation of pain, but in perfect satisfaction died as calmly as saints do in their beds.

This is the kind of faith which we must all have if we would be saved. Whether we know how we come by it or not, it must be a faith which rolls itself upon Christ, and a faith which consequently brings peace to the soul. Do you possess such faith, dear friend? If you do not, remember that you may die on a sudden, and then into Paradise you will never enter. Look well to this, and believe in the Lord Jesus at once.

Secondly, we are going to look at this man's CONFESSION OF FAITH. He had faith, and he confessed it. He could neither be baptized nor sit at the communion table, nor unite with the church below; he could not do any of those things which are most right and proper on the part of other Christians, but he did the best he could under the circumstances to confess his Lord.

He confessed Christ, first of all, almost of necessity, because *a holy indignation made him speak out*. He listened for a while to his brother thief, but while he was musing, the fire burned, then spake he with his tongue, for he could no longer bear to hear the innocent sufferer reviled. 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.” Did this poor thief speak out so bravely, and can some of you silent Christians go up and down the streets, and hear men curse and blaspheme the name of Christ, and not feel stirred in spirit to defend his cause? While men are so loud in their revilings, can you be quiet? The stones you tread on may well cry out against you. If all were Christians and the world teemed with Jesus praise, we might, perhaps, afford to be silent; but, amidst abounding superstition and loud-mouthed infidelity, we are bound to show our colours, and

avow ourselves on Christ's side. We doubt not that the penitent thief would have owned his Lord apart from the railing of his comrade; but, as it happened, that reviling was the provoking cause. Does no such cause arouse *you*? Can you play the coward at such a time as this?

Observe next, that *he made a confession to an unsympathetic ear*. The other thief does not seem to have made any kind of reply to him, but it is feared that he died in sullen unbelief. The believing thief made his confession where he could not expect to gain approbation, yet he made it none the less clearly. How is it that some dear friends who love the Lord have never confessed their faith, even to their Christian brethren? You know how glad we should be to hear of what the Lord has done for you, but yet we have not heard it. There is a mother who would be so happy if she did but know that her boy was saved, or that her girl was converted, and you have refused her that joy by your silence. This poor thief spoke for Jesus to one who did not enter into his religious experience, and you have not even told yours to those who would have communed with you and rewarded you with comfort and instruction. I cannot understand cowardly lovers of Christ. How you manage to smother your love so long I cannot tell. Love is usually like a cough, which speaks for itself, or a candle which must be seen, or a sweet perfume which is its own revealer; how is it that you have been able to conceal the day which has dawned in your hearts? What can be your motive for coming to Jesus by night only? I cannot understand your riddle, and I hope you will explain it away. Do confess Jesus if you love him, for he bids you do it, and says, "He that confesseth me before men, him will I confess before my Father which is in heaven."

Observe well that this poor thief's confession of faith *was attended with a confession of sin*. Though he was dying a

most horrible death by crucifixion, yet he confessed that he was suffering justly. "*We indeed justly.*" He made his confession not only to God, but to men, justifying the law of his country under which he was then suffering. True faith confesses Christ, and, at the same time, confesses its sin. There must be repentance of sin and acknowledgment of it before God if faith is to give proof of its truth. A faith that never had a tear in its eye, or a blush on its cheek is not the faith of God's elect. He, who never felt the burden of sin, never felt the sweetness of being delivered from it. This poor thief is as clear in the avowal of his own guilt as in his witness to the Redeemer's innocence. Reader, could we say the same of you?

The thief's confession of faith *was exceedingly honouring to the Lord Jesus Christ*. He confessed that Jesus of Nazareth had done nothing amiss, when the crowd around the cross were condemning him with speech and gesture. He honoured Christ by calling him Lord while others mocked him; by believing in his kingdom while he was dying on a cross, and by entreating him to remember him though he was in the agonies of death. Do you say that this was not much? Well, I will make bold to ask many a professor whether he could honestly say that throughout the whole of his life he has done as much to honour Christ as this poor thief did in those few minutes. Some of you certainly have not, for you have never confessed him at all; and others have confessed him in such a formal manner that there was nothing in it. Oh, there have been times when, had you played the man, and said right straight out, in the midst of a ribald crew, "I do believe in him whom you scoff, and I know the sweetness of that dear name, which you trample under foot," you might have been the means of saving many souls; but you were silent, and whispered to yourself that prudence was the better part of

valour and so you allowed the honour of your Master to be trailed in the mire. Oh, had you, my sister, taken your stand in the family — had you said, “You may do what you will, but as for me, I will serve the Lord” — you might have honoured God far more than you have done; for I fear you have been living in a halting, hesitating style, giving way to a great deal which you knew was wrong, not bearing your protest, not rebuking your brother in his iniquity, but studying your own peace and comfort instead of seeking the Redeemer’s glory. We have heard people talk about this dying thief as if he never did anything for his Master; but let me ask the Christian church if it has not members in its midst — gray-haired members, too, who have never, through fifty years of profession, borne one such bravely honest and explicit testimony for Christ as this man did while he was agonizing on the cross. Remember, the man’s hands and feet were tortured, and he himself was suffering from that natural fever which attends upon crucifixion; his spirit must have melted within him with his dying grief’s, and yet he was as bold in rebuke, as composed in prayer, and as calm in spirit as if he was suffering nothing, and thus he reflected much glory upon his Lord.

One other point about this man’s confession is worthy of notice, namely, that he *was evidently anxious to change the mind of his companion*. He rebuked him, and he reasoned with him. Dear friends, I must again put a personal question. Are there not many professing Christians who have never manifested a tithe as much anxiety for the souls of others as this thief felt? You have been a church member ten years, but did you ever say as much to your brother as this dying thief said to the one who was hanging near him? Well, you have meant to do so. Yes, but did you ever do it? You reply that you have been very glad to join others in a meeting. I know

that, too, and so far so good; but did you ever personally say as much to another as this dying man did to his old companion? I fear that some of you cannot say so. I, for my part, bless and magnify the grace of God which gave this man one of the sweet fruits of the Spirit, namely, holy charity towards the soul of another, so soon after he himself had come to believe in Jesus. May we all of us have it yet more and more!

So much for the confession of his faith: now a little, in the third place, about HIS PRAYER OF FAITH. ***“Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.”***

He *addressed the dying Saviour as divine*. Wonderful faith this, to call him Lord who was “a worm and no man,” and was hanging there upon the cross to die. What shall we say of those who, now that he is exalted in the highest heavens, yet refuse to own his deity? This man had a clearer knowledge of Christ than they have. The Lord take the scales from their eyes, and make them to pray to Jesus as divine.

He prayed to him also as having a kingdom. That needed faith, did it not? He saw a dying man in the hands of his foes nailed to a cross, and yet he believed that he would come into a kingdom. He knew that Jesus would die before long, the marks of the death-agony were upon him, and yet he believed that he would come to a kingdom. O glorious faith! Dear friend, dost thou believe in Christ’s kingdom? Dost thou believe that he reigns in heaven, and that he will come a second time to rule over all the earth? Dost thou believe in Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords? Then pray to him as such, ***“Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.”*** May God give you the faith which set this thief a praying in so excellent a fashion?

Observe that *his prayer was for a spiritual blessing only*. The other thief said, ***“Save thyself and us:”*** he meant, “Save

us from this cross. Deliver us from the death which now threatens us.” He sought temporal benefits, but this man asked only to be remembered by Christ in his kingdom. Do your prayers run that way, dear friends? Then I bless the Lord that he has taught you to seek eternal rather than temporal blessings. If a sick man cares more for pardon than for health, it is a good sign. Soul mercies will be prized above all others where faith is in active exercise.

Observe how humbly he prays. He did not ask for a place at Christ’s right hand; he did not, in fact, ask the Lord to do anything for him, but only to **“remember”** him. Yet that **“remember”** is a great word and he meant much by it. “Do give a thought to thy poor companion who now confesses his faith in thee. Do in thy glory dart one recollection of thy love upon poor me, and think on me for good.” It was a very humble prayer, and all the sweeter for its lowliness. It showed his great faith in Jesus, for he believed that even to be remembered by him would be enough. “Give me but the crumbs that fall from thy table, and they shall suffice me: but a thought, Lord Jesus, but one thought from thy loving mind, and that shall satisfy my soul.”

Did not his prayer drip with faith as a honeycomb with honey? It seems to me as if laid asoak in his faith till it was saturated through and through with it, for *he prays so powerfully*, albeit so humbly. Consider what his character had been, and yet he says, **“Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.”** Note well that it is a thief — an outcast, a criminal on the gallows-tree who thus prays. He is an outcast by his country’s laws, and yet he turns to the King of heaven and asks to be remembered. Bad as he is, he believes that the Lord Jesus will have mercy upon him. Oh, brave faith!

We see how strong that faith was, because he had no

invitation so to pray. I do not know that he had ever heard Christ preach. No apostle had said to him, "Come to Christ, and you will find mercy," and yet he came to Jesus. Here comes an uninvited guest in the sweet bravery of holy confidence in Christ's majestic love; he comes boldly and pleads, "**Lord, remember me.**" It was strong faith which thus pleaded. Remember, too, that he was upon the verge of death. He knew that he could not live very long, and probably expected the Roman bone-breaker to give him very soon the final blow; but in the very hour and article of death he cried, "**Lord, remember me,**" with the strong confidence of a mighty faith. Glory be to God who wrought such a faith in such a man as this.

We have done when we have mentioned, in the fourth place
THE ANSWER TO HIS FAITH.

We will only say that *his faith brought him to paradise*. We had a paradise once, and the first Adam lost it. Paradise has been regained by the second Adam, and he has prepared for believers an Eden above, fairer than that first garden of delights below. Faith led the dying thief to *be with Christ* in paradise, which was best of all "**To-day shalt thou be with me in paradise.**" Whatever the joy of Christ, and the glory of Christ, the thief was there to see it and to share it as soon as Christ himself.

And it brought him paradise *that very day*. Sometimes a crucified man will be two or three days a-dying; Jesus, therefore, assures him that he shall not have long to suffer, and confirms it with a "**verily,**" which was our Lord's strong word of asseveration, "**Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise.**" Such a portion will faith win for each of us, not today it may be, but one day. If we believe in Jesus Christ, who died for our sins, we shall be with him in the delights and happiness of the spirit-world, and with him

in the paradise of everlasting glory. If we commenced to believe at once, and were to die immediately, we should be with Christ at once, as surely as if we had been converted fifty years ago. You cannot tell how short your life will be, but it is well to be ready. A friend was here last Sabbath-day of whom I heard this morning that he was ill, and in another hour that he was dead. It was short work; he was smitten down, and gone at once. That may be the lot of any one of you; and if it should be, you will have no cause whatever to fear it if you now, like the thief, trust yourself wholly in Jesus hands, crying, ***“Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.”***

The lesson of our text is not merely that Christ can save in our last extremity, though that is true, but that now at this moment Jesus is able to save us, and that, if saved at all, salvation must be an immediate and complete act, so that, come life or come death, we are perfectly saved. It will not take the Lord long to raise the dead — in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, the dead shall be raised incorruptible; and the Lord takes no time in regenerating a soul. Dead souls live in an instant when the breath of the Spirit quickens them. Faith brings instantaneous pardon. There is no course of probation to go through; there are no attainments to be sought after, and no protracted efforts to be made in order to be saved. Thou art saved if thou believest in Jesus. The finished work of Christ is thine. Thou art God’s beloved, accepted, forgiven, adopted child. Saved thou art, and saved thou shalt be for ever and ever if thou believest.

Instantaneous salvation! Immediate salvation! This the Spirit of God gives to those who trust in Jesus. Thou needs not wait till tomorrow’s sun has dawned. Talk not of a more convenient season. Sitting where thou art, the almighty grace of God can come upon thee and save thee, and this shall be a

sign unto thee that Christ is born in thy heart the hope of glory — when thou believest in him as thy pardon, righteousness, and all in all, thou shalt have peace. If thou dost but trust thyself in Jesus hands thou art a saved soul, and the angels in heaven are singing high praises to God and the Lamb on thine account. Farewell.

The third of seven booklets.

