

The Pathway to Paradise

Luke 23:39-43

The last words General John Sedgwick ever uttered were said to have come in response to a suggestion that he should not show himself over the barricade during the Battle of the Wilderness. He allegedly answered, "Nonsense, they couldn't hit an elephant at this distance."

Supposedly, as dramatist Oscar Wilde lay dying in a drab Paris bedroom, the last words he was heard to say were: "Either that wallpaper goes, or I do."

And, of course, the last words that can be attributed to any redneck: "Hey, Bubba, watch this!"

The last words a person utters before he or she dies are often fascinating. Sometimes they are not, as in the case of Dominique Bouhours, a French grammarian, who died in 1702. His last words were rather vanilla: "I am about to - or I am going to - die: either expression is correct." Pretty boring.

Today, I want to consider the final words of a man about whom we know next to nothing. We know only that he had wasted his life. He was a criminal, sentenced by Rome to die by crucifixion. In fact, it was not until his dying utterance that his life was salvaged. One of the two thieves that were crucified next to Jesus recognized the futility of his existence. As he witnessed the demeanor of the Man on the cross next to his, he was convicted that this Man was the Son of God and he caught one last glimmer of hope that his eternity could be paradise even though his life to date in this world had been squandered. Crying out to Jesus was his pathway to paradise.

I. The Pathway to Paradise Requires a Properly Focused Guilt (verses 39-41)

³⁹One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

⁴⁰But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

A. One Must Grasp One's Condition before One Can Grasp One's Cure

Suffering doesn't always make a man better. Sometimes, it just makes him madder and meaner. Matthew and Mark tell us that both thieves had "mocked" Jesus earlier. Now, Luke notes that the man who persisted actually "hurled insults" at Jesus, a more intense word than mocking. This might have included the kind of cursing that could get a crucified man's tongue cut out were it directed at the Romans. As it was, the more ruthless soldiers may have gotten a perverse kick out of the whole scenario. Watching one condemned man turn on another may have given them a bizarre rush.

This first criminal had lived a life of sin, but he lacked the kind of remorse that leads sinners to repentance. Instead, he cursed Jesus. Was this was a pathetic attempt to numb his own torment? Perhaps, the silent nobility of Jesus enraged him, and he was determined to provoke Jesus into dying as angrily as he would. Perhaps, this thief, like many in the crowd, was aware of Jesus' career. The Jewish rulers had taunted, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One" (Luke 23:35). Jesus had saved others - from disease, blindness, demonic possession and even death. Jesus really could have saved both thieves as well as Himself, but He would not. Perhaps, the basis for the first thief's rage was as simple as that.

The second criminal's torment drove him to thoughts of eternity and judgment. As he pondered the character of the man on the cross next to his, he was constrained to make a decision as to who he believed Jesus was. Though the sign above Jesus' cross was hung there to ridicule Him, the thief saw that it was really true. This was "the King of the Jews" for whom his nation had long waited. He did what he could to silence the ranting of his counterpart. "Are you crazy? Don't you fear God's wrath even now that you're just moments from facing it? We are here because we are criminals. Stuff like this happens to criminals. But, this innocent man is all that is left of any hope you or I may have."

B. Whatever Happened to Good Old-fashioned Guilt?

Guilt is not always a bad thing. Sometimes, it's quite useful. Dale Rooks, a school crossing guard in Florida, tried everything to get cars to slow down through the school zone. Nothing worked until he took a blow dryer and wrapped it with electrical tape, making it look like a radar gun. Dale just points the thing at cars, and it's incredible how quickly they hit the brakes.

We cannot admire those who manipulate others with guilt trips. We despise the false guilt Satan uses against Christians who struggle to take Jesus at His Word in regard to the scope of His forgiveness. But, we also recognize this world's reluctance to declare anyone "guilty" except perhaps, the very vilest of offenders. Everyone else is just a victim or a product of society to the point that no one is just "plain old guilty" anymore. I am as sensitive as the next guy toward issues of mental illness, psychological pressures, the absence of opportunities, victimization by abuse and chemical dependencies, but such issues don't render any of us "innocent" or "not accountable" for our actions.

In an article boldly entitled, "A Message to Christians Concerning Same-Sex Relationships," the late sociologist Everett Grant Jarvis wrote:

"Contrary to popular ecclesiastical opinion, being gay is *not* necessarily living one's life in opposition to the Will of God. Since one's sexual orientation is most definitely *not* a choice, but an inborn characteristic that manifests itself sooner or later in every individual, and is a gift from God (the Creator of us all), let no one dare say that such difference - be it gay or straight - is evil or perverted."

Wow! He seemed pretty sure of himself. However, Mr. Jarvis did not make it very clear as to what authority he was standing on for his assertions. It seems to me that if one urge can be defined as inborn, then any urge can be credited to the Creator. The obvious conclusion of that slippery slope is that there is no sin against God, for He is the party responsible for our urges. These two men crucified with Jesus were not bad fellows. They were just acting on impulses that God planted in them. "Criminal" and "thief" are such harsh terms. Let's just call them "non-traditional shoppers."

Sin has always been with us, and the tendency to justify sin has always been right there alongside it, because we don't like feeling guilty and we loathe being declared guilty by anyone else. But, a sense of guilt is not a bad thing. In fact, it can be a very healthy thing. Guilt without hope is admittedly poignant, but guilt itself can awaken us to a hunger for a solution. It's like pain, which signals us to the fact that something is wrong. Pain sends us to the doctor. Pain compels us to remove our hand from the oven burner. Likewise, guilt can send very important signals to our spirits. In the case of the penitent thief crucified next to Jesus, it caused Him to turn trustingly to Jesus for salvation.

The first thief insulted Jesus. The second thief recognized owned his own guilt. He did not plead insanity, irresistible urge, parental abuse, or economic disadvantage. He pleaded guilty. He cleared away the rubble of self-rationalization and in the beauty of Jesus, he found a Savior.

II. The Pathway to Paradise Requires a Properly Centered Hope (verse 42)

⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

A. The Man Addressed Jesus for Salvation

Friends and enemies alike called Jesus, "teacher." This acknowledged that He was a rabbi with a following. Simon the Pharisee treated Jesus rudely but he addressed Him as "teacher" as did the Pharisees who wanted to silence the adoring crowd when Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem.

We call Jesus, "Lord" for He is the Ruler of our lives and over creation. "Christ" the Greek equivalent of *messiah*, acknowledges that Jesus is the Jewish *messiah* foretold in prophecy. Jesus constantly referred to Himself as "the Son of Man" while His disciples recognized Him to be "Son of God." Through the centuries, theologians and commentators have labored to help us to grasp the full import of those terms. Jesus is in every respect God and in every respect man.

Jesus is certainly Teacher, Lord, Son of Man and Son of God. But, who might a Jewish thief hanging on a cross be longing to meet? He was probably not looking for an educator, a master, or a full theological grasp of Incarnation. I suspect that He was longing for a Savior, someone who could show him a way of escape from the eternal darkness of being estranged from God. There were many other ways to address Jesus were the thief just feeling "religious," but the most precious way was also the simplest. The name "Jesus" is the Greek equivalent of Joshua, *Yeshua*, meaning, "Savior."

I don't know that this thief was well-versed in the meanings behind names, but I know that he addressed the Man next to him in the most appropriate way and by His loveliest designation. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." The thief acknowledged the weight of his own sin as well as his need for a Rescuer. "Jesus, I just want to be a part of Your kingdom."

B. The Bible Is Not Silent as to the Exclusive Nature of Jesus to Save

The world will typically acknowledge Jesus alongside Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed and all the rest. When Christians insist on the exclusivity of Jesus to save people from sin, we can find ourselves tagged as dangerous religious bigots, but if we behave ourselves and keep all that "Jesus saves!" rhetoric in check, the world will say nice things about Jesus. Christianity is benignly numbered with the great religions of the world, but that's misleading. Inherent to Christianity are claims that set it apart from the others. Whether one accepts Jesus or rejects Him, Christianity is a different animal.

Religion is typically a system rooted in the teachings of a founder who often claims to be a prophet. That founder dies, and his followers carry on after his death to pursue God's favor through deeds of every imaginable kind. Christianity claims that its Founder is not a dead prophet but One Who rose from the dead and is in His essence, God. His followers would never attempt to carry on in His absence. Rather, they are empowered by His indwelling presence. Deeds cannot curry favor with God so much as they evidence changed lives. Jesus died to shoulder the divine judgment due to each of us for our sins, so that we are declared righteous by God when Jesus' virtue is applied to us. That message can be accepted or rejected, but it cannot be modified if it is to remain distinctly Christian.

Christianity is not only a unique take on religion. It makes unique claims about its salvation message:

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." - John 14:6

The eyewitnesses of Jesus unashamedly declared:

"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." - Acts 4:12

Christian "religion," the external practice of faith, is not a feeble attempt to wrestle salvation from God's hand. It is the rightful response of transformed hearts for what He has already freely given. Biblical Christian doctrine fundamentally denounces the notion that in the various religions of the world there are a variety of avenues to God. There is one Way, one Truth and one Life. 2000 years ago, one particular dying thief recognized this. He looked nowhere but to himself to place the blame for his own sins. He looked nowhere else but to the cross next to his for the hope of eternal salvation.

III. And, Jesus Delivered Mightily (verse 43)

⁴³Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

A. Paradise Meant a Pardon for Iniquity

The world scoffs at death bed confessions of faith in God and jailhouse conversions to Christ. I believe unrelentingly that God's grace is bigger than man's deepest sin, but my eyebrows arch a bit as well when I hear some such stories. It's not that I don't want them to be true. I do. God's grace I trust. It's the human heart I'm not so sure about. It would be nice to see a little evidence of transformation before a man dies or outside of prison walls where temptations are more enticing. I compel myself to gratefully thank God for the possibility of such conversions and leave it there. Only Jesus could explore the depths of this man's dying wish, but whatever lay behind his request to be remembered in the eternal kingdom was sufficient to convince Jesus Who promised Him paradise.

The story of the thief's eleventh-hour conversion reminds us that God's grace really is that big. Still, if you understand the truth of Who Jesus is now, don't wait until death's threshold to act. Receive pardon today and begin to testify to God's power through your transformed life. Receive Christ now and live from now on in such a way so that the preacher won't have to do your funeral with his fingers crossed. At the very point that you recognize your status as a sinner, run to Christ just like that dying thief did, not merely because he was dying, but because he saw Jesus for Who He was.

B. Paradise Meant a Promise of Intimacy

Jesus promised this thief companionship with Himself in "paradise" before day's end. "Paradise" was a Persian word meaning "a park," "a garden," or "a walled garden." A king bestowed a very special honor on a subject when he designated him "a companion of the garden," chosen to walk in the royal garden with the king himself. Our thief did not ask for such a special place in Christ's kingdom. He wasn't a close friend like James and John who dared to ask for seats of honor. He just asked Jesus for enough mercy to not be overlooked. The text is unclear as to whether the thief hoped for an immediate blessing or something far off in the future, but Jesus made at least part of the picture very clear. Something of the blessed hope would belong to this man before the day at hand was over.

This is what it's all about. Through the preaching of the cross, through the Bible, through the transformed lives of Christians, people come face to face with Jesus and the Holy Spirit convicts them that He can save them from their sins. We are touched by this story because a man found salvation and we are thrilled for him. But, we should likewise be touched because of the joy this man's prayer brought to the heart of Jesus. H.D.M. Spence writes:

“No strengthening angel could have been more welcome to the dying Redeemer than these words of intense penitence and deep faith.”

Besides, the angels of heaven were busy. On an earlier occasion, Jesus told a parable about a shepherd who left ninety-nine of his flock in the open country to find one sheep that had strayed. He described the shepherd's sheer joy at finding the one sheep. Regarding heaven's elation, He added:

“I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.” – Luke 15:4-7

When the Jews used the word “paradise,” they typically meant Eden or the bosom of Abraham. These were Hebrew concepts. Neither paints an exhaustive picture of the afterlife, but both depict a tender image of intimate companionship. All the thief wanted of the kingdom of Jesus was to be included. Jesus effectively said, “I can give you so much more. This very day, we will walk together in God's garden.” Before he fell, Adam walked with his Creator and Friend. Sin dealt that intimacy a blow. Because of the cross, as it was in that first garden, so it will be again for God's children.

What an unlikely candidate to become the first citizen of Christ's eternal kingdom. He was a thief. He may have been a cohort of the murderous Barabbas who was originally intended for that center cross. And yet, a man branded and executed as a criminal would be remembered by Jesus just for showing the good judgment to ask. The hymn writers got a lot of mileage from this fellow:

*"The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day.
And there may I though vile as He wash all my sins away."*

*"Are ye able to remember when a thief lifts up his eyes
that his pardoned soul is worthy of a place in Paradise?"*

Shouldn't the first man purchased by the blood of Jesus have been a better man than this common thief? What an unlikely candidate. But, then again, who *is* a likely candidate for the grace of God?

⁶We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. – Isaiah 53:6

An unlikely candidate? Jesus died for a whole world of unlikely candidates.

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