

It was right there all along.

Maybe we've been searching for the blessed life with the latest or greatest do it yourself plan for some anticipated fulfillment.

Or maybe we said "yes" to Jesus some time ago and have pretty much left the Lord in the past and hope to meet him on the day of our death in the future -- for right now we kind of visit Jesus once a week or month or so in worship.

We might even think that we will always have time to get things squared away for eternity at a point in the future.

Salvation is for today, whatever time or season of life you are in. Right now, the salvation available through Jesus makes such a qualitative difference in our lives that Jesus himself said it was like being born a second time. The Apostle Paul wrote that if we are in Christ, we are a new creation.

For all of us, today, the example of the criminal on the cross is an invitation: "Jesus, remember me".

It is simple.

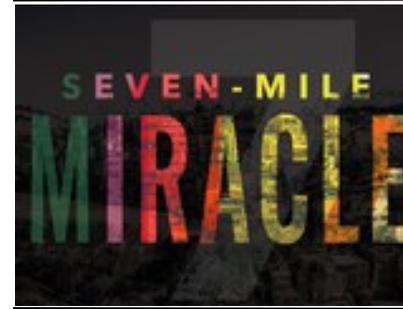
His promise is certain.

And it puts our feet again on the path God has promised to bless.



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**Luke 23:39-43
Our Need for Salvation**

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Luke 23:39-43

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

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

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

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

Talking about salvation can get us nervous.

We're often unsure if we are saved or not.

Like Larry the Sad Boy I mentioned last week who, shockingly for a Scandanavian Lutheran, repented and believed twelve times -- a record of any Lutherans in Lake Wobegone.

Or maybe if we think personally about our salvation, we recall a particular event, a time of receiving Christ or inviting Christ into our heart, or publicly confessing our faith in Jesus at confirmation.

Many of us seem to hope that when the test for salvation comes, our regular attendance at worship and extra credit we might get for serving on a church committee will get us enough points for a passing grade when we die..

I've got great news for you today:

Salvation through Christ is simpler, more certain, and more practical than many of us might think.

This is a sermon about salvation.

Not a theory or a theological lecture, but a deeply personal experience we overhear from Jesus on the Cross in his exchange with one of the two criminals being crucified with him.

And it is not an historical reflection of something that happened long ago and faraway, but an invitation to you and me today, and tomorrow, and for all time. Even beyond time.

Simple: Jesus, Remember Me

You are familiar, perhaps, with the setting.

Two others, both criminals (the word indicates political insurgents/terrorists) were led out to be executed with Jesus. They nailed Jesus to the cross. And the criminals were also crucified -- one on his right and one on his left. ... (Lk 23:32-33)

One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed. *"You, you're the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself -- and us, too, while you're at it!"* (Lk 23:39)

"Scoff" means to mock or dismiss with contempt. The Cambridge dictionary, reflecting British sentiment, indicates that scoffing means you find a person to be foolish; not to be taken seriously. And surely it seemed that Jesus had become a big joke. They put a sign over his head, "The King of the Jews". The irony of the sign over his head and the plain fact of being executed for political crimes -- the mighty Roman justice machine squishing Jesus like a bug -- indeed made the whole scene morbidly ridiculous. This criminal finds Jesus to be worthless.

The other criminal, however, was aware of something else. He protested to the scoffer. *"Are you mocking God's justice? We are being put to death because of what we have done. What did you expect? We deserve to die for our crimes. But this man hasn't done anything wrong."* (Lk 23: 40-41). This is a man who, as the Scriptures describe people like this, "feared God." He was aware that God is just and we are not; God is holy and we are not; God's ways are higher than our ways and even when we convince ourselves that we are righteous, it may only indicate that we are self-righteous. And that would indicate that we might actually need rescuing. We might need to be saved.

And he (Furtick) gives a couple of examples:

You became a parent when your child was born.

You are a parent today

You will be a parent tomorrow

There will be different ways this parenting goes -- past, present, and future -- but parenting is a process.

How about marriage?

You were married on your wedding day.

You are married today.

You will be married in the future -- unless there is a collapse of the relationship, but that sort of undermines the example. The point is a relationship that has a past, present, and future.

Salvation means "wholeness" or "completely well", not just "ticket to get through the pearly gates."

This is not something far away intended for somebody else.

The fact that there is *just one example* in the New Testament of a commitment to Christ at the time of death should caution us not to keep putting off our response to Jesus until the last minute. And because there is *at least one example* of a last minute commitment to Jesus means it is never too late -- for us or anybody else.

During Superbowl XXXVII, FedEx ran a commercial that spoofed the movie *Castaway*, in which Tom Hanks played a FedEx worker whose company plane went down, stranding him on a desert island for years. Looking like the bedraggled Hanks in the movie, the FedEx employee in the commercial goes up to the door of a suburban home, package in hand.

When the lady comes to the door, he explains that he survived five years on a deserted island, and during that whole time he kept this package in order to deliver it to her. She gives a simple, "Thank you."

But he is curious about what is in the package that he has been protecting for years. He says, "If I may ask, what was in that package after all?"

She opens it and shows him the contents, saying, "Oh, nothing really. Just a satellite telephone, a global positioning device, a compass, a water purifier, and some seeds."

Practical: Today

There is one more important word in this brief exchange between the repentant criminal and the Lord Jesus. It is the word, "*Today*". You may remember another account related to Jesus' power over death: the raising of Lazarus. If you know of this situation, Lazarus had died three days before Jesus arrived. The body of Lazarus was already in the tomb. When Jesus showed up, Lazarus' sister Martha was pretty put out that he had been so slow in coming. He could have perhaps healed her brother and restored his health. Jesus says something about resurrection, that death does not have the last word, and Martha says that yes, she believes in the resurrection of the dead on the last day, at the end of history, when God judges between the righteous and the unrighteous.

Do you remember what Jesus says to her?

Not something like, "Have faith until that day, sister!" Or sing a song like "When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be!"

Jesus says, "*I am the resurrection and the life.*" Not sometime in the future, but I am here now.

Jesus, remember me.

You will be in paradise with me TODAY.

Safe in the hands of the Savior TODAY.

We have a common misperception that salvation is something for the future -- a get out of hell free card or insurance against the fires of punishment or something like that.

Steven Furtick, in his book *The Seven Mile Journey*, helpfully reminds us that salvation is past, present, and future. Salvation is a process. Furtick finds the three tenses in the New Testament (p. 51)

"It is by grace you have been saved through faith." Have been -- past tense. (Ephesians 2:8)

"Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day." Are being renewed -- present tense (2 Corinthians 1) 4:16)

"Through faith we are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is read to be revealed in the last time." To be revealed -- future tense. (1 Peter 1:5)

Honestly, we recoil at language like that, don't we?

Maybe some people will need God to rescue them, but honestly, we're pretty much able to find our own way without all of that believing and faithing and dependence upon God.

When it comes to religious devotion, well, if it helps with our mindfulness or centering, if it is a place of refuge or a community of common values, then okay. But let's not get carried away with all of the wrath and mercy, grace and judgement, heaven and hell, and all of that. It's a lifestyle choice. An accessory.

Our understanding of salvation in North America, however, seems to focus on self-improvement efforts. If we're in a jam we can save ourselves, thank you very much. An article in the New York Times from several years ago catches, I think, our willing substitution of American success for God's gift of salvation:

"I think I can see the whole destiny of America contained in the first Puritan who landed on those shores," the French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville wrote after visiting the United States in the 1830s. Was he right? Do present-day Americans still exhibit, in their attitudes and behavior, traces of those austere English Protestants who started arriving in the country in the early 17th century?

It seems we do. Consider a series of experiments conducted by researchers led by the psychologist Eric Luis Uhlmann and published last year in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology. In one study, they investigated whether the work habits of today's Americans reflected the so-called Protestant work ethic. Martin Luther and John Calvin argued that work was a calling from God. They also believed in predestination and viewed success as a sign of salvation. This led to belief in success as a path to salvation: hard work and good deeds would bring rewards, in life and after.

Studies since the '70s have also found that Americans who score high on a Protestant Ethic Scale (emphasizing self-reliance and self-discipline) or similar metric show marked prejudice against racial minorities and the poor; hostility toward social welfare efforts; and, among obese women, self-denigration.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/05/opinion/sunday/are-americans-still-puritan.html>

This second criminal sees something different in Jesus: someone suffering innocently for crimes he has in no way committed. Could this really be the much anticipated Messiah? As a political terrorist, he was intensely committed to the redemption of the Jewish people and the overthrow of the Roman oppressors by God's Ruler. This criminal knows he is dying -- and he is stretching beyond his impending death, beyond the present agony, out to what might happen sometime in the future. If Jesus is the Messiah, despite all appearances, when he comes in his kingdom at the end of time, when there is the judgement of the living and the dead, the end of history and the dividing of the righteous from the unrighteousness, when God sets all things right, when you come again as king, Jesus, remember me.

What does this mean?

It is a phrase found on some tombstones of Jewish people of that time. These words are a prayer -- not just a request to surviving family and friends. What the criminal meant was, "When resurrection day comes, Lord God, when you announce and inaugurate your kingdom, Lord, remember ME. Don't forget ME just because I am a condemned criminal buried in this tomb. Let your salvation include ME.

You and I can relate, can't we?

Even if we're like the second criminal, the one who believes Jesus is Someone uniquely special, the Savior, we don't want Jesus to forget about us. We don't want Jesus to "remember" us just once -- like when we first come in faith or are confirmed or ask Jesus into our heart at summer camp. We need him to remember us over and over again.

Remember me when I am tempted.

Remember me when the destructive voices within me are so loud.

Remember me when life is hard and I don't know how to go on.

Remember me when I am afraid.

Remember me when I am all used up.

Remember me when I am weak.

Remember me when I am confused.

Remember me when I am wandering away.

Remember me when I am sick.

Remember me when I am dying.

Jesus, remember me.

Certain: You will be with me in paradise

And Jesus responded to that second criminal.

It is suggestive, I think, that Jesus makes no response to the scoffing, mocking, dismissive criminal. But to the one who asks, Jesus responds.

The past several weeks we have brought our attention in worship to Jesus' teaching often called the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6. The Lord begins by sketching out the difference between the life that is blessed by God and the life that is cursed. And he concludes with a story about two houses, one firmly anchored to a foundation and the other built with no foundation whatsoever. When a torrent of floodwater hits them both, one stands and one is completely destroyed. This isn't about home construction, but about you and me. There is a choice to be made: follow the ways of the Lord or refuse to follow the ways of the Lord. One way leads to blessing the other to curse.

One criminal dismisses Jesus and the other asks, "Jesus remember me."

Jesus does not respond to the one, doesn't try to convince him, doesn't waste what few breaths he has left on that cross to plead with the unrepentant criminal. But to the one who asks, he responds:

"You will be with me in paradise."

Just a note here: "paradise" is not just another word for "heaven". Paradise, in Jewish thought of the first century, was used for an intermediate place where the righteous dead were at peace, waiting for the day of resurrection. Jesus was promising that this condemned, crucified man would be among the righteous on that final day of resurrection. He would share with Jesus in God's kingdom. So he could die on this day in peace; as we have it in our liturgy shared at the graveside, *"in sure and certain hope of the resurrection and the life to come."*

In spite of all the sins and crimes and wrongdoing the man had committed, his future was safe -- safe in the hands of Jesus, the Messiah King and Savior whom he had just acknowledged.

"And why was this man saved? Because he had confessed his sin, turned to Jesus, and called out to Jesus. He trusted in Jesus, and he was assured of salvation by the promise of Jesus himself. This is the simple and certain example we are invited to follow"
(Christopher Wright, *The Cross* InterVarsity Press).

