

FINDING GOD

by

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE THIEF ON THE CROSS

“And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom” (Luke 23:42).

EVERY ONE who is not a Christian ought to be interested in this man, to know how he was converted. Any man who objects to sudden conversions should give attention to how this man was converted. If conversions are gradual, this poor thief could not have been converted. If a man who has lived a good, consistent life cannot be suddenly converted, then this thief didn't have a chance. If it takes six months, six weeks, or six days to convert a man, there was no chance for this thief. Turn to Luke 23, and you will see how the Lord dealt with this man, who was not only a thief, but the worst kind of a thief. It was only the worst class who were condemned to die the death upon the cross. We find this man was condemned to that most ignominious death.

When a prominent man dies, we are anxious to get his last words and acts. We ask, “What did he do? What were his last words and acts?” The last act of the Son of God was to save a sinner. He began His ministry by saving sinners, and ended it by saving this poor thief. **“Shall the prey be taken from the mighty, or the lawful captive delivered? But thus saith the Lord, Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away, and the prey of the terrible shall be delivered.”**

He took this captive from the jaws of death. He was on the borders of Hell, and Christ snatched him from the grasp of Satan. We are told by Matthew and Mark that these thieves cursed; they both reviled Christ. They were not only thieves but revilers; and they cast it into His teeth that He said, **“I am the Son of God.”** Here, then, our Lord is condemned by them. There were none to pity them.

Perhaps they might have had some mother in the crowd, but no one else had any pity for them. Justice cried out: “Let them be put to death; they are not worthy to live.”

The question is: What was it that converted one of these thieves? I do not know, but I have an idea that it was Christ's prayer. When Christ cried on the cross: **“Forgive them; for they know not what they do,”** I can imagine that did what the scourge did not do. They had gone through the trial, and their hearts had not been broken; they had been nailed to the cross, but their hearts had not been subdued; they raised no cry to God for mercy, but they reviled the Son of God.

But when they heard the cry: **“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do,”** one of them said: “That Man is not of the same spirit as we are. I would call out the thunderbolts of Heaven to consume them.” There they are crying, **“Save thyself if Thou be the Son of God”**; yet while they are crying this, the Son of God is crying to His Father to have mercy on them. It flashed into his soul that this was the Son of God, and that moment he confessed his sin. He turned to the other thief and rebuked him, and said, **“Dost thou not fear God?”** The fear of God fell upon him. There is not much hope of a man’s being saved until the fear of God comes upon him. Solomon says: **“The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.”**

We read in Acts that great fear fell upon the people: that was the fear of the Lord. That was the first sign that conviction had entered the soul of the thief. **“Dost thou not fear God?”** That was the first sign we have of life in that condemned man.

The next thing, he justifies Christ: **“This man hath done nothing amiss.”** When men are talking against Christ, they are a great way from becoming Christians. Now he says, He **“hath done nothing amiss.”** There was the world mocking him; but right there, in the midst of thieves, you can hear that thief crying out, **“This man hath done nothing amiss.”** “But,” he says, **“we are suffering justly.”** Now he took his place among the sinners, instead of trying to justify himself. He says: **“We suffer justly; we have done wrong, and our condemnation is just.”**

There is no hope for a sinner until he admits that his condemnation is just. The great trouble is, people are trying to make out they are not sinners; and therefore there is no chance of reaching them. But this thief said, **“Our sentence is just”**; and he took his place among sinners. There is no hope for a sinner until he sees the condemnation is a just condemnation, because he has sinned, and come short of the glory of God. This thief confessed his sin, and then justified Christ, saying, **“This man hath done nothing amiss.”**

The next thing is, he had faith. Talk about faith, I think this is the most extraordinary case of faith in the Bible. We talk about Abraham as the father of the faithful; do not compare Abraham’s faith with this man’s faith. God had Abraham twenty-five years talking up his faith. Moses saw the burning bush, and God talked with him; he had reason to believe. But this man we have no reason to believe ever knew anything about Christ. His disciples had heard His wonderful sermons and parables, and had seen Him perform His mighty works; and yet they had forsaken Him. One of His chief men, Peter, had denied Him with a curse; perhaps the thief heard this. Judas had betrayed Him. He saw no glittering crown upon His brow; he could see where they had put the crown of thorns, and the scars they made; he could see no sign of His kingdom. If He had a kingdom, where were His subjects? They were wagging their heads; they were crying: **“If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself.”** Yet that thief called Him **“Lord”**. I consider that man had more faith than any other person mentioned in Scripture.

When I was a boy I was a poor speller, but one day there came a word to the boy at the head of the class which he couldn’t spell, and the word went down to the foot; none of the class could spell it. I spelled it, as we used to say then, by good luck; and I went from the foot of the class to the head. So the thief on the cross passed by Abraham, Moses, and Elijah, and went to the head of the class.

How refreshing it must have been to Christ to have one more own Him as Lord, and believe He had a kingdom, and that He was a King. Oh, thank God for this man's testimony! He said unto Jesus, "**Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.**" If you are going to get into the kingdom of God, or if you are going to come to Christ, you must have faith in Him.

The first thing this thief did, he feared God. Then he did not justify himself but justified Christ. "**We, indeed, suffer justly . . . but this man hath done nothing amiss.**" Then his faith went out toward Him; faith flashed into his soul. The moment he had faith in Him he cried out: "**Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.**"

I have a thousand times more respect for the Jew, who will not believe in the Son of God, than I have for those who believe in Him and will not trust Him. This thief, the moment he did believe Christ was the Son of God, right there he owned Him: "**Lord, remember me.**"

How many men know He is the Son of God, but have not the moral courage to come out and call Him Lord? This thief—ah, how noble—right there alone, no one standing by him, not even the thief on the other side. There was the chief priest, Caiaphas, and the chief men of his nation against him. There was no one who cared to speak out on that memorable hour, only that poor thief! I can imagine he had a praying mother, and that when he was a little boy his mother taught him Isaiah 55, and he learned that verse: "**Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near.**"

When he found this was the Lord, he called upon Him at once. A man said to me once: "I cannot make a prayer; I read prayers." What could this poor thief have done if he could not have made a prayer? He had no book; and if anyone had given him a book, he could not have read it. He prayed out of his heart. His prayer was short, but it brought the blessing; it came to the point: "**Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.**" He asked the Lord to give him, right there and then, what he wanted.

You see, in the conversion of this thief, salvation is distinct and separate from works. Now some people tell us we have to work to be saved. What has the man who believes that to say about the salvation of this thief? How is he going to work, when he has nails through both hands and through both feet? He cannot work with his hands or run with his feet. When he had the use of his feet, they were engaged in the service of the Devil.

He took the Lord at His Word, and believed. It is with the heart men believe, not with their hands or feet. All that is necessary for a man to be saved is to believe with his heart. This thief made a good confession. If he had been a Christian fifty years, he could not have done Christ more service than he did there. He confessed Him before the world; and for 1,900 years that confession has been told. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John have all recorded it. They felt it so important that they thought we should have it.

Someone has said that Christ did not give the thief arms to fight for God, but He gave him wings that he might fly away to his Creator. He got an answer to his prayer as soon as he asked.

He said, “**Lord.**” He put the Lord at the head of the prayer. “**Lord, remember me.**” Three short words—three golden links in that chain that bound him to the throne of God. The Lord could not help answering that prayer. He says He will save all who will call upon Him; the man called upon Him, and He had to answer the prayer. Did you ever see a man in the wide, wide world that ever called to the Lord out of the depths of his heart that the Lord did not answer? The answer came.

See how salvation is separate and distinct from all ordinances—not but ordinances are right in their places. Some people say you cannot be saved if you are not baptized. Many people think it is impossible for anyone to get into the kingdom of God if he is not baptized into it. I don’t want you to think I am talking against ordinances. Baptism is right in its place; but when you put it in the place of salvation, you put a snare in the way. You cannot baptize men into the kingdom of God.

The last conversion before Christ died on the cross ought to forever settle that question. If you tell me a man cannot get into Paradise without being baptized, I answer, “This thief was not baptized.” If he had wanted to be baptized, I don’t believe he could have found a man to baptize him. Some people tell us a man cannot be saved until he has partaken of the sacrament. The thief did not. Who administered the bread and cup to him? Was there a man on that mountain that would have faith to believe he could have been saved? Would the Roman government have allowed them to administer the sacrament, or baptize him? The moment he asked for life he got it. Salvation is distinct from ordinances. Baptism is one thing; the Lord’s Supper is another thing; and salvation through Christ is another. The only way for us to be saved is to come straight to Christ for life, and to own, as this man, that we have sinned, and that our condemnation is just.

Bear in mind, God is just; and the condemnation He has pronounced against us is a just condemnation. “**The soul that sinneth, it shall die.**” God has a right to put a penalty to His law, and it is just for God to pronounce condemnation. But God is also a God of mercy. God will have mercy upon all them that call upon Him. I can imagine, after that thief believed, he commenced right there at once to praise God. I can imagine, as the soldier drove his spear into our Saviour’s side, there came flashing into his mind the words of the prophet Zechariah: “**In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness.**”

The thief was led out in the morning to the cross; in the evening he was in the Paradise of God, crowned with a crown he should wear through all ages. In the morning led out to suffer punishment; in the evening, going down the streets of Paradise, arm in arm with the Son of God, in the morning, not an eye to pity him; in the evening, up there amid the hallelujahs of Heaven. In the morning, in the society of thieves; in the evening, washed and made clean in the blood of the Lamb.

You know Christ died a little while before the thief. I can imagine He wanted to hurry home to get a mansion for him, and to give him a welcome when he got there, that he should not be a stranger. The Lord loved him, because he confessed Him in that dark hour. It was a dark hour for many of them who said, “He is not the Son of God, the Saviour of the world.”

Some go so far as to try and make out He was an impostor. In this dark day, should we not come out like the thief and confess Him, and take our stand on His side? If we do, He will remember it. The thief wanted to be remembered in Christ's kingdom. When Christ instituted the Lord's Supper, His dying request was we should remember Him in this world; and now the thief's request was he might be remembered in His new kingdom.

Go into some of our churches next Sunday morning, where they are going to administer the Lord's Supper. The bread and cup are there. The minister, who pronounces the benediction, asks the people to stay and partake of the Lord's Supper. Two-thirds of the people will get up and turn their backs upon it. They say: "What do we care for His death? What do we care for what the Son of God has done for us?" But this thief, thanks be to God, did confess Him! He asked to be remembered; he believed Christ has a kingdom. Hundreds of thousands of people believe Christ has a kingdom; yet they will not seek Him, and they will not cry out, "**Lord, remember me.**" I believe that if every unsaved soul would cry out, from the depths of his heart, "**Lord, remember me,**" the answer would come immediately. He would remember you, and there would be the response. "This very night you shall become an heir of My kingdom." You can now become a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, if you will.

I can imagine how the thief's soul leaped for joy when he heard Christ say, "**It is finished.**" He wanted to follow Him. I can imagine, when the men came to break the legs of these thieves, that this one was in a hurry to be gone. The moment his soul left that body, it leaped into a chariot sent down from Heaven; and away it went to meet the Saviour. He was a condemned man in the morning; in the evening in the Paradise of God. So if your heart is as black as that poor thief's, if you call upon God, He will have mercy upon you and save you now. I have no doubt that, until he cried to the Lord, that thief had no thought that he would be saved.

I wish the fear of the Lord would come into your heart and that you may confess Him, and take your place as a sinner, asking God to remember you. What will you do with Jesus—with the Saviour? He comes and He offers salvation. You can be saved now if you will. He is just the same Saviour the thief had; it is the same cry he made that you want to make. Let that cry go up now. Whisper, "**Lord, Lord, remember me!**" and see if He does not answer your prayer. Do you want the Lord to remember you, and have mercy upon you? Call upon Him now. I think the thief was the first man to enter Paradise after the veil of the Temple was rent.

If we could look up yonder, and see around the throne, if we could catch a glimpse of the throne, we should see the Father there and Jesus Christ at His right hand; but hard by the throne you should see that thief. He is there now. He has been there 1,900 years, just because he cried: "**Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.**" I see Mary Magdalene there, and Zacchaeus, the chief publican of Jericho; and if I could ask them how they came there, they would shout down, "Saved by grace." There is only one way to Heaven. Do you want to join that throng? Then send up the cry, "**Lord, remember me.**"

~ end of chapter 13 ~

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