

PARADISE GAINED AND LOST

“And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death....And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But he answering rebuked him, saying, 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, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise.” - Luke 23:32, 39-43.

The events surrounding the last moments before the deaths on the three crosses are nothing short of dramatic. On one level, they illustrate the incredible extent of God’s forgiveness. The Saviour’s companions on that fateful day were professional criminals. In the eyes of the Roman government they were terrorists whose prime aim was to make life as difficult as possible for the occupying power. This they would do by ambush and rebellion, they along with many others were real thorns in the sides of the authorities. In their own eyes they were freedom fighters. Now their days together were about to end. Before nightfall they would be dead.

Mercifully, it was the evening of the Passover Sabbath, and Jewish law decreed that their bodies could not hang on crosses on that special day. For them then, the awful suffering would soon be over. That day was their last on earth. But what then?

For the Man on the centre cross, He was not, like the other two, there, for any crimes. He was not only innocent but perfect! He was there paying the penalty of human guilt. In a sense, His companions were representatives of the human race. Few of us have criminal records, as these men had, but we have *“all sinned and come short of the glory of God” - Romans 3:23*. But for the unique intervention of our Saviour the Lord Jesus, we would all die in our sins and be eternally lost.

It is at this level that we see the grace of God working in the dying moments of these two men. History would record that while they were united in crime and in death, they were divided in eternity. Why?

One chose to address the central sufferer as Lord, recognising His right to Messianic kingship. Jeshua, Saviour King of the Jews He believed and went to paradise. The other did not believe and perished.

As the gates of Paradise opened for the criminal, so the gates of everlasting salvation were finally and fully being opened for all mankind. It was the dawning of a new day, the inauguration of the new covenant.

All this begs a number of questions. For example:

What right had the malefactor to ask to be remembered?

How could a notoriously sinful man go immediately to Paradise?

What about his sin?

Then we would ask; How could the central Sufferer, who Himself would be dead before nightfall, be of any value to him?

The short answer to our first question must be that this man had no rights or claims whatever. In the eyes of the law he was an offender and must suffer the due consequences for his misdeeds. Why then did the King on the cross hear his cry? And on what grounds did he go to Paradise?

Paradise is the place of the just and the holy. It is what it says: pleasure for evermore!. But by its very nature it demands a total absence of sin. "*Nothing that defileth shall ever enter in*" - *Revelation 21:27*. Two things must have impressed Jesus; an unqualified confession of sin - "*we indeed justly for we receive the due reward of our deeds*"; and, an unquestioning belief that the Man beside him was special, "*this man has done nothing amiss. (out of place)*".

What a confession, what a belief! What faith that could stretch from the natural to the supernatural, to see that this was not the end of the matter, but the beginning. So he repents, he capitulates. As a professional criminal, his life was characterised by rebellion against the authorities. Now he willingly, ungrudgingly subjects himself to the authority of the King by his side.

That is why the gates of paradise opened so quickly for him.

Finally we must inquire; Who is this Jesus, who is this King?

Why His death makes all the difference is in the answer to the question WHO IS HE?

We have noticed that the malefactor's repentance was followed by FAITH! From where did he summon such trust? At the moment in question the King was about to die! His royal garment had been a blood stained purple robe, His kingly sceptre a Judean reed. His adulation was ribald mockery. He now wears a diadem of thorns and His throne was a cross!

Was not the dying man's faith then incredible?

If this is a king, over what country does He reign? What are its boundaries? What are its laws? Who are its subjects? The answer to these questions lies in what was written above His cross and what was not written! Above the heads of each of the men was a notice board. It bore their names and a list of the crimes they had committed. But above the head of the central Sufferer were listed no crimes, just His lovely name -

JESUS. He was the One who was foreordained from the world's foundation to be "*the Lamb of God that would bear away the sin of the world*" - *John 1:29*. The One about whom the Prophets wrote;

"The Lord made to meet upon him the iniquity of us all...It pleased the Lord to bruise Him.....He hath put him to grief.... And made an offering for sins " Isaiah 53.

This is Jesus!

At the commencement of His ministry and also near its end, the heavens were opened and God , His Father, declared "*THIS IS MY BELOVED SON IN WHOM I AM WELL PLEASED*" *Matthew 3:17, 17:5*. He was not to be CONFUSED with the worst of men (a generation of vipers) and on the mountain of transfiguration the Father would not have him COMPARED with the best of men!

The mention of going to Paradise, of course, forecast RESURRECTION! The

grave would not keep THIS MAN. And because He lives we, who love and trust Him, with the believing malefactor, will live also.

Who of us today are able to say; *"This is my beloved and this is my friend?"*

*Is this the man,
Can this be He,
The prophets have foretold
Should with transgressors numbered be
And for my crimes be sold?*

Who of us can answer; THIS IS HE!

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