Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The King Crucified: Conversion at Calvary
Scripture: Luke 23:39-43
Code: 42-287

Luke 23 is our text, Luke 23. We're going to return to the scene at Calvary on that Passover Friday in the spring of A.D. 30 when Jesus was crucified. I want to give you the full setting as Luke records it, so I want to begin reading in verse 32 and read down through verse 43. "And two others also, who were criminals, were being led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified him and the criminals one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, 'Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' And they cast lots, dividing up his garments among themselves and the people stood by looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at him saying, 'He saved others. Let him save himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One.' And the soldiers also mocked him, coming up to him, offering him sour wine and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.' There was also an inscription above him, 'This is the King of the Jews.' And one of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at him saying, 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us.' But the other answered and rebuking him said, 'Do you not even fear God since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we, indeed, justly for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' And he was saying, 'Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom.' And he said to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today, you shall be with me in paradise.'

The story of the penitent thief is not in Matthew, Mark or John. It is only in Luke. This is all we have. And in a sense, as we look at verses 39 to 43 and consider this miraculous conversion of a thief hanging on a cross next to Jesus, we might conclude that this is a rather cryptic account. Perhaps we would wish that Matthew had given us another look at it or Mark or both or John, but this is all we have. We have considered the comedy at Calvary, the burlesque, the vaudeville, the sarcasm, the mockery, the extended joke as the notion that Jesus was a king was laughable. They heaped scorn on him, "If you're a king, save yourself and us." We have looked not only at the comedy at Calvary, we've looked at the contrast at Calvary; the great contrast between their hatred and his forgiveness as he prays, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," when they were in the process of doing the worst thing that had ever been done by anyone ever.

And now we come to the conversion at Calvary, the story of the salvation of a crucified thief. And as I said, as you first look at it, it seems a bit brief and perhaps not very revealing, but you will find by the time we're done that it is anything but that. And there are so many ironies at Calvary, but one almost finds it impossible to list them all. Here is Jesus being mocked because he can't save anyone and he can't save himself, saving a thief by not saving himself. The ironies go on and on. Jesus is accused of

claiming to be a king, threat to the power of Rome, a threat to Cesar, a threat to Roman authority. He must be executed before he can lead a revolt. And yet, by the same people who claim to be protecting Rome from him, he is mocked and scorned and ridiculed as impotent and helpless. He is treated like a king only in sarcastically cruel jest, yet in reality he is God's true king. He is accused of blasphemy against God by those who blaspheme him, the true God. So the blasphemers accuse the one being blasphemed of blasphemy. It is also ironic that he, the innocent of the righteous, is executed by the guilty. Justice is turned on its head. It is also somewhat ironic that he is cursed by his enemies who hate him, but cursed in an infinitely greater way by his father who loves him. He appears unable to save himself or anyone else, yet being unwilling to save himself becomes the savior of the world. He is the one who gives life, who is life, who is dying, that those who are dead might receive life. One such dead sinner is hanging next to him, to whom God miraculously, sovereignly, powerfully, instantly, transformingly gives life and that's this one thief.

There's another irony, that the Jews want him dead so they can get on with the celebration of the Passover that points to his death. The Jews want to get on with the slaying of the lambs that can never take away sin while rejecting the one, true lamb of God how alone can take away the sin of the world. While they are busy killing the lambs who had no power, God was by their hands, killing the lamb to whom all salvation power belongs. The Jews looked at Passover as God rescuing them from Pharaoh. That really wasn't what the Passover was. They looked at the Passover as God rescuing them from the power of Pharaoh in Egypt. It was really far more than that. While there was a deliverance from Egypt, there was a far greater deliverance in the Passover. Do you remember what the Passover was? The word came from God that he was going to come in sweeping judgment on both Egyptians and Jews, and the only people who would be protected from that judgment would be those who put the blood of the lamb on the door post and the lintel. Otherwise, the judgment of God would hit that house and take the life of the first born. And God did not discriminate between the Jews and the Egyptians. He would take the life of any first born. He would bring wrath and judgment on any household that was not covered by the blood of the Passover lamb. The night of the Passover, then, was not truly a deliverance from the power of the Pharaoh and the wrath of Pharaoh, it was a deliverance from the wrath of God. Somehow they had skewed that thinking that they were delivered from the wrath and power of Pharaoh. They celebrated that part of it and they forgot that the real Passover was a deliverance from the wrath of God. And all sinners are always deserving of wrath unless they're covered by the blood, and the blood of bulls and goats can't take away sin and can't really cover the sinner. So they had no idea what as going on at their cross of Calvary when the true Passover lamb was dying so that his blood might become the protection of all who believe in him.

So in not saving himself, Jesus was able to save others, exactly opposite their assumption that he couldn't save anybody because he couldn't even save himself. How twisted their perception. How wrong. And the whole scene was feeding this twisted perception. There was no clarity anywhere. The leaders didn't have clarity. The people didn't have clarity. The Romans didn't have clarity. The high priests didn't have clarity. The chief priests didn't have it. Nobody had it. Everybody had a twisted and

perverted understanding of what was happening and in the midst of all of this, one man gets clarity. In spite of everything that's going on around him in which he's been a participant, the light dawns. Life comes out of death. Knowledge comes out of ignorance. Light dispels the darkness. And that's the story of this man that we call the penitent thief. It's a personal story. It's a very personal story. It's about one man. It's a personal story of salvation, but it's also the pattern of the story of all people's salvation. You might read the story and say well, you know, this isn't exactly the kind of thing that we associate with salvation. It's kind of cryptic and kind of looks like historical shorthand. Do we really have enough to know that this man met the necessary conditions for salvation? Well, if you look a little closer you're going to find out the answer to that is absolutely yes.

This personal story has much more in it than at first meets the eye. It is a personal story, but it is everyone's story because it's how all sinners come. And so it's your story and my story, if you're a believer. Let's look at the story and let it unfold for us. Verse 39, "One of the criminals who was hanged there was hurling abuse at him, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us," in a joking, sarcastic fashion. Now remember, going back to verse 32, there were two thieves – two criminals – being led away to be put to death with him and verse 33 says they were crucified, one on the right and one on the left. Verse 39 says that one of the criminals was hurling abuse at him. That's really not the whole story. Matthew tells us and Mark tells us in their parallel accounts of the cross that both thieves were doing that. Both of them. They both joined in the comedy, if you will, the mockery, the blasphemy. So as the scene begins to unfold at 9:00 in the morning when Jesus is crucified, they're part of the joke. They're fully involved in the blasphemy led by, orchestrated by the Jewish leaders. The people fall in line, the soldiers fall in line, the thieves fall in line as well, and even though they're hanging on the cross enduring the same suffering that Jesus himself was enduring physically, even though they're in a torturous and deadly kind of excruciating agony, they're mustering up enough energy to hurl abuse and blasphemy at Jesus. That's how powerful – that's how powerful the moment was. That's how infectious the hatred was. They used their energy for that.

But one of them all of a sudden grows silent in Luke's account. And we only have one left hurling abuse at him. Something happened to the other thief. As the hours passed on the cross, one of the two most thoroughly degenerate people on the mountain, at the scene, a man devoted to violent robbery, a wicked criminal, has a massive transformation. It is shocking; 180 degrees. His taunting goes silent and while his body is in horrible trauma and agony, the unparalleled suffering of crucifixion, his mind might be assumed to go foggy as he tries to deal with the pain. And as some kind of shock would set in, just to protect him from agonies that would be totally unbearable, and we know the body has the capacity to send us into shock in order to mitigate those kinds of excruciating experiences, but in the moment of the worst imaginable kind of agony, his mind becomes crystal clear with a clarity and perception of reality and truth that he'd never experienced in his life. With a clarity and a perception of truth and reality that he hadn't experienced a moment before. Something has happened. All of a sudden, he turns to his friend and rebukes him for doing what he had just been doing. What has happened?

I'll tell you what has happened. A divine, sovereign miracle has happened. There is no other explanation. You want a parallel to this? Paul on the Damascus Road. That's the best parallel. His thoughts of Jesus are thoughts of hate. His thoughts toward those who confess the name of Jesus are thoughts of persecution and execution. Paul has papers. He's on his way to Damascus to persecute and execute those who named the name of Christ. And while he's on his way with his papers in his hand, God invades his life, slams him to the dirt, blinds him and saves him. That's how salvation works, folks. It is a sovereign miracle. Not always that dramatic, but sometimes that dramatic. This is the best biblical parallel to Paul's Damascus Road conversion, an overpowering work of God to turn somebody around. And it's what Paul said when he writes to Timothy. He said, "I was a blasphemer, but God showed me mercy." Now remember, this thief would have been the most wretched of men. He would have been the worst present in the eyes of the Jews. The religious Jews would have seen him as unredeemable. If you want to connect this with somebody else, this man would be the prodigal. This is a wicked man, but all of a sudden in the moment he is dramatically transformed and it becomes immediately evident what has happened. He goes from blaspheming Jesus to being horrified at the other criminal blaspheming Jesus. His whole perception of how you treat Jesus is completely changed and that's where the story begins. The other criminal has had no such change, hanging there hurling abuse at Jesus with the same mocking sarcasm, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us." It must have shocked him to hear from the other side of Jesus, his friend, verse 40, who answered and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God since you're under the same sentence of condemnation? And we, indeed, justly for we're receiving what we deserve for our deeds. But this man has done nothing wrong." This must have been a shock to the other thief who was hurling the abuse. What happened to you? What happened to you since you were nailed up there? The transformed man finds the taunts coming out of the mouth of his companion criminal repulsive to him and frightening to him and they had just come out of his mouth. What this man says is the evidence of his changed heart. Salvation is a divine miracle and it manifests itself. There's a lot more here than you might think.

First of all, he becomes very, very aware of God and the fear of God. Then he openly acknowledges his own sin. Then he confesses the sinlessness of Christ and affirms his messiah-ship and his savior-hood. It's an amazing thing. And all of these are responses to the miraculous sovereign work of the spirit of God on his dark heart. This is the light of the glorious gospel of Christ shining in the midst of the darkness and dispelling it. I want to sort of unpack those elements that are the manifest evidences that God has done the work of transformation. The other sinner, no fear of God, no fear of judgment, no sense of sinfulness, no sense of justice, no sense of guilt, no desire for forgiveness, no longing for righteousness, no desire for reconciliation. And the thief who has been transformed confronts that tragic condition, which moments before had been his own condition. He can't understand it any more. In a moment of time he went from being a part of it to not being able to comprehend it. How can you act like that? How can you talk like that? Don't you fear God? Don't you know you're getting what you deserve? Don't you know this man is righteous? What a transformation.

Let’s look a little more closely at it.

While the one criminal is hurling abuse at Jesus, the other answered and rebuking him said – rebuking is a very strong word. *Epitima*. He said, “Do you not even fear God?” Let me tell you the first evidence that God is doing the work of conversion: the fear of God. The fear of God. If someone is converted to Christ, if someone is regenerate and someone is born again, made new, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17 he becomes a new creature, old things pass away and all things become new. Boy, do we see that here. And the first thing you see in a real conversion is a heightened awareness that God is a threat. To be afraid of God, literally to fear God. He really is not seeking someone to get him off the cross. He’s not trying to find someone who can save him from physical death. He wants to make sure he is saved from divine judgment. His problem is not really what’s happening to him on the earth, it’s what’s going to happen to him when he comes to the throne of God. He’s a Jew, no doubt, raised to know the laws of God, to understand God – God’s holiness, God’s law, obedience to God’s law. He is a violator of God’s law. He is an open violator of God’s law. He is a known violator of God’s law. He is a tried and proven violator of God’s law and he’s dying a death that is just and he says it. And the law of men was a reflection of the law of God, certainly in Israel, and so he knows that if this is what men to do him for breaking the law of God, what in the world is God going to do to me? All of a sudden he has clarity on what he had learned about the law and guilt and sin and judgment. He knew he was a violator. He was internally convicted by the work of the Holy Spirit, to be aware that what he was getting from a human judge was only a small sampling of what he was going to get from a divine judge. And to add to his guilt, which put him on the cross, you can add that he had been blaspheming the Messiah and he now knows it, producing an even greater guilt. From this place of clarity he can’t even imagine that he did that, that he said what he said to Jesus and he can’t understand how his friend can say that. He says in verse 40, “Do you not even fear God since you’re under the same sentence of condemnation?” They’re two of a kind. Look, we’re getting exactly what we deserve. Don’t you have a fear of what’s going to happen when we wind up before God? As Jesus said in Luke 12:4-5, “I don’t fear those who destroy the body, but fear him who destroys both soul and body in hell.” I will tell you this, and you need to remember this, Romans 3:18 says this when it defines the inherent nature of fallen man and his sinfulness, “there’s none righteous, no not one, there’s none that understand, none that is good,” etc. That text from verse 10 of Romans 3 to verse 18, ends in verse 18 with this statement: “There is no fear of God in their eyes.” It is characteristic of the unregenerate not to fear God. This is a typical unregenerate comment, “I’ve lived a pretty good life. Certainly God will take me to heaven.” Like the Jews in Romans 10 who didn’t understand the righteousness of God. The sinner does not live under the fear of God. He must be brought under the fear of God by the convicting power of God. This thief who is still hurling abuse at Jesus has no fear of God like all other sinners. But the sinner who comes to salvation has been brought by the power of the Spirit of God to a deadly fear of divine judgment. And friends, as we communicate the gospel with sinners, you can’t hold back that reality. The gospel is not telling sinners that Jesus will make them happy or Jesus will give them a better life or Jesus will fix up the pain and bring fulfillment and all of that. The message of salvation is you are a violator of God’s law and you are headed for eternal

punishment under the wrath of God. You'd better fear God. That's the message. And when you see a real conversion, you see this and it's reminiscent, isn't it, of Luke 18. What is the public doing as he pours his head down and looks at the ground and pounds his breast saying, "Lord, be" – what – "merciful to me, a sinner." Don't give me justice. Don't give me judgment.

The first thing you do when you proclaim the gospel, when you evangelize anybody, is you move the issue to divine judgment. When you say somebody is saved, saved from what? Saved from God. Saved from God's wrath. Saved from God's justice. Saved from God's judgment. Saved from hell. All of a sudden, he had crystal clarity in his mind on the fact that he was going to stand before God as a sinner with nothing that could rescue him. That's the first evidence of a work of salvation in the heart. The second one is a sense of one's sinfulness. They go together. The fear of God coupled with a sense of one's guilt. Verse 41, we indeed, justly, we're receiving what we deserve for our deeds. He says I'm a lawbreaker. I know that. It's a true assessment of his condition. Like the prodigal, who in getting down with the pigs and trying to eat and be on the brink of death, he says – and Jesus told the story in Luke 15 – he came to his senses. That's where true repentance begins, when you come to your senses. He's guilty, he's aware of his sinfulness, he's in a sense saying I am a sinner. I know I am a sinner. I am receiving what I deserve for my deeds. This is the attitude of a true repenter. He understands that if justice is operating in his life, then he is going to get exactly what he's getting. No excuses. He's not saying I was led astray and there were evil influences in my life. I was molested when I was four or whatever it might be. He's saying look, we're receiving exactly what we deserve for our deeds. Justice is operating and it will operate not only in the human world, in the world of men, but it will operate in God's realm as well. Spiritual reality makes clear that in spite of the system of Judaism teaching salvation by works, salvation by self effort, salvation by ceremony, etc., the true convert pleads nothing but confesses his utter guilt and absolute bankruptcy. He has nothing to offer God; nothing to commend himself. Like the prodigal he comes back stinking and dying. He needs mercy, he needs grace and he knows it. He's an unworthy sinner. These are the evidences of a saving work of God. He needs mercy and it's never been this clear. By the way, sin never becomes as clear to the sinner as when he's in the presence of righteousness. Like Isaiah, who in the presence of God, who was holy, holy, holy, said, "damn me, for I am a man of unclean lips." He had a clear perception of the judgment of God which he was deserving and a clear perception of his great guilt.

There's a third element that becomes in evidence for us of the work of God in his heart and that is that he believed in Christ. He believed in Christ. We talk about two things that make up a real conversion repentance under the fear of divine wrath and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and we see that. The things that he says about Christ, though brief, are really quite stunning. The end of verse 41 he does what the sinner must do. He compares himself with the perfection of Christ. "We're getting exactly what we deserve for our deeds. But this man has done nothing wrong." Here the story moves from an assessment of his own condition to an assessment of Jesus Christ. That's what happens in a true conversion. And he goes beyond saying Jesus isn't guilty of the crime for which he's being crucified to saying something far broader than that. He has done nothing wrong. I don't know how

much he knew about all the attempts to try and find a crime for which they could legitimately crucify Christ and they never could find one. I don't know what exposure he had to Christ. I don't know what he heard other people say about the perfections of Jesus Christ, but our Lord had been on display for three years with all of his perfections and no one had ever been able to lay any legitimate charge against him. He is given, by the power of the Spirit of God, clarity to understand that he is hanging on a cross as a sinner who is getting what he deserves next to someone who is righteous and is getting what he doesn't deserve. He believes, then, in the righteousness of Christ.

Then he speaks to him in verse 42, and he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." What's he asking for here? In a word, forgiveness. Right? How is he ever going to get into the kingdom if he's not forgiven? Did he know that the Old Testament said, "Who's a parting God like you?" Probably. Maybe. Did he know God was by nature willing to forgive? If he knew anything about the Old Testament he knew that. Did he know what he needed? Right, he had nothing to commend himself. He needed to be forgiven. Why would that come into his mind? Because just before this Jesus had said to God, "Father, forgive them." He knew enough about God to know that God was a forgiving God and now that he is clear on who Jesus is as the Messiah of God, the Christ of God, the promised King, the promised Messiah, and he hears him ask the Father to give forgiveness to these people who were right there blaspheming him, he is asking if he couldn't be one of those recipients. He knows what he needs. It's about forgiveness by grace and mercy.

You see the components are here. When the spirit of God does the work of conversion, turning on the light, the first thing the light reveals is the wrath of God. The second thing the light reveals is the guilt of sin. The third thing the light reveals is the glory of Christ and the hope of forgiveness. It was the same thing that the publican was saying, "Lord be merciful to me, a sinner. Is there forgiveness with you? Is there forgiveness with you?" And it was clear to him that this prayer for forgiveness was pretty stunning because he was asking his Father to forgive the people who were committing the worst crime that has ever been committed. They're killing the son of God and they're doing it with glee and sarcasm and sneering and scorn. As so he concludes if there's forgiveness, if there's grace, if there's mercy available from God to people who are doing this, maybe there can be grace and mercy and forgiveness for me. Maybe I could be one of those to receive that forgiveness.

And then – I love this – he was saying, "Jesus, yeshua." What does that mean? Jehovah saves. "We shall call him Jesus for he will save his people from their sins," Matthew 1:21. Yeshua. He recognizes Jesus as righteous. He recognizes Jesus as a source of forgiveness and grace and mercy. He recognizes that Jesus is so merciful and gracious that he's not even holding the sin of these people against them, but rather desirous of their forgiveness. And he sees, I think, all of this with clarity given only by the spirit of God who drew, perhaps out of his background, perhaps out of conversations – who knows where it came from – to focus the clarity because he had to know the truth about Christ. Then when he says, "Jesus," there's a lot in that word. He recognizes Jesus as the Savior. How do you know that? Why would he then ask him to remember him when he comes into his kingdom

unless he thought he was the one who could save him? He doesn't say to him, "Dear sir, could you find somebody that could save me." He doesn't say, "Could you connect with whoever's in charge of saving people like me?" He says, "Jesus. Yeshua." Save me. Remember. More than a thought. We think about remember, it's a hazy, foggy kind of thing. That's not what he's talking about. Much, much more than that. It's a plea of a broken penitent, an unworthy sinner, for grace and forgiveness. And what he's really saying is save me from the judgment of God. Save me from what I deserve. Forgive me. You've prayed it. Can I be one of those that's in answer to your prayer?

And then I love this. Boy, he's got a pretty comprehensive Christology because he says, "Remember me when you come in your kingdom." He's got the Old Testament eschatology. What did the Old Testament teach? That the Messiah would come in the end of the age, gloriously, and establish a kingdom, right, fulfilling all the promises to Abraham, all the promises to David and fulfilling all the reiterated promises of the Old Testament that are rehearsed again and again by the prophets, including the new covenant salvation to Israel, and that there would be a kingdom established on earth that's defined and described in great detail in the Old Testament. An actual earthly kingdom where Israel would be saved, Jerusalem would be exalted, the Messiah would set up his throne in Jerusalem from which he would rule the world, the world would be filled with knowledge and filled with peace and he would rule with a rod of iron and righteousness and glory. He has Messianic understanding. He understands that the Messiah will bring a kingdom. And so he says, "Remember me when you come in your kingdom." Nobody survived crucifixion, so he also believed that Jesus would die and what, rise again and bring his kingdom. That's pretty good Christology. That's exactly what he was saying. Remember me when you come in your kingdom. He is saying this isn't the end of you. Like the Centurion, remember, who says surely this is the son of God. He's convinced.

You say maybe he knew Jesus power over death. Probably, because everybody in town knew that he had raised Lazarus from the dead. And Matthew tells us in Matthew 27 that the thieves were hurling abuse at him and the other people were saying you that said destroy this temple, in three days I'll raise it up, they were mocking him about his claim to resurrection. So they made resurrection an issue at the foot of the cross. He has come to a vast understanding of who Christ is. He understands that he's the Messiah. He's God's anointed, chosen king because he's going to bring the kingdom. He understands that Jesus is righteous. He understands that he is a savior. He understands that he is going to die and rise again and he is going to come in his kingdom and he's going to bring the saints that belong to him and he wants to be one of them. This is an eschatological request. In the Old Testament, the Jews viewed their death until the coming of the end of the age and the glory of the kingdom as a kind of a waiting. They didn't have a very full understanding of what happened after you die. They talked about *sheol* and the grave and his idea was perhaps, Lord, in the future, at the last day, when after you've died and risen again and raised your saints, he probably knew Daniel 12 that the saints are going to be raised and brought to a place of glory in the kingdom. When that day comes, Lord, could I be in your kingdom? He knows it would be shear grace. It would be shear mercy. Would you raise me and make me a part of your kingdom? He's talking about the glory of that

final end time Messianic kingdom that then moves into the eternal kingdom and the new heaven and new earth where Christ reigns forever and ever. I want to be with the saints in the glory of the kingdom. I know I'm not worthy, but would you remember me? Would you bring me with you when you come in or into your kingdom?

The answer that Jesus gives him is absolutely astonishing. Verse 43, and he said to him, "Truly I say to you" – truly I say to you? Why does he add the truly? Because this is so hard to believe. This is really hard to believe. This is really impossible to believe. This is another blast to the sensibilities of the religious leaders, like the father running and kissing the prodigal and kissing him all over the head and putting a robe and a ring and sandals on him and making him a full son and taking him up to his estate and having a celebration. Full reconciliation, full son-ship, full riches, full resources, that kind of shock because you don't just embrace a wretched sinner who's lived his entire life in a sinful way, who is a – this is a prodigal. This is a prodigal hanging on a cross. This is where a prodigal ultimately ends up. Even men recognize that. He's crucified there and what Jesus says to him is outrageous. He says, "Truly I say to you," and he throws truly in there because it's just too hard to believe. "Today you shall be with me in paradise." Now if Jesus had been a Roman Catholic, he would have said, "Yeah, maybe by the time the kingdom comes you'll be out of purgatory." Or if he had been in the Jewish system of works he would have had to have said, "You know what? I like your attitude, but you don't have time to earn your way in. You're about dead. There's not much hope for you." What is this? Today? Today? Today I'll make you a place in paradise. Not on the outskirts and as you demonstrate some spiritual development out there we'll move you closer to town. No. Today you shall be – what are the next two words? With me.

Did he have a right to be with Christ? Are you kidding me? With me? Today. What had he done to earn it? Nothing. He'd be dead before he could do anything. This is grace, isn't it? This is the father kissing the son. This is full reconciliation; instantaneous. Today. Paradise, *paradeisos*, an old Persian word for garden. It's a synonym for heaven. In 2 Corinthians 12 Paul says in verse two, "I was called up to the third heaven." And in verse four he says he was called up to paradise. Same thing. Third heaven, first heaven, atmospheric, second heaven, celestial, third heaven the abode of God. That's paradise. Or in relation to seven, Jesus says, "To him who overcomes I will grant the tree of life which is in the paradise of God." If you turn to Revelation 21 and 22, the tree of life is in heaven. So he's not saying anything but you're going to be with me in heaven today. There's no waiting place. There's no transitional place. Absent from the body, present with the Lord, to depart and be with Christ. If that is not the great illustration of grace I don't know what is. This is a man whose whole life qualified him for hell. And in one moment a sovereign God swept down, gave him complete clarity on himself and on Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit rescued him from divine judgment and that same day met him in heaven and fellowshipped with him. Can you understand how absolutely unacceptable that is to a works righteousness system?

And there's something else here, too, that strikes me. Most of us, at sometime in our Christian life, have asked the question am I really a Christian. Fair enough? I wonder if I'm really saved. Some people struggle with it more than others. Wouldn't it be neat if at the moment you were saved Jesus had showed up and said, "You'll be with me in paradise." That would be nice, that kind of guarantee. Wow. This is such kindness and such comfort to a man who would have been, at that point, so overwhelmed with his own sin, struggling so hard to understand what Jesus had just said, "Today you will be with me in paradise," he would have been wracked by the gnawing reality of his whole life of sin and he would have had nothing to lean on as any evidence of anything other than that. And so in order to remove any undue anxiety, Jesus just told him you'll be there with me. With me. Heaven is not a place where you can go and see Jesus. Heaven is a place where you'll be with him. He'll make his abode with you. He asked for a place in the future kingdom and Christ gave him a place in his presence that day and forever after. Unthinkable to the older brother, huh? Instant heaven. He believed in an earthly kingdom, a Messianic kingdom. He believed the kingdom would be populated by saints and ruled by the Messiah. He believed Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus was the savior, Jesus was the righteous one, Jesus offered gracious forgiveness, and he asked for that forgiveness and received it.

So the mockers are wrong. Jesus can save. But the only way he can save sinners is not to save himself. Did the thief understand at that moment that Jesus was actually hanging on that cross and was innocent? Yes. Did he also understand that Jesus was bearing his guilt? I don't know. But certainly the publican in 18 Luke pounding his breast saying, "Be merciful to me, a sinner," didn't understand the cross. Before the cross and the resurrection, this is a classic example of an Old Testament conversion, only it's beyond an Old Testament conversion. It's come to Christ an he believes right up as far as he can know, the truth of Christ. So the mockers, indeed, are wrong. He can save, but to save others he has to give up his own life. This is the story of one man and its all our story. We were all snatched, weren't we, by sovereign grace, given light in the midst of darkness and life in the midst of death when we came to grips with the wrath of God, the reality of sin and the truth of Christ and asked for grace and forgiveness. And the Lord is so eager, that as soon as you ask, he's eager to say today. If this is the day you die, you'll be with me. Some people think that when Jesus died he went to hell for three days. No. He went and announced his triumph, but that same day he was with that thief in heaven. What grace. This is the grace that comes to any who ask for forgiveness.

Father, we thank you for again the clarity of scripture. We thank you for its richness and we are so blessed, Lord. What can we say? There are no words to express gratitude. We will spend forever and ever saying thank you that you snatched us out of the darkness and lifted us from death and gave us life by your sovereign power. This is so stunning. Salvation is so clearly by grace through faith, not of works. This is so exalting to you. This puts the glory of your love and your compassion and your mercy and your grace on display in such magnificent ways. We are all like the penitent thief. We are all under the wrath of God. We are rescued by the very God who would destroy us if He didn't rescue

us. What great glorious mercy is this and we thank you that we can be forgiven because our sins were paid for by Christ. Father, thank you again for opening our hearts to the truth. We thank you for the blessing of worship and fellowship this morning. We thank you for the joy of singing these hymns and being with those that love you and those we love. We thank you for the friends who have come to visit with us today. We pray, Lord, that you would take the truth and pour it deep into our own hearts that we might know you and that we might rejoice in knowing you in the fullness of understanding the greatness of your salvation. Bring us together again tonight with great expectation as we open your word in fellowship again. We thank you in Christ’s name. Amen.

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2016 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).