

Luke 23:43

What do you say to a dying man? “I’m sorry?” “Hope you don’t suffer too long?” Jesus was dying. They spoke to Him with words of cruelty. They mocked Him. They all did; those watching Him and those dying with Him. They were thieves, and they were dying too. What do you say to a dying thief? “That’s what you get?” “Too bad for you?” To one thief, Jesus said nothing. There was nothing to say. He was dying for him. He prayed to His Father to forgive him. The man’s heart was stubborn. There was no repentance. No words from Jesus to him. No words of comfort. No words of assurance. No words at all. Nothing.

But to the other thief, everything. This thief repented. He was just a few hours from hell and he repented. What changed him? The same thing that changes us—the Word of Christ. Through His words from the cross, the Holy Spirit led this man to repent of his sins. He rebuked his partner in crime: “we are getting the justice we deserve, but this Man has done nothing wrong; remember me, Jesus, when you come in your kingdom.”

This man confessed his sins. He said what we say here: “I, a poor, miserable sinner... justly deserve...temporal and eternal punishment. I am sorry...and I pray Thee...for the sake of the holy, innocent sufferings and death of Thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ...to be merciful to me.”

“Lord, remember me,” we say. “We deserve to be punished, but for Jesus’ sake, show mercy to us.” What does God say to a repentant thief? The same thing He says to you. “I forgive you. Your sins will not keep you out of heaven. You shall be with Me in Paradise.”

Those were the sweetest words that man ever heard. “In truth,” Jesus told him, “this day you will be in heaven with Me.” No doubt, only certainty. Not “maybe,” but “truly.” Not tomorrow; not years or centuries from now. “Today” you will be in Paradise.

For this man there was no tomorrow. Today was it. His last day in time was this day. It was today or never. “Now is the day of salvation.” “Today,” Jesus said, “you’ll be in heaven with Me.”

Some would say that’s not fair. That thief was a worthless man. There was nothing good about him. He lived a selfish life. He hurt others. He had no use for God. The man was scum. And now in his dying hours he hears the words, “Today you will be in paradise!” Why should he go to heaven?!

Friend, if he doesn’t go, no one goes. Heaven is not for the righteous, but for scum. Those who saw themselves as righteous were mocking Jesus from beneath the cross. But they were on the road to hell. That lone thief saw himself as scum, and heaven belonged to him.

He couldn’t save himself, and he knew it. There was nothing he could hold out to God and say, “look at this God; there’s some good in me.” No. There was nothing. No good at all. The good was in Christ, not him. The saving had to come from Christ, not him. He was a few hours away from hell and he couldn’t stop it. And so he didn’t. Rather, he did the opposite. He ran toward hell. He threw himself into hell. “That’s what I get! That’s what

I deserve; not heaven, but hell, and I can't stop it! Jesus it's all up to you. If I'm to be saved, it's in your hands. Remember me Jesus."

That's confession. That's repentance, and nothing else is. If you think you deserve less than hell for your sins, than you belong with the other thief. To repent is to cast ourselves into hell; to freely admit that this is what I deserve, not heaven, but hell. There is nothing good about me. I am not righteous. I am scum.

What does Jesus say to sinful scum like us? He does not turn His head away in disgust. He does not close his lips and say nothing. His words are sweeter than honey to your ears, "Friend, you shall be with Me in Paradise."

Not "maybe;" not "perhaps;" not "if you're good." To dying thieves like us the only thing Jesus has to say is "heaven is yours." We don't deserve it, but it's ours in Christ. That thief didn't deserve it, but he is there with Christ. Jesus' words lift us up out of hell and place us in the heavenly mansions. Jesus' words to that thief erased all doubt; all uncertainty. He was going to heaven, period! Jesus said so.

When Jesus entered into His kingdom, that man would be there with Him. He died with Christ, and he would live with Christ. Do you know that in your baptism, you become that thief? You die with Christ there, and there, you rise with Christ. You are with Christ in His kingdom. Through water and Word He has brought you into His Kingdom of Grace, where He richly showers you with forgiveness of your sins. Where you live, not in doubt, but in confident assurance, knowing that all things are yours in Christ Jesus.

"Jesus," the man cried, "remember me when you come into your kingdom." What can a dying King do for a repentant thief? He gives him comfort. He forgives his sins. He gives heaven to him. And that's what He does for you. He who died and rose again gives you the very best He has to give. "Friend," He says, "you shall live with Me in Paradise." Amen.