

***An Eleventh Hour Conversion***  
**Luke 23: 32-43 (Good Friday 2008)**  
**By Rev. Keith Davis**

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, between the years 1974 and 1978 a man by the name of Theodore (Ted) Bundy went on a killing spree. He confessed to killing 30 women, but homicide investigators fear that the actual number was closer to 100.

For his horrendous crimes against society, Bundy was sentenced to death by the electric chair. On January 24, 1989, in a Florida State prison, (after his fourth and final appeal was denied) Ted Bundy's executed.

However, just a day before his death, Bundy was interviewed by Dr. James Dobson. During that interview Dr. Dobson asked if it was true that he had sought out the forgiveness of God for all his crimes and that he was now a follower of Jesus Christ.

Bundy said "Yes. He had *asked for* and *received* God's forgiveness". As you can imagine, Bundy's 11<sup>th</sup> hour conversion was not well received. As a rule, people are very skeptical about this because it seems almost every criminal on death row manages to find Jesus before he dies.

As one person put it: I guess this means that we can do whatever we want in this life, no matter how dispicable, and then at the last minute, we can experience an 11<sup>th</sup> hour conversion and suddenly we're assured of eternal bliss.

Congregation, we get that term *11<sup>th</sup> hour conversion* from our text. Here, one of the thieves on the cross, a life-long criminal that's condemned to die, a malefactor who literally has but a few moments to live, experiences what seems to be a last minute conversion to Christ.

But is this a fluke? Is this just a ruse? A ploy? An attempt to try to get on Christ's good side before he dies? Furthermore, is there really such a thing as an 11<sup>th</sup> hour conversion? Can someone's heart really change just like that? If so, what does this say about the grace and power of our Savior?

That's just some of the things we'll be considering in our text tonight. Here: **The Suffering Savior Grants a Criminal's Last Request.** Notice:

- 1) **A Surprising Rebuke**
- 2) **A Stunning Request**
- 3) **An Assuring Response**

### **1) A Surprising Rebuke**

The Heidelberg catechism teaches us that Christ suffered during His *whole life* on earth, but that he suffered *especially in the end*. There can be no doubt that it was on the cross that Christ endured the most physically excruciating part of his suffering.

It was on the cross that Christ was made to feel the full weight and measure of His Father's wrath against our sin and guilt; it was on the cross that Christ experienced--in body and soul--the deep anguish and pangs of hell itself.

In addition to the physical pain, Christ was made to endure bitter shame; total humiliation; utter disgrace. He suffered innumerable reproaches, not the least of which was that he was crucified alongside two criminals.

Now, some may think that this was actually a benefit for Christ. If it's true that misery loves company, then at least Jesus didn't suffer and die alone. But the very fact that Christ was made to suffer alongside common criminals makes his shame all the more significant; and the fact that **Jesus was placed in the center** of these two criminals, makes it appear as if He was king of thieves, not the King of kings.

Undoubtedly this is what Isaiah was referring to when he prophesied that Christ *was numbered among the transgressors*. Our passage also informs us that Jesus suffered humiliation as insults were heaped upon him. Luke 23: 35 records that the people and the rulers *sneered* at Jesus as they watched this gruesome spectacle. The soldiers were there mocking Jesus as well.

We saw what these people were capable of back in Luke 22: 60 and following. There they not only mocked Jesus but they beat him with their fists and spat upon him. *Here* they cannot spit upon him any longer nor reach him with their fists, but they still lash out at him with their words.

Their tongues are full of hatred; their words are biting and cruel. The word *sneer* means that they pulled up their noses at Jesus, which is a gesture of strong disdain and contempt. They despise Jesus. They hate Him for who He claims to be.

They said, *He saved others let him save Himself if He is the Christ of God the chosen one (a.k.a. the Messiah)*; likewise in verse 36 the soldiers heap upon him give a similar rebuke; *If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself*. In other words: exercise your sovereign right as king and command your people to save you”!

And even one of the criminals who was being crucified along side Jesus got in on the action. He managed to take his mind off his own pain and suffering long enough to insult Christ as well: *Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!* And Mark 15:32 and Matthew 27:44 record that both robbers who were crucified along side Jesus heaped insults upon him.

In this way what was prophesied about Psalm 22 regarding Christ’s crucifixion was fulfilled. Vv. 6-8 state: *But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: “He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.”*

However, in the midst of all this sneering and mocking and scoffing, something remarkable happens. A stern rebuke is uttered from the cross...but it does not come from the lips of Jesus. He is silent in the face of his mockers. This rebuke came, surprisingly enough, from the lips of someone who (only moments earlier) was scoffing Jesus like everyone else.

It was one of the thieves. And notice, he directs his rebuke, not to the crowds, not to the rulers, not to the soldiers standing nearby, but to his fellow thief on the cross who had mocked Jesus. Luke 23: 40-41 records what he said: *But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don't you fear*

*God...since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong”.*

We'll get to the unusual nature of his comments in a moment, but just consider the contents of his words. For the words which come from the lips of this thief, the words which come from lips which had only moments earlier heaped insults upon Christ, are nothing short of amazing.

This thief informs his partner in crime that while their punishment was just and deserved, while they were getting what their deeds had earned, Jesus had done no such crime; Jesus deserved no such punishment. This thief attested to the innocence and righteousness of Jesus Christ.

How was this possible? How did he know this? Had he known Jesus all along? Was he a secret follower of Christ? No. I believe that this was very much like Peter's testimony. He said "Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God".

Upon making that testimony Jesus replied, "*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven*". There can be no doubt that here too, the Father had suddenly and instantly revealed this truth to the heart and mind of this thief.

How else can we explain that in a matter of moments he went from attacking Christ to defending Christ; He went from mocking and scoffing the Son of God to praising and glorifying Him as God's holy and righteous Son. Why did this take place?

One commentator points out that the answer is found right within our text. Earlier Jesus had prayed, *Father forgive them, for they know not what they do*. And here is the Father's answer to the prayer of His Son. The thief on the cross is but the first fruits of many who would at first mock and scoff Christ and deny Christ, but later would turn to Him in faith and repentance.

And sure enough in Acts we see Peter and John appealing to the very people who had heaped insults upon Christ. Peter preached, *Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying*

*that his Christ would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.*

So the thief's sudden change of heart is evidence of God's irresistible grace; it's also a demonstration of God's sovereignty in salvation where even on the cross, where two condemned thieves hang, one is taken and the other is left.

And this serves as a reminder to us as well that no one (while they still have the breath of life in their souls) is beyond the reach of God's grace; no one, no matter how far they've fallen, no matter how deep a pit they may have dug for themselves, no matter how many horrible and unspeakable things they may have done in their lifetime, no one is ever beyond God's grace.

This scene on Calvary proves that God can redeem anyone, anywhere, at any time, under any circumstances. So never stop praying, never stop hoping, never stop trusting in the power of God.

## **2) A Stunning Request**

Not only does the penitent thief surprise us with his rebuke, but he also stuns us with his request. That's the second point we consider tonight. Look at verse 42. The thief says, *Lord remember me when you come into your kingdom.*

There's a case to be made that the word *into* should actually be translated *in*; so it is argued, the thief wasn't referring to the present moment (to Christ entering into His kingdom upon His imminent death); rather, he was referring to a future event. He was asking Christ to remember him when He came at the end of the age, in the *consummation* of His Kingdom.

That translation actually seems to be more in keeping with Christ's response when He says, I tell you the truth, *TODAY* (not a later time, but right now, *today*) you shall be with me in Paradise (in my Kingdom).

But be that as it may, whether this thief is referring to a future date or even to the present day, the fact is, he is demonstrating remarkable faith in Christ; He seems to possess an uncanny ability not only to see Jesus as the Messiah, the King, but He even sees Christ in His kingdom.

This is stunning, because, as Calvin notes, here is a man *who has not been* educated in the school of Christ; in fact, it would appear that most (if not all of his life) he had endeavored to ignore or extinguish all sense of what was right, yet here, he suddenly rises higher (suddenly sees and understands more) than all the disciples and apostles whom the Lord had gone to such lengths to instruct.

This thief was able to grasp who Christ was; as we mentioned previously, he recognized that Christ was condemned unjustly; that he hung there on the cross in his innocence; in addition, he recognized that Christ's Kingship and Kingdom was not being of this world.

Ponder that a moment. This was something the disciples could not see; it was something that Christ admonished them for again and again. They kept thinking of Christ's kingdom as something earthly, yet here's this uneducated thief, who sees with child-like faith; he sees all this so clearly. He sees that Christ as King of heaven, and that His Kingdom is an eternal kingdom.

You ask, how do we know that this is what the thief sees and understands? How do we know that this is what he saw when he looked at Jesus? Well just consider the circumstances. What proof or marks or seals of royalty did this thief see in Jesus at that moment? What evidence did the thief have to base his knowledge that this Jesus was King of a might kingdom?

All he saw with his physical eyes is what everyone else saw. He saw a man whose flesh was torn, whose life-blood was ebbing away, whose body was so badly beaten, who was racked by such pain and anguish that he was beyond recognition. As Isaiah 53:3 said *Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*

In fact, Jesus was closer to death than the thieves were; recall, their legs had to be broken to speed their death, whereas Jesus died before that moment. So this thief was certainly not pinning his hopes on Jesus as an earthly king of an earthly kingdom. He knew that Jesus was dying.

Rather God gave this thief the childlike faith to see *life* in the face of *death*, to see *exaltation* in the midst of *humiliation and ruin*, to see *glory* in the face of *shame*, to see *victory* in the midst of *defeat and destruction*, to see *heaven* amidst the darkness of *hell*, to see a *King* on His throne, even as he looked upon a wretched figure hanging and dying on a *cursed cross*.

That's what it means to walk by faith not by sight! This thief had the faith *to come to Christ*, to adore Christ, to humble Himself before Christ—believing that this Christ was the Savior of mankind—HIS SAVIOR—the Lord of life, even though this Savior was in the clutches of death.

And beloved, if that is how this robber, this criminal, worship Christ/elevated Christ while He hung there on the cross, then woe be unto us, (“may God deal with us ever so severely”) if we are slow or unwilling to *elevate* Christ, to *adore* Him, to *behold* Him as He is, to *worship* Him in reverence and awe, as He sits in a seat of honor and glory at the right hand of God!

Woe be unto us if we are slow or unwilling to fix our hope for this life upon His resurrection; woe unto us, if our aim and ambition, if our aspirations, our thoughts and desires are not set upon heavenly things, where Christ is seated; woe unto us if we do not put to death the deeds of the flesh, realizing that all our sins have been nailed to the cross with Christ, and we are dead to sin.

If a common thief can look upon a dying Christ and say *Lord remember me when you come into your kingdom*, then surely a covenant child like you and me can look upon an exalted Christ and pray *Lord remember me each day that I may walk in your ways, that I may uphold the glory of your Name, that I may live right now as a member of your glorious kingdom, that every moment of every day I might humble myself before you, my King, and live as you have called me to live.*

### 3) An Assuring Response

So that is the stunning request. Next we consider an Assuring Response. Jesus replies with a promise. *I tell you the truth* (or truly, truly, I say unto you): *today you shall be with me in Paradise*. Jesus leaves no doubt in the thief's mind, or in the reader's mind that the thief would be joining Jesus in Paradise, in heaven, in Christ's eternal Kingdom by the close of that day.

These wonderful words, this reassuring promise by Jesus prompts several observations. First of all it emphasizes, it highlights so beautifully the unselfish, loving, gracious nature of our Savior Jesus Christ. Beloved, I don't know about you, but when I'm in the midst of suffering and pain and discomfort, my mind isn't exactly focused on the needs of other people.

When we're suffering, when we're hurting, we expect others to come and help us. We expect to be saved, not to save someone else. Yet here is our Savior Jesus, hanging on a cross—suspended above the ground by nails driven through his hands and feet, his body searing with pain, he's lost so much blood that he's dehydrated, he's craves something to drink, he's a few hours from death.

The Father is pouring out His wrath upon Him; the pain is relentless as He bears in his body the weight of our guilt; Jesus feels the stripes for each and every one of our sins. Yet at such a time as this, in a moment of unspeakable agony, a robber, a thief asks Jesus to save him also—to make it possible for him to enter into Christ's Kingdom.

Did he know what he was really asking Jesus? Do you know what that meant for Jesus? It meant that Jesus would have to suffer for *his sins* as well. It meant more pain for Jesus; more agony; more of the Father's wrath.

But what did Jesus say? Did Jesus say, "I'm sorry but my burden is already too great"? Did Jesus say, "There's no way, I cannot possibly endure more pain"? Or did Jesus say, "It's too late, you should have thought about this years ago. Do you really think you can just slip into heaven this easily"?

Jesus said none of that. Rather, as the loving Savior of mankind, Jesus did what He had come to do. He assured this fallen sinner of salvation. Jesus had promised that all who come to Him in faith and repentance shall not be turned away. In John 6: 37 Jesus says: *All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.*

Jesus assures us that there's grace even for a life-long criminal who makes an 11<sup>th</sup> hour confession. Jesus willingly, lovingly, eagerly took upon himself the debt of this man's sin and guilt so that he could be free from his sin and enter into His Father's Kingdom.

But notice something else that this verse teaches us. Notice how easy it is to gain access into the kingdom of heaven. This man turned to Christ in faith, and within the span of but a few moments, he went from being an unbeliever and an outcast—one who heaped insults on the Son of God, to asking Christ to remember Him in his kingdom, and being assured of eternal life.

Salvation is that easy, beloved. Jesus is the Door, the Gate to the kingdom of heaven, and that Door, that Gate swings open to penitent sinners with great ease. Sometimes we make salvation more complicated than what it is. Sometimes we want to make it about what *we* have to do (the hoops we have to jump through). (He's promised Paradise, not purgatory; no work on his part!)

In this regard, I fear that we're a bit like Jonah; we like the fact that we're God's people, and we preach the fact that our lives ought to show it. But something just doesn't seem right when a man like this thief is saved; it seems like he should be made to prove himself.

Maybe we'd feel better if he was put on 30 days probation to see if his conversion was real or not. But Jesus doesn't need a probationary period. Jesus sees his heart; he sees faith. Jesus sees that this man believes that He is God's Son, and that He trusts in Him. So we dare not make salvation into something more than that.

One final observation: this passage before us assures us and encourages us of our own salvation. Calvin points out so wonderfully that if this robber found entrance into heaven so easy, if he could have assurance in Christ when around him all he saw was grounds for total despair, then

how much more ought we to be assured of our salvation in Christ; for we know now that Christ has died for our sins, having taken our sins with Him to the cross; we know that by His death Christ has given us the victory over death, the grace, and hell itself, over Satan and all his powers and principalities.

And we know that on the third day our Lord was raised from the dead by the power of God, and that He is the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep in Christ. And so we know that because Christ lives, we live. Because He won the victory over sin and death and hell, we won the victory; and since Christ ascended into heaven there to sit in power at God's right hand, we will rule with Christ as kings in His kingdom.

So brothers and sisters, we have every reason to rejoice, to celebrate, to praise the Lord this evening. Although we grieve and lament that it was our sin that caused our Savior's pain and agony, yet we can also celebrate, for our debt has been paid; our Savior's pain is over; and He will indeed remember us in His Kingdom, and one day soon, unless we go to Him first, He will come back and take us to be with Him.

Until then, we commemorate His death and celebrate the victory we have in Christ! Amen.