

Some Last Words Part 1
Luke 23:32-39

In His last moments of human life, while hanging there on that cross, our Lord spoke several precious words, some to His Heavenly Father, others to some of those gathered around Him, but all for our blessing and benefit.

And for me, one of the greatest blessings that I have received from those words that He said that day are words that reveal the mysterious attribute of His character that we call "Providence", "His Divine Providence".

Providence best defined as being His mysterious "working out" of the plans and the purposes that He had put into place to sustain, govern and direct all the matters and activities of our daily existence. The plans and the purposes that He then, and even now, each day brings forward as he carefully unfolds the events that will accomplish the divine purposes that He, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit devised when they first conceived this grand creation that you and I live within each day.

And for me, part of the mystery of His Providence is that the "choices He makes" are seldom ever predictable, and often not the choices that we might expect. That's because all of His Divine Attributes are perfect and without flaw and are present within every decision that He makes.

Yes, God is Loving and Kind, but He is also Holy and He is Just. And again, all of His Divine Attributes can be seen in everything He does. And that is demonstrated all throughout these scriptures.

And probably, for me, the most mysterious of all the Divine Attributes of His character is His "Grace", His "Grace", His choice to give to us the unmerited and free gift of eternal salvation.

In today's study of these scriptures, even as the Lord Jesus is going through the most difficult moments of His life here on this earth, we see Him still focused on making Divine Choices. And we see Grace and Mercy being given.

That while yes, God truly does sustain, govern and direct everything that takes place within His entire creation, His divine caretaking is not just of a general nature. No! His Providential watchcare is an intimate "Hands-on" caretaking of

every individual and leaving no one and no circumstance to random occurrence.

And that folks is especially comforting to me. Because dear friends, I have come to realize that my commitments and my habits and my behaviors are not at all trustworthy, certainly not trustworthy enough to bank the eternal existence of my soul on my doing the "right thing" at the "right time".

And so, for me, as we see in the response of these men who were crucified with the Lord Jesus, our dependence really must be on the Divine Providence of God and not on anything that we might do in those difficult moments of trial.

We'll pause for a moment and I'll read these words given to us here in Luke chapter 23, beginning with verse 32. Follow along with me . . .

³² Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³ And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. ³⁵ And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine ³⁷ and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."
³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."
(Luke 23:32-43)

Oh dear Christian, yes, our God, His personality and the attributes of His character truly are completely mysterious and "unknowable" to our rational human minds. And that is especially so for the "Grace" and "Mercy" within His Providential Plans for us.

But here today, in just a few words, a small part of that mystery is being unfurled for us, revealed within the contrast of what takes place within the lives and within the eternities of these two men who were being crucified on either side of the Lord Jesus.

And here, we are able also to see the “power of the gospel” at work within the Divine Providence of our Lord, as one of these men hanging there that day did His part in the blessed gift of salvation. He believed the Lord Jesus and he received Him as his Savior.

Recall those exact words given in John chapter 1 verse 12,

¹² . . . to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. (John 1:12)

Dear friends, in those special moments in time, our Lord is able to open our minds and our hearts. And it's then that we are able to receive the salvation that He offers!

And that was so for one of those two men who was hanging there with the Lord Jesus that day. The other gospels record that for a while both men ridiculed and blasphemed the Lord Jesus as He suffered there with them. But then, at some point, this one man seemed to have caught enough of a glimmer of the “gospel” for him to make that all important choice and make that all important request of the Lord Jesus, “remember me when you come into your Kingdom”.

Folks, there have been many sermons preached about the sudden transition that took place within the soul of this one who called out to Jesus, with the “how” and the “why” being debated and explained in many different ways. But for me, it seems more simple than some make it out to be.

Jesus said in John chapter 6

⁴⁴ No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him. (John 6:44)

For me, I'm convinced that it is as simple as this! God the Father drew the heart of this wretched thief to Christ. And this lost soul heard the call of God and he responded rightly.

But immediately, the question would come to mind, but did God not also call out to the other thief, the one who was crucified on the other side of Jesus. And did He not also call out to all of those other people who were standing around the cross that day, those who were jeering and railing against the Lord Jesus.

That is a debate that many bible scholars have voiced since these words were first penned. And I would love to know exactly what really did take place that day.

We do know that each person's "will" is always at work within them. And many would say simply that yes, God called out to all of them, drawing them to receive the Lord Jesus, but the others simply made a "free will" decision to reject the opportunity. And perhaps that is true.

Some, especially those within the "Reformed Faith" would say that this man who gave his heart to the Lord Jesus was one of the "elect" of God, "chosen" before the foundations of the earth were laid. And according to the scriptures given in Ephesians chapter 1 that is true.

Mysteriously, within the Providence of God, both of these "calls" can actually be true. A "general call" is given, but the call was only "effectual" for the one man who answered the call. Those two decisions and the conditions under which each is made is a debate that fills the hearts and minds of many bible teachers and their students. The seeming "free will of man" and the "predestination" of men's souls are both given credence as doctrines of God.

These scriptures are filled with so many, many mysteries such as this one. And we will often be left without fully knowing all of the details of God's plans and purposes. And because of that, I find it best to simply take each word as it is given and continue from there.

And so, may we do that as we study about this special mystery today. And along the way, I want to also give you some of the insights that I found recorded in a commentary written by one of my favorite bible scholars, Matthew Henry.

Again, here in these words we are told that the Lord Jesus was crucified between two thieves. And in these two men is represented the different and opposing effects that the cross of Christ seems always to have on the souls of men.

These two men and all the others who had brought Jesus to this cross were all evildoers, all guilty before God.

And here again is this special mystery. In the words of Matthew Henry, "To most of those gathered there that day, this cross was an aroma of death unto death. But to a few it would begin to become an aroma of life unto life. To them that perish the cross is foolishness, but to them that are saved it is the wisdom of God and the power of God."

Don't you just love the manner of wording with which some of our learned theologians express these truths! I do!

Here on the one hand was a criminal who was hardened to the last. And he railed at the Lord Jesus, just as the others did, saying, "If you are the Christ, as some say you are, save yourself and us".

And even though this man was in pain and agony, and in the valley of the shadow of death, he did not humble his proud spirit, nor did he have a good thing to say, even to his fellow-sufferer.

But here, we see that the other criminal, who had at first reviled the Lord Jesus, did in his last moments begin to soften. Just as he was about to fall into the hands of satan, he was snatched from the burning flames, into the divine mercy and grace of Christ.

But folks, this kind of last minute turning to Christ should not be considered the best path, or even a good path to follow. While yes, it is true that repentance can never be too late. But under no circumstance should someone put off their repentance until they are at their own death's door, hoping in their final moments that they might find mercy. Such waiting is foolishness.

The path that was chosen by this penitent one is truly the path that each person should take. And may we use these last few moments of our time together today to observe some of the process that this penitent one was able to experience.

Note first, that as change began to take place within this man's soul, we see evidence of the two things that are absolutely required in order to have eternal life, "repentance" and then, "conversion".

Then we see him reproving the other criminal for railing at Christ, saying to him, "Do you not fear God?"

I wonder if perhaps his rebuke was not God's voice calling out to the other man, one final time!

And then, we hear the words of repentance as this one owns that he deserves what was done to him. He said, "We indeed justly deserve our punishment".

And here also, we see the division between the two men beginning to take shape, one turning to Christ, the other turning away.

And in their choices, we see the workings of divine grace, in that God does surely make choices as He gives forth His favor to men.

These two men have been comrades both in their sin and now in their suffering, but yet now, one is saved and the other will perish, two that had gone together all along thus far, but now they divide, and one is taken but the other is left behind.

The one who is saved is a true penitent in that he acknowledged and accepted the justice of God. He acknowledged that God has done right, and that he and his comrade have done wickedly.

Too often, we find ourselves questioning God's ways, His plans and His purposes, and as we do, we step across a line where we should not go, sometimes blaming God for our condition and even indicting Him for crimes against us or against our loved ones.

And that is dangerous ground to tread. In Psalm 119 we are told that "God is good and that He does good"! And you and I must do as this penitent thief did and that is to acknowledge and to accept that God is "just" in all that He does.

Here also, this man believed that Jesus was suffering wrongfully, that though He be condemned in the courts of men, He has done no wrong.

The chief priests, with all their great wisdom, would have Jesus be crucified between these criminals, as being one of them. But this common thief, with little or no education at all, showed more wisdom than all of them, and here declared that Jesus was not at all like the two of them.

Whether this man had on other occasions heard of Christ and of his wondrous works is not said, but the Spirit of grace had now given him knowledge that he could not otherwise know.

And so, here in verse 42, the man cried out to the Lord Jesus, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom". This is the prayer of a dying sinner to a living Savior. Perhaps this man had never prayed before, but yet, in his final moments of life is being heard and being saved.

We must always remember that while there is still a breath of life remaining within us, there is hope, and while there is hope there is still room for prayer.

Also, observe this man's faith within his prayer. In his petition he owns Jesus to be Lord of a kingdom; and he acknowledges that Jesus is going to that kingdom, and that there Jesus will have authority.

Note also, that I use the word "own" to describe this man's faith in the Lord Jesus. And may that be true for you and me, that we would "own" our belief in Christ. It must be ours, personally. And our belief must not be mere knowledge alone, but a possession that can never be taken from us. We must "own" Him as Savior and Lord.

Here also in his words, we see that this man believed in another life after this one, and that he desired to be a part of that blessed life, not as the other thief desired, to be saved only for the moment from the cross, but to be more wonderfully blessed after the cross had done its worst to him.

Observe also, the humility in this prayer. This man's only request was, "Lord, remember me." He didn't pray, "Lord, show me a special place in your kingdom". He simply begged, "Lord, remember me."

Such humility is part of the substance of faith that is required before any man can be saved; humility to simply say to the blessed Lord Jesus, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom".

And Jesus is now there, in His kingdom, awaiting each of us. As He promised, He has gone on ahead of us and has prepared a place for us, a "mansion" with many glorious rooms and provisions.

Lastly, we see here the ultimate grace of God being poured out upon this repentant thief as the Lord Jesus, the True and Just Judge of all the earth graciously gave forth His judicial decree to this man saying, "Today you will be with me in Paradise".

In just a few short moments of time, Jesus would open the gates of Paradise, the place of the blessed. And by the shedding of His precious blood, He would invite this penitent sinner and all other penitent sinners to join with Him there. What a precious indescribable free gift!

As we close here today, may I ask each of us to examine our hearts carefully and to ask ourselves, "Have we taken the step that this broken and penitent sinner has taken?" "Have we fully surrendered over our heart to the Lord Jesus?" "Have we humbly said to Him, Lord Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom?"

As the words of that blessed hymn resound, "while on others thou art calling, do not pass me by."

Oh my dear friends, if you have any question or doubt at all, please do pray that prayer right now. Say, Lord Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!

In John chapter 14, Jesus said,

⁶ "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me. (John 14:6)

And again, in John chapter 1 we read,

¹² . . . as many as received him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name. (John 1:12)

Pray with me.