

## Luke 23:40-43

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[ 0 : 00 ] Today we are considering one of the most incredible conversations that has ever taken place.

A conversation between three men. But they weren't just three men standing on a street corner having a conversation. These were three dying men.

Dying as being executed in the most barbaric way. These were men hanging on crosses. And crucifixion, as I'm sure you're aware, is one of the most barbaric and painful ways in which to die. Eventually you suffocate because you are unable to continue to maintain your body's weight and to breathe being nailed on that cross.

And these three men then were each being crucified and they have a conversation with them. Two of the men are thieves, insurrectionists, terrorists who are being put to death because of their misdeeds.

[ 1 : 20 ] But the other is Jesus, the perfect son of God, the most influential man in history. It's a conversation of extremes.

One is hurling insults. One is repenting. One is giving hope. Let's just read it again. It's in Luke 23 and verses 39 to 43.

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults to him. Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us.

But the other criminal rebuked him. Don't you fear God, he said, 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. Then he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Jesus answered him, I tell you the truth.

[ 2 : 30 ] Today you will be with me in paradise. Now Luke didn't record this conversation just for us to marvel at a conversation between three dying men or merely to be entertained.

But Luke recorded this conversation because he wants us to understand the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. He wants us to have clarity over this most profound question.

Why did Jesus die? And one of Luke's ways to answer that question and to help us to grasp it is to relay this conversation so that we can relate to the characters involved and be clear as to why it was that Jesus was found amongst them and what he could then offer through his death.

It's one of the most crucial questions that anybody will ever ask. Sadly today many are just not interested and won't consider the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But if you can get people to consider this amazing man of history and who he is, then very quickly you have to talk about his death. All of the Gospels give so much time to his death and to this fundamental question of why did he die?

[ 3 : 55 ] Well as we listen in then on their conversation, hopefully it will help us to understand why Jesus died and to understand that it wasn't just some interesting historical event, but something which is relevant for you and me today in 2014.

What I want us to do is to consider the words of each dying man. Try and imagine yourself at the scene, listening in as each speaks.

The first man teaches us the easiest and worst mistake in the world. The second man teaches us the hardest admission to make.

And the third man teaches us the greatest gift in the world. Each one has something to teach us. Each one sets the background then for these wonderful, reassuring words of hope of the Lord Jesus as he turns to this man and says, I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.

[ 5 : 03 ] But in a sense we can't grasp Jesus' words until we've understood the words of the other men that set the context. So first of all then, the easiest and worst mistake in the world.

The easiest and worst mistake in the world is to fail to see who Jesus really is because of your own selfishness.

Look at verse 39. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him. Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us.

This man's preoccupation and concern was that Jesus solve his problems. Now, let's just think about this man for a moment.

He is on a cross. He is being crucified. He is in excruciating pain. And you can understand then that the thing which is foremost on his mind is, how can I get off this cross?

[ 6 : 11 ] How can I be rescued from this ordeal that I am facing at this current moment in time? And here next to him is Jesus.

And he can hear from what he's observed and the things that the crowds are saying and the notice that has been written above Jesus' head, that this man, Jesus, is some sort of Messiah.

So, well, if Jesus is some sort of Messiah and Christ and rescuer, well, surely he could rescue me then. He could help me in this predicament that I face, that I'm dying on this cross.

And in a sense, it's understandable. He wants rescuing. But he is making a judgment and an assessment about Jesus on how well Jesus answers his needs.

There's no humility in this man. He's speaking in dismissive and arrogant terms. He's speaking in an insulting and a demanding and a selfish way.

[ 7 : 20 ] His only concern is himself and getting relief from the pain that he is facing and getting off the cross. And by his tone and the attitude with which he speaks, you would think that he was the king of the universe and that this man who was being crucified next to him, Jesus Christ, was in fact his slave.

As he bosses and tells Jesus, do this. If you are who you are, then do this. Because I, after all, am the most important. Some people are like that with everybody, aren't they?

They walk into a shop. They speak to people on the phone as though they're the king and everybody else is there to serve them. I'm sure you've all met them.

They're arrogant. They're looking down on other people. They sort of walk around as though they're in charge and almost people should move out of their way on the pavement as people are inconveniencing them as they come around.

And lots of people, perhaps you too, are like this with God, assuming that God is there to do their bidding. It often shows itself in times of crisis.

[ 8 : 36 ] People become ill. People have an accident. People get into debt. People lose their job.

People are bereaved. Suddenly they have a great need. And well, God, God can sort it out.

And that's how they think about God. And that's how they relate and react to God is that he is there to sort out my problems. That's how lots of people think.

They assume that God exists primarily to solve their issues. And when God doesn't answer their prayers or solve their problems as they feel that he should, when their debt doesn't disappear and the illness gets worse rather than better and the accident seems to have such huge implications on their life, then they become angry with God and reject God and turn their back on God and say, well, how can there be a God when he didn't do this for me?

This is a great sense in similarity with those who crucified Jesus.

[ 10 : 01 ] He wasn't the Messiah that they thought he was. You can see that back in verse 35. They sneered at him. They said if he saved others, let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the chosen one.

You see, they had a particular mindset that they assumed that this Messiah would come and free them from the Romans and give them political freedom in this world.

And when Jesus didn't do that, then he was a disappointment. He wasn't working to their agenda and they couldn't understand then. And they therefore were dismissive of him. What if it's actually the other way around?

What if actually God is the center of the universe and you and I are here to serve him? Suddenly it changes everything, doesn't it?

Why are we speaking to God as though he is here to do our bidding when actually he made us and we're here to do his bidding? You see, this man has made such a tragic yet simple mistake.

[ 11 : 23 ] Imagining that he's the focus when actually the focus should be on Jesus. He shouldn't even be speaking to Jesus in these ways. This is the one who is responsible for making him.

He should be worshipping him, not insulting him. What if God has a better, different solution to your problems and the world's problems?

What if God can see things that you cannot see? Is it not possible that God could be smarter and more knowledgeable than you and I? Is it not possible that God has better ways of managing the world and bringing things to a right conclusion than you and I can see from our narrow, individual, selfish perspective?

It's embarrassing, isn't it, when you forget people's names or you mistake people's identity. How much more to make that mistake with the Lord Jesus Christ? And it's not that God hasn't made it plain.

[ 12 : 42 ] God has spoken and revealed himself. God has made the world which shows and demonstrates that he really is the living God.

He has given us this great book, the Bible, in which he has spoken and revealed himself. And then, not just a book, but he has come in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, who did miracles and spoke with authority, showing that he really was from heaven.

I imagine when we read this account, we think, he's a pretty outrageous guy.

But actually, I think we're more like him than we like to admit. Because so often we have the same wrong attitude towards the Lord Jesus Christ.

Just look at your prayers. How selfish they often are. Rather than full of worship and praise. the easiest and worst mistake in the world.

[ 14 : 01 ] Let's come to the second man. the hardest admission in the world to make. Because now we have a contrast. We're told that the other criminal rebuked him.

Rebuked the first criminal, that is, and said, don't you fear God, he said, since we are under the same sentence. We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve.

But this man has done nothing wrong. Then he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Now we're told in Matthew's account that he too began insulting Jesus.

Both of them were hurling insults at the Lord Jesus Christ. But then he changed his approach and his attitude. He too had been selfish and mocking and setting himself up against God's anointed and failing to honour Jesus as who he was, as the king of the universe and the son of God.

But then something changed. What changed? Well, he began to wake up and see two realities.

[ 15 : 18 ] He began to see his own wickedness and he began to see what Jesus is really like. So first of all then, he saw his own wickedness.

He acknowledges that he was to blame for his own predicament. You see that in the way that he speaks to his colleague and he says that we are punished justly.

He has a sense that actually he has done things which are wrong and which are deserving to be punished. And that the reason that he is being crucified on this cross is because he has done things wrong.

He deserves to be there. We don't like recognising that we're wrong, do we? Our natural tendency is to justify ourselves and to blame others.

You can see it in children very easily, can't you, when they're in the wrong and a parent comes and challenges them and immediately it's their brother or sister's fault or if they can't blame them it's their toy's fault or it's their parents' fault or it's somebody else but it's definitely not them.

[ 16 : 35 ] Adults are a bit more sophisticated but they do exactly the same. Have you ever been to somebody and to say to them look, do you realise that you said this or did this?

How often do you actually get a yes you're right and I'm sorry? Usually you immediately get a fight back, don't you? Because we hate to admit that we're wrong. And we kick and scream whether it's literally when we're a toddler or inside but we hate to admit that the problem is with us.

But this man faced up to that reality. He was guilty. He had done wrong. He deserved to be punished.

And it wasn't just the fact that he'd done wrong before men. He was guilty before God. And you sense that in verse 40 where he rebukes his colleague and says, don't you fear God.

He was starting to get a sense that he was accountable to the living God who made heaven and earth because behind all human authority whether it be parents or teachers or the government and all the arms of government stands ultimately God's authority that we, you and I, are accountable to as human beings.

[ 18 : 06 ] Have you admitted this? Have you faced your guilt? Your sin? Your wrongdoing?

That you haven't feared God as you should but rather you have been dictating to God as to how he should do things rather than submitting to him.

That you have viewed yourself as far too important in God's world whereas he is the preeminent one. You haven't had that sense of humility before your maker and judge as you should.

You've broken his laws and commandments. Have you faced up to your own wickedness? It's the hardest admission in the world to make.

But this man that was only part of what he changed. The other change was in his attitude towards Jesus. He started to see something beautiful and attractive about the Lord Jesus.

[ 19 : 21 ] You see that in verse 41 where he says we are punished justly for we are getting what our deeds deserve but this man has done nothing wrong. No longer is he shouting and hurling insults at him but he's starting to see something of Jesus' purity.

humility. He's starting to see that Jesus hasn't done anything wrong that Jesus doesn't deserve to be on that cross that he is in fact an innocent man. He's starting to see something of his kingship. You see that in his humility in the way that he speaks of the need to fear God. He's starting to see that this person next to him is incredibly powerful and awesome.

He's no longer being swept along by the crowd. Remember the crowd were jeering at him and sneering at him and saying he saved others let him save himself if he is the Christ the chosen one. And this man then is no longer being just swept along by what everybody else is saying. But he's starting to look honestly and truthfully at the evidence in front of him and he's starting to see that actually this Jesus is who he claimed to be.

[ 20 : 43 ] This Jesus is totally different from every other human being. Have you done that? Have you honestly thought about Jesus?

Thought about his life? His claims? His death? His resurrection?

These are incredible claims. And this man as he starts to think these things through and as he starts to observe how Jesus is dying he begins to ask why?

Why is this man on this cross? He's sensing that something strange and incredible is going on. That here is one who has no sin and yet is in the place of sinners and is dying on a cross.

Why is this happening? Here is one who has made great claims. Here is one who he rightly starts to fear as God. Why is he on this cross?

[ 21 : 59 ] Jesus? And you see how much has started to fall into place in his mind and his heart in the request that he then makes in verse 42.

Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom. he's not asking to get off the cross anymore.

All he wants to be now is with Jesus. He's realized that his greatest need in the whole world is not to escape the barbaric cross but is to be with Jesus.

To be reconciled to God that is now he sees is his greatest need that he is a condemned man but if there is some way he can be reconciled to God and made at one with God and be with Jesus then that surely will solve every other problem.

That is the most critical thing he sees. Have you sensed that that's your greatest need? All those other worries and concerns that have been pressing in upon you over these past few days and that you've imagined that just solving this will solve everything else well the word of God comes and says no all of those things are they may be important they may be vital they may be urgent but this is the critical thing you need to be right with God that is the most important thing of all and this of course is what is involved in becoming a Christian coming to know this Lord Jesus Christ as your friend of wanting and desiring to be with Jesus forever and ever recognizing that that's what is what is right and useful and what you most need that leads us thirdly then to the greatest gift in the world

[ 24 : 27 ] I'd like to imagine that at this point the crowds fell silent as they observed this change of attitude in this criminal and wanted to hear into this intriguing conversation what is it that this man is asking wanting to be with Jesus in his kingdom how is that going to happen when Jesus is here dying and what is Jesus going to say in reply to this man and then we get these incredible words that Jesus answered him in verse 43 I tell you the truth today you will be with me in paradise every single word Jesus speaks here is incredible and significant he says today no waiting but from this moment on this will be real for you he says to this man not tomorrow not in the future but today you can be with me those words are highly significant too this is what the gospel is all about is about knowing

God and Jesus says yes you can be with me where I am you can be John tells us that Jesus prayed these incredible words to his father in that high priestly prayer in John 17 this is John 17 in verse 24 he says father I want those you have given me to be with me where I am and to see my glory the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world that's what Jesus prayed he desired just before he went to the cross that's what he was praying to his father that those who had been given to him would see his glory and would be with him the glory that he has because the father has loved him to share in the fellowship that God the father and God the son have enjoyed from the beginning of all time and now that's exactly what he is offering to this criminal on the cross he's saying today you can be with me in paradise you can be with me and see my glory the glory

I have with the father and you can enjoy it too and that's why Jesus is on the cross to pay for sin God made him who had no sin to be sin for us that we might in him be the righteousness of God so that people like this thief can be with God and he is the Christ and he is the Messiah and he has come to rescue but maybe not in the way that people expected he'd come rather than throwing off the political power of the Romans he had come to be a sacrifice and to suffer and to die that others might then be spared that and be forgiven you will be with me in paradise at its root it has the idea of a garden it's used a few other places in in the

New Testament to speak of heaven it's about the future bliss of God's people so in 2 Corinthians 12 verse 3 Paul says and I know that this man whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know but God knows was caught up to paradise he heard inexpressible things things that man is not permitted to tell in the book of revelation and chapter 2 and verse 7 we have another use of this word here so at the end of the letter to the church in Ephesus it says Revelation 2 7 he who has an ear let him hear what the spirit has says to the churches to him who overcomes I will give the right to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God he's talking about heaven he's saying to this man today you will be with me in heaven it's the most incredible gift ever and just think about it from this man's perspective he's going to go from gasping in agony as he tries to maintain life in this world he's going to go from gasping in agony on a cross and eventually he's going to suffocate and die and then he'll be in heaven with

Jesus forever what did this man contribute nothing he wasn't baptized he never went to church never read his Bible except for this cry he didn't pray he never gave a penny or a denarius to gospel work but without all of those things he is saved because it's reminding to us and underlining for us that salvation is by grace it is entirely a free gift this man had nothing to offer and yet Jesus was still able to say to him it doesn't matter it doesn't matter because I've done everything that's necessary and therefore today you can be with me in paradise and that's why there's such hope in these words for every one of us this morning because you may think you've got lots to offer

[ 31 : 09 ] God but the reality is you've got nothing except wickedness and sin and mistreatment of God and yet he will freely forgive you if you but call out to him he'll rescue and forgive you that's why he came that's why he was dying this is what gets people into heaven when they die it's not because they've been good it's because of what Jesus has done on the cross reconciling to God is simply and exclusively the work of the Lord Jesus Christ without him it's impossible and that's why the great need of each one of us is to cry out like this man did and say Lord remember me when you come into your have mercy on me a sinner it's never too late to come to

Jesus here is one right at the very end of his life who turns to Jesus and is forgiven God He may not have such an opportunity there is only one that none may despair but only one that none should presume today is the day to sort things between you and God so the words of three dying men an amazing conversation two men had sin in them the two criminals that we have been contrasting who began hurling insults at the

Lord Jesus they had sin in them because they were sinners and they had done wicked things and they failed to honour God they were just like you and me two men had sin on them that is that they were carrying the burden and paying for sin but it's not the same two the unrepentant criminal carries his own sin but the second person who has sin on him is the Lord Jesus Christ the one who had been made sin even though he had no sin of his own and he is made sin and sin is put on him that others like the other man might then even though they have sin be forgiven you and I are dying people we may not be on a cross but we are dying people and we have sin in us every one of us does it's out of our hearts that wickedness and bad things come all of us have sin in us the question is is your sin still on you or has it left you and been put on another has it been put on the Lord Jesus

Christ has he taken your sin that's why he died that's why Luke has recorded this conversation that we might understand clearly what Jesus death was all about and to illustrate to us these incredible words of hope and promise that Jesus speaks today you will be with me in paradise and all who call and all who believe can take those words as their own let's pray father in heaven thank you for this conversation that took place between Jesus and these other men thank you for what it reminds us of of our own sin and of our blindness to see who

Jesus really is and to too often imagine that we are the centre of the world help us to see our guilt our sin our selfishness help us to be honest about that like the second criminal who feared God and acknowledged his wrongdoing and then sought Jesus solution and sought that he might be with him Lord we thank you that when we come humbly like this and cry unto you you come back with these wonderful gracious words today you'll be with me in paradise you come offering forgiveness and new life how we praise you for the Lord Jesus that he died and took sin on him that we may not carry it but rather be forgiven and spend all our days with Jesus forgiveness both through this life and into the perfection of paradise which is yet to come

[ 36 : 51 ] Lord we pray make this a reality for each one of us we ask we pray in Jesus name Amen Jesus name that he Lord for each He is