

Introduction

For communion today we come to the second of seven sayings from the cross. I am calling this one, "*Amen" to the Thief on the Cross*. We come to remember the Lord Jesus Christ in a special way when we have a communion service. To accent remembering does not make this service a bare memorial because we remember our risen Lord, He is present with us by the Spirit, we remember along the lines of the Gospel remembrances given by the Holy Spirit, and the Lord uses our remembering as a means by which He confirms our faith.

What then does this second saying from the cross reveal to us about the Lord Jesus?

In a word, it shows us that even while being crucified He is the Savior of sinners. On the cross, He saves a sinner. By this, He shows us the largeness of His saving love. We have to stand back in awe and say, "this is high and awesome; it is too wonderful for me; it is the Lord's doing and marvelous in our eyes."

Even while accomplishing our salvation, He found a lost lamb. Right there on the cross He gives us an illustration that summarizes His entire mission: God's suffering servant came to seek and to save lost sinners.

From the context of Luke's Gospel (23:32-33, 39-43), we will cover two things: on the cross, Jesus saved a lost lamb and on the cross, Jesus promised entry to Paradise. As we cover both of these points, we want to keep the fact ever before us that these things unfold *while Jesus is on the cross!*

1A. On the cross, Jesus saved a lost lamb

Luke cues us into the saving of a lost sheep by the magnificent picture of the crucifixion that He places before our eyes. The Romans acted without thought as to who is who. They put three men on crosses: one, two, and three; first, second, and third. They intend no symbol; they make no theological statement in the number and order of this day's executions. However, Luke makes note of the fact that there were two others led away to die with Him (23:32, what words are these: "to die with Him"?), and he impresses this very revealing image forever on our minds: "one on his right and one on his left" (v. 33). During the trials, Jesus spoke of His coming on clouds of glory as the Son of Man and universal Judge (Lk. 22:69; Matt. 26:64; cf. Dan. 7:14). Earlier He had spoken of the day when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne where He will gather all nations and separate the sheep from the goats placing the sheep on his right and the goats on the left (Matt. 25:31-33).

Viewing the cross, we see the Son of Man with one on his right and the other on the left. Jesus does not interact with one of the criminals. By contrast, Jesus does interact with the other criminal. As we can easily see, He saved him. In saving him, Jesus saved a lost lamb.

1) How do we know that the man was lost?

He was an individual of that era, a criminal that sinned in outrageous and public ways. His path crossed with that of Christ. His life and the life of Christ overlapped in close proximity and for a few hours. He saw Christ in the flesh; he saw Him on the cross when he was himself on the cross.

Nothing separates him from the companion thief on the nearby cross. By his own testimony we know that he is guilty and hangs there without excuse (Lk. 23:41).

He deserves nothing from the Lord.

He mocked and reviled Christ along with the others.

The Gospel of Matthew (27:37-44) lists various forms of mockery and derision that were directed at the Lord Jesus on the cross. They relate to kingship, the temple, and salvation (king, v. 37; wagging their heads: He said He would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, v. 39-40; mocking, He saved others but cannot save Himself, He is king of Israel, let him come

down now from the cross; He trusts in God, let God deliver Him, v. 43). Notably, both robbers mocked and reviled Jesus “in the same way” (v. 44).

The thief that heard the “amen” was lost. If he is a sheep or lamb, he is a lost one.

We might assume that he had heard of the preaching, teaching, and healing. How much did he hear? Did he have any personal contact with Christ or those He healed? We do not know. Whatever information he had, one thing is certain, he did not embrace the Lord Jesus in faith and repentance because his sins against man and God continued right up to and included his first moments on the cross. Remarkably, on the cross, he went along with the mockers who crucified him. He joined hands as it were with those who crucified him; he spoke as they spoke, he reiterated their taunts, he mocked the Lord Jesus in the same way that they did.

That is amazing. Why would he join with those who inflicted pain on him? Why agree with them over against another condemned criminal?

We do not know why. *We know that both criminals continued their sinful ways, and aggravated their crimes beyond measure by cursing the Son of God.* These dying criminals are no different one from the other. They have no fear of God or man. Their disregard for law and order has come full circle to the painful death they now face.

2) How do we know that Jesus saved him?

At first, he mocked and derided the Lord of glory.

However, at some point early in his suffering there beside Christ, he rebuked his former partner in crime (Lk. 23:40-41). He states that it is now evident that we are under “the same sentence of condemnation” (v. 40b) that ought to cause us to fear God (v. 40a). We have done wrong but “this man has done nothing wrong” (v. 41).

There was a change in this robber’s attitude toward his own suffering and the suffering of Jesus. He acknowledges his guilt, the wrongdoing and the justice of his death sentence, and he proclaims the innocence of Christ.

He shows a change of heart toward himself (I am guilty of deeds that merit this reward), toward the civil law he has broken (this condemnation is just), and toward the companion thief (he rebuked him instead of following along in more sins in a strange time for sinning, in the hour of their dying). He even shows a change of heart toward the soldiers, those passing by, the chief priests, scribes, and elders (Matt. 27:27, 39-41) because he now ignored them and contradicted their blasphemy. Most of all he has a new view of Christ. Now he commends Jesus while condemning himself.

This happened in a short time period; it took place early on in the hours of the crucifixion.

Calvin sees in this man a striking example of faith: “I know not that, since the creation of the world, there ever was a more remarkable and striking example of faith; and so much the greater admiration is due to the grace of the Holy Spirit, of which it affords so magnificent a display” (*Commentary*, 311).

Why does Calvin take these words as faith of a remarkable kind? He does so for the following reasons: 1) A murderer who “had endeavoured to extinguish all sense of what was right, suddenly rises higher than all the apostles” in his confession of faith. 2) He “adores Christ as a *King* while on the gallows, celebrates his *kingdom* in the midst of shocking and worse than revolting abasement, and declares him, when dying, to be the Author of life.” 3) He persists to acknowledge Christ as a king despite “the thick darkness of so disgraceful a death.” Calvin says, “For what marks or ornaments of royalty did he see in Christ, so as to raise his mind to his kingdom? And certainly, this was, as it were, from the depth of hell to rise above the heavens. To the flesh it must have appeared to be fabulous and absurd, to ascribe to one who was rejected and despised, (Isa. liii. 3) whom the world could not endure, an earthly kingdom more exalted than all the empires of the world.”

Thus, Calvin concludes, “Hence we infer how acute must have been the eyes of his mind, by which he beheld life in death, exaltation in ruin, glory in shame, victory in destruction, a kingdom in bondage.”

How can it be that the one continues to mock while the other defends Christ while condemning Himself? How can we explain his words to Christ that beg to be remembered while acknowledging the Lord’s kingship (v. 42, remember me when you come into your kingdom)?

This man’s faith is a magnificent display of the grace of the Holy Spirit (311). At the moment that Jesus chooses, the cross is applied to the sinner by the work of the Holy Spirit. Then that sinner, personally and individually owns his own sins, defends the righteousness of Christ, and calls out to the Lord Jesus to be remembered.

Now we have another look at who the Lord Jesus is. He is the Savior of sinners. *He brings sinners home to faith like lost sheep to the flock.* He is the lover of the lost, the Shepherd of the sheep given to Him as “his own sheep” that He calls and who hear His voice and follow (Jn 10:1-4). He knows and loves His own, He lays down His life for them, He must bring them all to Himself to form one flock as a charge He received from His Father (Jn. 10:14-18).

That is our brother and friend. That is our good shepherd. He is lover of our souls. He knows our sins. He knows we are just like the others who mock, ignore, and disobey. However, He remembers us. That is, He knows us in love, grace, and mercy. From the cross comes the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit applies the benefits secured by Jesus on the cross. Those benefits include the conquest of our rebellion and mockery of the things of God. Those benefits include the giving to us of faith and repentance. Those benefits include His finding us. When He finds us then we cry out to Him in faith and repentance.

2A. On the cross, Jesus promised entry to Paradise

This word is predominately a promise.

Jesus is covenant making and covenant keeping Lord.

1) He is authoritative (cf. the ancients...but I say). He gives an authoritative word of promise as prophet, priest, and king from the very depths of humiliation. He is Son of God and Son of Man in humiliation, in humble obedience unto death, even the death of the cross.

He is authoritative as servant Lord. He is a king. He is the king. The mockery places an accent on what is in fact the case; the sign hanging over this criminal on this particular Roman cross says, “This is the King of the Jews.”

2) He is personal as amen sayer and promise giver. The personal love is evident in the personal interaction that is direct (I say to you) but warm beyond expectation (*you will be with me in Paradise*).

3) He is confident (He trusted in God that He would deliver Him). Peter says, “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Pet 2:23).

He says, “verily” or “amen.” This is a strong way of saying truly it is so.

In these circumstances, despite them, he states that the time is now (Today).

From the cross and against all outward appearances, Jesus promises Paradise: without question, today, you will be with me in Paradise.

It is Jesus. He is speaking on the cross.

This is authoritative, kingly.

It gives a message, information, as from a prophet.

It is good news from a priest who mediates a relation to God: today in paradise.

No matter how dark the scene; no matter what must transpire there on Calvary to the eye of man, one thing is sure: the one who is mocked in death, mocked even by a dying criminal at His side (by dying criminals to his left hand and right hand), is confident and sure. Even there and even then, He speaks with the “amen” of absolute assurance regarding the things of God, man’s relation to God and access to the gates of heaven. It is so because the cross is the divinely

appointed way that the prophet, priest and king will do the work He was sent to do for the glory of God in the saving of sinners.

It is an “amen” of triumph for this thief by this Savior of thieves; it is an “amen” of good news despite the horror yet to come (the deepest stroke has not yet pieced the Son of Man).

Conclusion

Even while accomplishing our salvation, Jesus found a lost lamb. Right there on the cross He gives us an illustration that summarizes His entire mission: the suffering servant of the Lord came to seek and to save lost sinners as lost lambs.

He is a king that is both prophet and priest. He is a preaching King and a mediating King. Even on the cross, He proclaims the good news that He saves sinners and takes them with Him home to glory.

As we take of the bread and the wine, what then shall we say to these things?

We shout “amen” because of His “amen.”

1) I need Him. I need the Lord Jesus who died on the cross for the salvation of that sinner and sinners like him down through the centuries.

I must speak words similar to those of the dying thief, “What I suffer is just. I deserve to die for my sins but Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He has done nothing wrong. He has only obeyed the will of the Father.

My Lord, I need to know that you remember me as I come here in communion to remember you. I need the body and blood presented here for me. O Lord Jesus, I need you.

2) I own Him as my own. I take the bread and wine to my palate. Likewise, I partake of Christ in a commitment of repentance and faith. Lord Jesus I commit myself to you to be your servant. Whatever you would have me do, by your grace that I will do.

You are the promised prophet, the great high priest, and the king of glory. I submit myself to you and cling to you to learn from you, to cling to you as my sacrifice for sin, and to obey you as my king. O Lord Jesus, I own you as my prophet, priest, and king.

3) I own His people as my family. O Lord, I own your people as my brothers and sisters in your name. I dedicate myself to you and to them. Help me; help us, Lord, to show that we are your disciples by our love for one another.