EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS

ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,  
*And Many Explanatory Notes*.

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ST. LUKE. VOL. II.

LONDON:  
WILLIAM HUNT AND COMPANY, 23, HOLLES STREET.

CAVENDISH SQUARE

IPSWICH: WILLIAM HUNT, TAVERN STREET.

MDCCCLVIII.

LUKE XXIII. 39–43.

39 And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.

40 But the other answering re­buked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?

41 And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.

42 And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.

43 And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.

THE verses we have now read deserve to be printed in letters of gold. They have probably been the salvation of myriads of souls. Multitudes will thank God to all eternity that the Bible contains this story of the peni­tent thief.

We see, firstly, in the history before us, *the sovereignty of God in saving sinners.* We are told that two male­factors were crucified together with our Lord, one on His right hand and the other on His left. Both were equally near to Christ; both saw and heard all that happened, during the six hours that He hung on the cross; both were dying men, and suffering acute pain; both were alike wicked sinners, and needed forgiveness, yet one died in his sins, as he had lived, hardened, impenitent and unbelieving; the other repented, believed, cried to Jesus for mercy, and was saved.

A fact like this should teach us humility. We cannot account for it: we can only say, “Even so, Father, for so it seemeth good in thy sight.” (Matt. xi. 26.) How it is that under precisely the same circumstances one man is converted and another remains dead in sins, why the very same sermon is heard by one man with perfect indifference and sends another home to pray and seek Christ, why the same Gospel is hid to one and revealed to another,—all these are questions which we cannot possibly answer. We only know that it is so, and that it is useless to deny it.

Our own duty is clear and plain: we are to make a diligent use of all the means which God has appointed for the good of souls. There is no necessity that any one should be lost: there is no such thing as decreed dam­nation in the Bible. The offers of the Gospel are wide, free, and general. “In all our doings,” says the 17th Article, “that will of God is to be followed, which we have expressly declared to us in the Word of God.” God’s sovereignty was never meant to destroy man’s responsi­bility. “One thief was saved that no sinner might des­pair; but only one, that no sinner might presume.”

We see, secondly, in this history, *the unvarying character of repentance unto salvation.* This is a point in the penitent thief’s story which is fearfully overlooked. Thousands look at the broad fact that he was saved in the hour of death, and look no further; they do not look at the distinct and well-defined evidences of re­pentance which fell from his lips before he died. Those evidences deserve our closest attention.

The first notable step in the thief’s repentance was his concern about his companion’s wickedness in reviling Christ: “Dost thou not fear God,” he said, “seeing thou art in the same condemnation?”—The second step was a full acknowledgment of his own sin: “We indeed are justly in condemnation. We receive the due reward of our deeds.”—The third step was an open confession of Christ’s innocence: “This man hath done nothing amiss.”—The fourth step was faith in Jesus Christ’s power and will to save him: he turned to a crucified sufferer, and called Him “Lord,” and declared his belief that He had a kingdom.—The fifth step was prayer: he cried to Jesus when he was hanging on the cross, and asked Him even then to think upon his soul.—The sixth and last step was humility: he begged to be “re­membered” by our Lord. He mentions no great thing: enough for him if he is remembered by Christ. These six points should always be remembered in connection with the penitent thief. His time was very short for giving proof of his conversion; but it was time well-used. Few dying people have ever left behind them such good evidences as were left by this man.

Let us beware of a repentance without evidences. Thousands, it may be feared, are every year going out of the world with a lie in their right hand. They fancy they will be saved because the thief was saved in the hour of death; they forget that if they would be saved as he was, they must repent as he repented. The shorter a man’s time is, the better must be the use he makes of it: the nearer he is to death, when he first begins to think, the clearer must be the evidence he leaves behind. Nothing, it may safely be laid down as a general rule, nothing is so thoroughly unsatisfactory as a death-bed repentance.

We see, thirdly, in this history, *the amazing power and willingness of Christ to save sinners.* It is written that He is “able to save to the uttermost.” (Heb. vii. 25.) If we search the Bible through, from Genesis to Rev­elation, we shall never find a more striking proof of Christ’s power and mercy than the salvation of the penitent thief.

The time when the thief was saved was the hour of our Lord’s greatest weakness. He was hanging in agony on the cross. Yet even then He heard and granted a sinner’s petition, and opened to him the gate of life. Surely this was “power!”

The man whom our Lord saved was a wicked sinner at the point of death, with nothing in his past life to recommend him, and nothing notable in his present position but a humble prayer: yet even he was plucked like a brand from the burning. Surely this was “mercy.”

Do we want proof that salvation is of grace and not of works? We have it in the case before us. The dying thief was nailed hand and foot to the cross; he could do literally nothing for his own soul: yet even he, through Christ’s infinite grace, was saved. No one ever received such a strong assurance of his own forgiveness as this man.

Do we want proof that sacraments and ordinances are not *absolutely* needful to salvation, and that men may be saved without them when they cannot be had? We have it in the case before us. The dying thief was never baptized, belonged to no visible Church, and never re­ceived the Lord’s supper. But he repented and believed, and therefore he was saved.

Let these things sink down into our hearts. Christ never changes. The way of salvation is always one and the same. He lives who saved the penitent thief. There is hope for the vilest sinner, if he will only repent and believe.

We see, lastly, in the history before us, *how near a dying believer is to rest and glory.* We read that our Lord said to the malefactor in reply to his prayer, “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.”

That word “today” contains a body of divinity. It tells us that the very moment a believer dies, his soul is in happiness and in safe keeping. His full redemption is not yet come; his perfect bliss will not begin before the resurrection morning: but there is no mysterious delay, no season of suspense, no purgatory, between his death and a state of reward. In the day that he breathes his last he goes to Paradise: in the hour that he departs he is with Christ. (Phil. i. 23.)

Let us remember these things, when our believing friends fall asleep in Christ. We must not sorrow for them as those who have no hope. While we are sor­rowing they are rejoicing: while we are putting on our mourning, and weeping at their funerals, they are safe and happy with their Lord.—Above all, let us remember these things, if we are true Christians, in looking forward to our own deaths. To die is a solemn thing: but if we die in the Lord, we need not doubt that our death will be gain.

NOTES. LUKE XXIII. 39–43.

39*.—*[*One of the malefactors...railed, &c.*]The question naturally arises, How are we to reconcile St. Luke’s account of the con­duct of the thieves with the account given by Matthew and Mark? They distinctly say that both the thieves railed. St. Luke says, “one of them.”

1. Some think that only one thief railed, and that Matthew and Mark use the plural number, in the general way that people sometimes use it, when describing a transaction. They adduce as instances Psalm ii. 2; Heb. xi. 33, 34, 37. This, according to Maldonatus, is the opinion of Cyprian, Cyril of Jerusalem, Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, Gregory, and Leo. It is also held by Scott and Doddridge.

2. Some think that both the thieves railed at first, but that one of them afterwards repented, ceased to rail, and began to pray. This is the opinion of Athanasius, Origen, Hilary, Chrysostom, Theophylact, and Euthymius. It seems far the most probable opinion.

Let it be noted that the impenitent thief is a striking proof that pain, suffering, and the approach of death, are not suffi­cient, without grace, to convert a soul. The followers of the impenitent thief are unhappily far more numerous than those of the penitent thief.

40*.—*[*The other answering, rebuked him.*]Who this malefactor was and what first struck his conscience and moved him to repent, we are not told. Some say, as Bengel, that he was a Gentile: and some, as Scott, that he was a Jew.—Some think, as Suarez, that he had heard our Lord preach, and seen Him work miracles at some former period.—Some think, as Euthy­mius, that he had heard our Lord’s answers to Pilate, and been struck by them, and so learned to believe in our Lord’s kingdom.—Some think, as Stier, that he was struck by the title put over our Lord’s head on the cross.—Some think, as Theophylact, that he was pricked to the heart by hearing our Lord’s prayer for His enemies, and by seeing our Lord’s pa­tience under sufferings. All these are purely conjectural ideas.

Cornelius à Lapide surpasses all other writers in his remarks on the thief. He mentions, with much gravity, an opinion of Fererius, that the shadow of Christ on the cross, as the day wore on, fell on the thief, and was the cause of his conversion, as the shadow of Peter healed the sick! He adds another opinion, that the Virgin Mary stood between the thief and Christ, and obtained grace for him! He also tells us that the name of the thief was Dismas, that his day in the calendar of saints is March the 25th, and that chapels are erected in honour of his name! It is well that people should know how much rubbish can be found in the pages of an accredited Roman Catholic commentator.

As to the nation of the thief, it is probable that he was a Jew. Our Lord’s words to him seem to imply that. He would hardly have spoken of “paradise” to a Gentile. As to the cause of his conversion, it is safest to rest in the belief that it arose from the free, sovereign grace of Christ, and was in­tended to be a proof of Christ’s power to save, even at His time of greatest weakness, and a pattern of Christ’s willing­ness to save the chief of sinners.

[*Dost not thou fear God?*]Our English version has hardly given the full sense of the Greek words. Scholefield would render it, “Dost not even thou fear God? Even thou, in thy circumstances of desperate wretchedness,—whatever others may do in the unthinking levity of present security.”

41*.—*[*This man has done nothing amiss.*]The Greek word here translated, “amiss,” is only found in two other places. (Acts xxviii. 6; 2 Thess, iii. 2.) In one it is rendered, “harm;” in the other “unreasonable.”

The sentence rather favours the idea that the thief had either heard or seen something of our Lord before, though he had not been a disciple. We must either suppose this, or else we must suppose that he knew generally that he was being crucified in company with a man whom Pilate and Herod thought innocent.

42.—[*Lord* *remember me, &c*.] The remarks of Ness on this won­derful prayer are worth reading. “This short prayer contained a very large and long creed, the articles whereof are these.—1. He believed that the soul died not with the body of man.—2. That there is a world to come for rewarding the pious and peni­tent, and for punishing the impious and impenitent.—3. That Christ though now under crucifying and killing tortures, yet had right to a kingdom.—4. That this kingdom was in a better world than the present evil world.—5. That Christ would not keep this kingdom all to Himself.—6. That He would bestow a part and portion thereof on those that be truly penitent.—7. That the key of this kingdom did hang at Christ’s girdle, though He now hung dying on the cross.—8. That he does roll his whole soul for eternal salvation upon a dying Saviour.”

Ness remarks, also, that the two malefactors, one penitent and the other impenitent, one on the right hand and the other on the left, are “a clear emblem of the sheep and goats” in the day of judgment.

[*Into thy kingdom.*]Scholefield remarks, that these words would have been better translated, “in thy kingdom.”

It is observed justly, by Lightfoot, Bengel and other writers, that not one of the twelve apostles had such a clear and cor­rect view of the real nature of Christ’s “kingdom” as this penitent thief had.

43*.—*[*Verily I say unto thee.*]The use of the word “amen,” or “verily” here, shows the authority and power with which our Lord even on the cross could save souls, and the certainty with which the grant of paradise was made to the thief. His great faith received a great reward. No child of Adam ever received such an assurance as this.

[*Today shalt thou be with me.*]This sentence deserves close attention.

It is a distinct answer to the Romish doctrine of purgatory. It shows clearly that no purification of any kind after death is needed for the person that dies a penitent believer. If the thief needed no purgatory, the whole doctrine of purgatory falls to the ground.

It is an instructive intimation as to the state of believers after death. The moment they die they are “with Christ.” Their condition of course is one we cannot pretend to ex­plain: we cannot comprehend the state of a soul separate from the body; enough for us to know that a dead believer is immediately with Christ.

It is a clear proof of the separate existence of the soul when the body is dead. We shall live and have a being, even when our earthly tabernacle is mouldering in the grave. The thief’s body was that day to be broken and mangled by Roman soldiers; but the thief himself was to be with Christ.

Maldonatus, the Roman Catholic commentator, struggles in vain to show that the passage before us does not disprove purgatory. He maintains that the thief must have believed in purgatory, from the fact of his praying to be remembered when Christ came in His kingdom, and not before! Such arguing shows the straits to which a man is reduced by an unscriptural theory.

[*In paradise.*]The word so translated is only found in two other places in the New Testament. (2 Cor. xii. 4 and Rev. ii. 7.) Parkhurst says, “This is, without controversy, an Oriental word. The Greeks borrowed it from the Persians, among whom it signified a garden, park, or enclosure, full of all the valuable products of the earth. In this sense the word is found in Herodotus, Xenophon, and Diodorus. In the New Testament the word is applied to the state of faithful souls between death and the resurrection, when like Adam in Eden, they are admitted to immediate communion with God in Christ, and to a participation of the true tree of life.”

Brentius maintains that the passion of Christ opened Para­dise, which had been closed since Adam fell, and that these words proclaimed the opening.

It is clear from the whole narrative that the penitent thief died unbaptized. To avoid this difficulty some writers of Romish tendency have actually caught at the idea, suggested by Augustine, that he was baptized with the blood and water which came from our Lord’s side, when it was pierced with a spear! This baseless and gratuitous assertion shows the ab­surdities into which men may be driven to maintain their theory of baptismal regeneration. It is clear that the thief was born again: it is equally clear that he was never baptized. It follows therefore that a man may be born again without baptism.

The general remarks made by all the best commentators on the case of the penitent thief are very striking. It would be impossible to give them all. Cornelius à Lapide collects many good things from the Fathers, and Gerhard is peculiarly full of good matter in considering the whole narrative.

Heinsius remarks that Christ never wrought a greater or more illustrious miracle than He did in saving the penitent thief.

The Church of England Homily of Good Works, quotes Chry­sostom, saying: “I can show a man that by faith without works lived and came to heaven: but without faith never man had life. The thief, that was hanged when Christ suffered, did be­lieve only, and the most merciful God justified him. And because no man shall say, that he lacked time to do good works, for else he would have done them, truth it is, I will not con­tend therein: but this I will surely affirm that faith only saved him.”

Luther, quoted by Stier, says, “This is a comfortable sym­bol and example for all Christians, how that God will never let faith in Christ and a confession of His name go down. If the disciples as a body, and those otherwise related to Christ, con­fess not and lose their faith, deny Him in fear, are offended and forsake Him, this malefactor and murderer must come for­ward to confess Him, to preach Him to others, and teach all men who He is and what consolation all may find in Him.”

Rollock, on the Passion, says, “I say of this man, to the glory of God, that he shamed all that stood by. He shamed the apostles and made them cast down their faces: he shamed all men who will not believe, when they see Christ not cruci­fied as He saw, but glorified in the heavens, and sitting at the right hand of Majesty.”—“The Lord raised him up on the gallows to be a teacher of faith and repentance, of hope, of patience, of love, and of all graces. Think no shame to learn of him.”

Baxter says, “The thief’s example showeth us what election freely doeth in calling one, while another is passed by. Christ would give this present proof of the virtue of His sacrifice to call and justify sinners. True conversion is never too late to the obtaining of mercy and salvation: true repentance and faith, however late, will have its fruits. This man was not saved without good works.”