

With Me in Paradise

DAVE BAST

Jesus' seven last words, as they are traditionally called, refer to the statements which the four gospels record him as saying while he hung on the cross on Good Friday. The third of those words was spoken by Jesus to one of his fellow sufferers; a man we usually call the penitent thief, who died on a cross next to Jesus. In this word, we see the question of salvation reduced to its simplest terms—stripped down to essentials—this is what it's all about; it's about a request we make and a promise Jesus gives. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, as I mentioned, we are in the middle now of a series on the seven last words—Jesus' words from the cross...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And we started, appropriately enough, with the first word, which was: Father, forgive them; they don't know what they are doing; and then the second word from John's gospel...the first word comes from Luke, the second word from John, where he commends his mother to the care of the beloved disciple.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so, now this is the third program in this series, and in the order in which we are taking things in this series anyway, we are going to come up to this one that we hear from the Gospel of Luke, and Luke's account of the crucifixion; and let's get right to it and read the passage. Luke tells us:

^{23:32}Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³When they came to the Place of the Skull, there they crucified Jesus, along with the criminals, one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴Jesus said, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing," and they divided up his clothes by casting lots. ³⁵The people stood watching and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the chosen one." ³⁶The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself."

DAVE BAST

³⁸There was a written notice above him, which read: This is the King of the Jews. ³⁹One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him, "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us." ⁴⁰But the other criminal rebuked him, "Don't you fear God," he said, "Since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth. Today you will be with me in paradise."

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that right there is the word from the cross we are looking at in this program.

DAVE BAST

The beautiful third word, yes: Today you will be with me in paradise.

SCOTT HOEZEE

One thing we can note, too, just a moment kind of in passing here, is that we noted on one of the earlier programs in this series that the crucifixion accounts in the four gospels are not identical. There are some details that vary slightly from gospel to gospel; probably a hallmark of eyewitness accounts...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

When people see and notice different things. They didn't try to get their stories all on one page. They were willing to let various eyewitnesses highlight different things, but the broad details are all the same, that it was at a place called Golgotha or Skull Hill; we sometimes call it Calvary, and that is from the Latin *calvarium* for skull. He was mocked. They put a sign above his head that this is the King of the Jews in three languages; and another important detail is that he wasn't crucified alone. There was a thief on his right and on his left, who were also executed that same day.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, in broad outline, the gospels all agree on these fundamental facts. Another interesting thing: you read this scene and you get the sense that it is kind of like a carnival; it is kind of like...there are people all over the place; they are laughing; they are mocking him on the cross; the soldiers join in the mockery; Pilate himself was mocking him with the sign that he had nailed to the cross. In fact, one of the gospel stories says that the leaders of the Jews were very upset that Pilate labeled Jesus as the King of the Jews, and they said: You shouldn't write that; and Pilate was rather testy in response and he said: What I've written, I've written. Just let it be. So, there is some irony in that, but maybe most people don't realize that until fairly recently in history, public executions were kind of an entertainment spectacle.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it seems very sick to me and probably to most of us today, but yes, even in the old West when they would hang an outlaw it kind of became a community event. People even brought younger children to these things, to watch these criminals get executed. That was certainly typical around the time of Roman executions by way of crucifixion as well.

DAVE BAST

So, Jesus is undergoing all this humiliation in addition to the physical torture that was involved in crucifixion, to the spiritual anguish; and we are going to look at that especially in the next program—the spiritual pain that he felt; but in the midst of it all, there are these two others who are being executed with him. Jesus is not even allowed to kind of die alone, in privacy and with some shred of dignity; he is just one of a group, you know. He is part of a lot that has been assigned for execution that day. He is just another number; and the gospels describe these guys variously. One word that is used for them is criminal, and the word literally is *kakourgos*—evildoers—wrongdoers; and Matthew and Mark both say that they were thieves, and that word is interesting. It could mean even something like insurrectionist or even terrorist perhaps.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Terrorists—robbers, yes.

DAVE BAST

So, these are not good guys, and we are told outright that they are getting what they deserve.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, it is interesting that in Church history people have speculated, and some have said: Well, are we saved *only* by Jesus' death—that he died in our place; or is it important that he died in this particular way with this mockery and this accursed death? So, suppose that Jesus had been taken out back by a soldier and just had his head lopped off, just FOOM with a sword and he died, you know, instantaneously? Does it matter how he died? Most theologians in Church history have said it does matter how he died. Simply lopping off his head would not have had the theological import that this mockery, this humiliation—all of this is what sin looks like—all of this is what the punishment for sin looks like. So, it is very important that Jesus didn't just die of a stroke or a heart attack or having his head lopped off.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That it was this way because it focuses for us the wages of sin.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, in the meantime, as all of this is unfolding, we have coming to Jesus an interaction with these two criminals, one on his right hand and one on his left; and the first guy, who is kind of a hard-bitten type apparently, he joins right in with what the crowd is doing, with what the soldiers are doing...

SCOTT HOEZEE

He mocks him.

DAVE BAST

He pipes right up and says: Hey, Mr. Messiah; look, if you're such big stuff, why don't you save yourself and us, too? Because they had been crying out at him in mockery: Hey, if you *are* the Christ...if you *are* the Messiah...why don't you come down from the cross, and then we'll believe you. We will all fall down and worship you. And of course, the depth...he could have, you know...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is kind of what you would have expected, though, right? You would expect these thieves to hurl mockery on him; and the one does, as exactly one would expect, but not the second one. The second one rebukes the first criminal and says: Don't you fear God? We are getting what we deserve. This man doesn't deserve this...how he knew *that* we can think about in just a moment, but he chides the other thief, and then makes a request, and that request is most interesting; and we will take that up in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are looking at the third word from the cross, the third of seven, and it is recorded in the Gospel of Luke. It is the exchange between Jesus and the man we call the penitent thief. We have just been saying there are these two criminals who died alongside Jesus. He was just part of the batch to be executed on that particular day, on Good Friday; and one of them was kind of a nasty type who joined in the mockery that was going on all around, that Jesus was experiencing. It wasn't enough that he had to die, he had to die kind of in a shameful way. We pointed out, I think, in an earlier program even that he died naked...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

They stripped him of all of his clothes; they gambled for his clothes, including the tunic or shirt that he wore next to his skin. So, all that is going on, and this guy starts railing on him: Save yourself and save us, too; and then, the man we call the penitent thief rebukes his co-conspirator—his fellow criminal—and says: Look, we're getting what's coming to us. We've done wrong and we know it; but this man is innocent, so you shouldn't be mocking him like that. I wonder how he knew that Jesus was innocent?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; maybe he had heard something about Jesus. Maybe he had heard of Jesus' reputation. Hard to know; I mean, the Bible doesn't even come close to trying to answer that question for us; but he knew something that Jesus didn't deserve what he was getting the way they did.

DAVE BAST

You know, Scott, I wonder if it was even just the first word from the cross that he heard? Father, forgive them; they don't know what they're doing...maybe that made such an impression on him that somehow he thought this guy is really...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, sure; who would say that but an innocent man? But then he turns to Jesus...so, he turns away from his fellow criminal whom he has rebuked and he says: Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom; and that is all he says; a very humble cry for mercy. I have always been struck by the fact that he didn't say: Jesus, save me.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He didn't say: Jesus, rescue me—redeem me. He says: Remember me; and I can't help hearing the echo of the Lord's Supper, where Jesus says: Do this in remembrance of me; remembrance kind of surrounds the death of Jesus; and so, this person makes that very—this criminal—makes that very simple request: Just remember me; keep me in mind when you come into your kingdom. I guess a plea for salvation is implied there, but it is subtle, to put it mildly.

DAVE BAST

Well, we call him the penitent thief, so there is an element of repentance here. He has just been saying: We're getting what we deserve; and interestingly, when he begins the rebuke of his fellow criminal, he says: Don't you fear God? And of course, the fear of God or the fear of the Lord is a major theme throughout the whole Old Testament. I have to believe this guy is Jewish, and that he is coming out of a context...he may have kind of made a mess out of his life...but there is this sense that we are accountable to God; that there is a judgment that we are all going to face. In fact, they were going to face it very shortly, in just a matter of hours; that is a fearful thing! That is a very sobering thought to know that we are going to answer for our lives, as these two were, before the throne of a holy God. So, what does he do? He turns to Jesus in humility, in penitence, sorry for his sins, and as you say, Scott, that prayer that he asks is so compelling to me. It is so profound and powerful: Just remember me. I don't know that he knew a whole lot about Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, we don't know that he did, as you said, Dave. Maybe all he had heard was that word of grace that Jesus himself had uttered; hard to know. I have always thought, though, it was a gutsy thing for this criminal to do because at the time, Jesus didn't look like he was going anywhere worth following: The kingdom!

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I mean, all of his followers had stopped following him—the disciples had abandoned Jesus. They had followed him, but now there is no place to go. I have always kind of thought I half expect Jesus to respond and say: What are you talking about buddy? Can't you see I'm washed up, done, finished, through?

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I'm not going anywhere worth following; but he does; he steps out on faith—this criminal, of all people—and believes that Jesus is going somewhere. There is still going to be a kingdom of light that he wants to be part of.

DAVE BAST

How could he sense this? How could he still believe that the sign above Jesus, King of the Jews, was anything more than a mockery? Kings didn't end up on a cross. If they did, it was because somebody else had taken over their kingdom. So, this is a remarkable expression of faith; almost a leap beyond belief; and in fact, the great theologian, John Calvin, describes...in his commentary on the gospel...describes this faith of the thief on the cross in these words. I love this statement. Calvin writes: I don't know if there was ever, from the foundation of the world, a more rare or memorable example of faith. This thief suddenly penetrates more deeply than all the apostles, upon whom the Lord himself had spent so much effort. He adores Christ as King on the gallows tree, celebrates his reign in the fearful and unspeakable loss, and proclaims him author of life in the hour of dying.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Glowing words from John Calvin...

DAVE BAST

Yes, wonderful.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think we have to just see this indeed as an instance of grace. None of us save ourselves; none of us are motivated to save ourselves. Indeed, in the Reformed tradition we always say that the outward expression of a desire to be saved is an indication that the heart has already turned by grace...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are responding to something God did in you first. So, somehow God got inside...the Spirit of God got inside this criminal, softened his otherwise probably hardened and calloused heart...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in that moment he was able to see Jesus, who, as we just said, sure didn't look like he was going anywhere worth following; and he saw in him the way to salvation; and so, he asked to be remembered in Jesus' bright kingdom. It is a profound act of faith, but it is also a profound reminder that you never know where the Holy Spirit is going to put grace. Never write anybody off. God does change hearts, and he does it all the time.

DAVE BAST

I love this because it is also a paradigm for us. This guy couldn't do anything...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, literally.

DAVE BAST

And we are always tempted... There is another character later in the Bible who asks a question; also a good question; the Philippian jailor. He says: What must I do to be saved?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And Paul says to him: Well, just believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the only thing you have to do. Our only work is believing. This thief...he doesn't get baptized, he doesn't receive communion; he cannot go out and turn his life around and turn over a new leaf and reform himself. He is nailed, literally, to a cross. He cannot move his hands and his feet, but he can turn his head and look at Jesus and say: Lord, remember me; and that is enough—that is enough, even if you don't understand all the dynamics, you cannot spout a lot of scripture even; if you can turn to Jesus and say: Lord, remember me; Jesus, remember me...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Of course, Jesus had a reply; and in just a moment we will look at what Jesus said and what we can also take away from those words from the cross.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and we are in our third program of our seven-part series on the seven last words from the cross. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. The penitent thief, the good criminal, as we sometimes say; and Jesus had a reply, and Jesus looked at him and said: I tell you today you will be with me in paradise.

DAVE BAST

Beautiful words spoken in response to a wonderful request; and actually, everything that we have said so far in the program is just a buildup and a background to this word from Jesus: I tell you today you will be with me in paradise; which is...again, we talked about how remarkable the thief's request is, that he is hanging there on a cross and he looks to one side and he sees a supposed Messiah who is also being crucified, and yet, to him it is a king with a coming kingdom, and so he entrusts himself by faith into the hands of this king, and Jesus replies: Today you are going to be with me in paradise; no hesitation, no doubt. He didn't kind of express a pious wish or a hope like: Hey, buddy, you know; I hope it's going to turn out okay for you. I hope it's going to turn out okay for me. I hope soon we'll be in a better place. You know, the kinds of things people say; but no, just this quiet word of assurance, and absolute certainty; and it's going to happen now. It is not going to be in some distant future in the sweet by and by, but today.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Actually, there are some Bible commentators who try to move the comma around in this sentence.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. That is interesting.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There are some who think that Jesus went to hell after he died on the cross, so he wouldn't have been in paradise that day. We will look at a little bit of that in our next program, actually; and so some translate it as saying: I tell you today...

DAVE BAST

Comma...

SCOTT HOEZEE

You will be with me in paradise...someday.

DAVE BAST

Yes, eventually.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, you know, that is...as a minister I once heard preach on this said: That is the kind of translation you do only if you are grinding an axe.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The natural sense of the word was today we will be there together.

DAVE BAST

When else is he going to say it to him, you know? He has only got today...so...that is kind of a discredited interpretation; and, you know, we can kind of think about what this means for our theories of heaven and the afterlife, but I think consistently the New Testament presents truth that although we are waiting and looking forward to the coming of the new heavens and the new earth and the resurrection at the last day, and that is going to wait for Christ's return; nevertheless, for those who belong to him through faith, for believers in Christ, the moment of death is the moment of entrance into the presence of Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which is interesting because, and I think we have talked about this in a different connection on other *Groundwork* programs, but there are varying opinions in Church history and in the Church right now today as to what happens when we die; and there are some who say: Well, nothing happens when you die. You are dead; and you will stay dead until Jesus comes back and raises you back to life. That is called extinctionism sometimes.

DAVE BAST

A soul sleep...

SCOTT HOEZEE

A soul sleep, which would be the same version, right? All of you goes to sleep and you wake up at the last day when Jesus returns; but of course, a much greater part of the Church tradition believes in the intermediate state, where you can be apart from your body but still alive and in felicity and in joy and happiness in the bosom of the Lord. It is not full resurrection yet because you don't have your body, but it is wonderful because you are with the Lord. And this passage is actually one to which people who believe in the intermediate state often appeal: Look, the thief was going to be with him that very day; not going to sleep, not extinguished forever until the last day...and of course, there are other passages like, you know, Paul

desiring to go to be with the Lord, and so forth; but this passage is one that is often a sign of hope that, indeed, at our death because of what Jesus did on the cross, death is not the end. It becomes the doorway to life immediately; not the fullness of resurrection life yet; but immediately new life.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, there is no separation...there is no lag in time; although, once we leave this world of time and space, it becomes a mystery as to how time works, even.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes; what does today mean in eternity?

DAVE BAST

We might have to do a whole new series of programs on the future and heaven and all that to kind of explore this more deeply; but meanwhile, staying here in this wonderful exchange on the cross, we have this promise from the lips of Jesus to the penitent thief, and I for one, don't doubt that he could keep that promise. You know, in a sense, it is easy to make statements about the future or to promise people things if they do this or that or the other thing. In fact, our world has experienced some horrible, horrible results of people who believe they are doing God's will by killing or by terrorist attacks or creating all kinds of havoc; and supposedly there are religious leaders who claim if you do this you are going straight to paradise and you get this, that, or the other thing. I would certainly not want to stake my own future, my own hope, on the words of such leaders...

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, right.

DAVE BAST

And such promises; but from Jesus' lips...

SCOTT HOEZEE

But from Jesus, especially when he is...

DAVE BAST

I don't have a problem believing this.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Especially when he says this while he is on the very cross that will accomplish our very salvation, you know you can believe it; you know that this will absolutely come true; and it is a beautiful thing here, too...you know...so: Jesus, remember me. That was his plea of salvation, although he doesn't name it as such, but it was a plea for salvation; and the beauty is that we know Jesus does remember us; he remembers each person who has ever lived. There are no unimportant people; there are no little people; everybody who is in Christ, who has experienced his salvation, is remembered by Jesus; and here is something that pastorally is very meaningful for anybody who has a loved one with dementia...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or old age and senility; Jesus remembers us even if we can no longer remember him. There is great, great comfort in that idea.

DAVE BAST

There is not going to be a test in theology when you stand outside the pearly gates, as people like to say. It's kind of a...I don't particularly like that sort of talk and imagery, making little jokes about heaven and St. Peter standing there and, you know, kind of taking down names, and were you good enough and all that. All of that is in the popular imagination; it is not in the Bible. It is not even how much you know or how much you can explain. I have a hunch that this thief didn't know anything about what was actually happening at that moment in Jesus' death on the cross.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No; but he entrusted himself...

DAVE BAST

For his salvation. It is enough to just say: Remember me, Lord. And at some point, even if you have forgotten him, he will not forget you. That is the Good News of the Gospel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Amen.

DAVE BAST

Thanks be to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we always want to know how we can help you to dig deeper into the scriptures. So, visit our website, groundworkonline.com, to suggest topics and passages for future *Groundwork* programs.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/with-me-in-paradise>

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