

Luke 23:39-43 Don't You Fear God? Lent Worship 3 February 24, 2016

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Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from Jesus Christ who saves us from our fears! Amen. Today (tonight) we hear a condemned man speak from the cross about Jesus in Luke 23:39-43 These are Your Words heavenly Father to put fear in our hearts and then in Christ You take it away. Amen.

Dear Christians,

Chester A. Arthur was the 21st president of the United States. Do you know the irony in his life? Arthur took over when President James Garfield was assassinated in 1881. Arthur's career dramatically changed at that moment. No one had expected him to serve. His name was added to the Republican ticket as a compromise. Arthur had had the richest government job in America. But, the previous Republican president had fired him from his job. He hadn't strictly broken the law, but Arthur had made a lot of money through his connections. So when the new president died, many people thought the best thing for America would be for Arthur to resign. However, a woman named Julia Sands wrote him a series of letters calling on him to defy people's expectations and be a good president. Arthur took her letters to heart and persuaded Congress to pass reform legislation that stopped government corruption; and he enforced that legislation. He shocked friend and foe alike by changing the way the government ran. In our lesson, we have another man whose words were a shock to many who heard him. His words were:

Don't you fear God?

First, even a dying criminal learned to fear God. Unlike the story of President Arthur, the account of the dying criminal is well-known. But we can't let our knowledge blind us to the irony of his words. Pilate had condemned Jesus to die. Crucifixions required preparations of poles, cross beams, nails, ropes, and extra soldiers as guards for the prisoners and for crowd control. So usually there was a delay between sentencing and crucifixion. But God planned that His Son die that day at Mt. Calvary. So Jesus was sent immediately to the cross. Two other criminals awaiting execution joined Him.

As soon as Jesus was on the cross, His enemies began to mock Him. *"If you are the Christ, save yourself!"* Mark tells us that both criminals joined in asking that He save Himself and them. (Mark 15:32) But, at the time they didn't believe that He could. We know that Jesus could have saved Himself. The reason He didn't was to pay for the sin of all people including those two men who were dying beside Him.

What kind of men were they? The Bible describes them such as violent thieves. They were either hard core criminals or were caught leading a rebellion against Rome which carried a death sentence. They deserved it. One of them said to the other, *"Don't you fear God . . . since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve."* (v.40-41) "Don't you fear God?" Where did that question come from? If either of these men had feared God, they wouldn't have ended up on crosses! Yet God created all people with natural knowledge of Him in their hearts. So even in a heart of a hardened criminal, the thought of death and then facing an angry God put the "fear of God" in him.

But that wasn't all this man said. He also confessed *"This man has done nothing wrong."* (v.42) Jesus was innocent. His death wouldn't lead Him to judgment before God, but to victory in His heavenly kingdom. How did the man know this? Everyone in Judea had heard about Jesus and His miracles; and he had personally been with Jesus on the way to Calvary and heard Him plead to God to forgive the enemies who nailed Him to the cross. Although at first he mocked Jesus, the Holy Spirit was at work using the words and actions of Christ to reach this dying man's heart. God gave him faith right there while on the cross.

Although not as dramatic, God has done the same thing for us. Is it really the same? Yes, we are all sinners from birth. The greatest lie of our age is that all people are good by nature. The truth is that even though we're not notorious criminals, we are sinners. We've held grudges against others and we've wanted people to get what they have coming to them. By nature we have been envious of other people, resenting the fact that God was more generous to them with talents or money than he was to us. To God, those sins of the heart are just as evil and liable for punishment as the sins of men on either side of Jesus. We should clearly acknowledge that we are just as guilty those men. We deserve death and the punishment of hell.

Like the repentant criminal, we can only look to Jesus for mercy. We look to Him who paid for envy and anger and for all sin. His blood has washed it away. He promises to all who trust in Him to take them to paradise with Him. The Holy Spirit has worked through that gospel to give us the same faith in Jesus as the dying criminal. The criminal's words must have surprised many people. And we, who know our sinful hearts, should be just as surprised by Jesus' gracious words of forgiveness and life.

The criminal knew he was dying. A sense of urgency compelled him to listen to Jesus. How would we feel if we knew exactly when we were going to die? We pray that our trust in Christ for eternal life would conquer our fears so we could say, "Jesus, remember me as You rule in Your kingdom of heaven.

Second, in the true fear of God the man looked beyond death to life! Crucifixion was a horrible way to die. As the men hung on a cross, their lungs compressed and they had to push themselves up with their legs to get a breath. Eventually, the victims became more and more tired until they reached a point of exhaustion where they couldn't breathe any longer and died. At the same time, crucifixion was painful. Thirst tortured them. They were exposed to heat or cold. It often took days to die.

Once the criminal was on the cross, he knew how it would end. Yet, in all that shame and pain, he found strength and comfort in Jesus. At first, without faith, he had begged Jesus for his life. Later, he only had eternal life in mind. He didn't try to bargain with Jesus to get into God's kingdom. He didn't ask Jesus for relief from pain. He prayed only: "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*"

And Jesus said, "*Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.*" (v.43) That very day when the criminal died, he left behind his sin and guilt, his shame and pain, and the power of death. As bad as his life had been, this criminal was welcomed by God as one of His own children through Jesus' death. His acceptance by Jesus into God's heavenly kingdom was a greater witness than all the criminal had said. No one expected this man to speak up for Jesus and confess Him as the saving King. No one ever expected that Jesus would speak up for this dying sinner and promise him a paradise of heaven. By God's grace both things happened! Only God can work such wonderful unexpected things in the darkest moments of life.

In our lives, we should be just as amazed, for we should be called to account for our sins. We are the ones deserving condemnation, shame, and punishment for what we have said and done as sinners. But, Christ has forgiven us. He has taken our punishment and shame on Himself. Despite His innocence, God declared Him guilty and had Him die for us. His death does not take away our pain in life. His death will not keep us from dying some day. But, because of Jesus' death, our death will be for us a door to life! Today, as we meditate on Christ's promise that we will be with Him in paradise, God is working in our hearts. He gives us courage and strength not only to believe but to confess our faith to those around us. As we speak of going to heaven to be with Jesus, our words will bring hope to those who hear!

President Arthur made a striking change in his life by the support of a woman named Julia Sands. The change was even more dramatic for the dying criminal. No one that day at Calvary expected to hear the confession of his sins and of Christ as his Savior. But the Holy Spirit was at work! Through Jesus' promise of paradise in heaven, He still reaches out to sinners like us to call us to His Kingdom. Trust in Him! Amen.