

Introduction: It is remarkable how much space the Gospels devote to the Passion Week leading up to Christ's death. For example, the 'Book of Signs' is the systematic presentation of Jesus' three-year miraculous ministry in Word and Deed, (John 1-11). But the last week of Christ's life takes up John 12-19, followed by His Resurrection appearance in John 20-21 – both final sections of this Gospel composing what is called the 'Book of Glory'! Clearly, then, as we hear Jesus speak to Nicodemus about "being lifted up" like the serpent in the desert, (John 3:14-15), we begin to understand that the Cross is indeed the focus of Christ's zeal for God's glory and the focus of our faith. May the Cross indeed be our 'glory' as we turn again to Christ's suffering there. the old hymn by John Bowring puts it:

*In the cross of Christ I glory,
Towering o'er the wrecks of time;
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.*

*When the sun of bliss is beaming
Light and love upon my way,
From the cross the radiance streaming
Adds more luster to the day.*

*In the cross of Christ I glory,
Towering o'er the wrecks of time;
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.*

*When the woes of life o'ertake me—
Hopes deceive, and fears annoy,
Never shall the cross forsake me,
Lo! It glows with peace and joy.*

*Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure,
By the cross are sanctified;
Peace is there that knows no measure,
Joys that through all time abide.*

Mon/Tues/Weds: read Luke 23:33-42. Oh, how timely Jesus' words are in all circumstances and situations: always well-placed, perfectly and wisely phrased, and able to rescue sinners by recalling them from their dead and vain life of sinful rebellion. Even when they are receiving the *height* of their just deserts for sin and are at their *lowest* with no hope of any deliverance from human help or counsel – *Even then* His Word can bring hope and life from the dead! Indeed, Mr. Wesley was right: "He speaks and listening to His voice, new life the dead receive!"

For example, take the thief on the Cross, who hears Jesus' first mighty Word from the Cross in Luke 23:34: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"! Do you not think that word gave hope to this wicked transgressor, as well working in him the life-saving repentance *which always must accompany* salvation? As he says to his partner in crime in Luke 23:39-41: "We are getting what we deserve for our crimes. This man has done nothing amiss."

It was because of Christ's *first Word* from the Cross, a Word of sovereign forgiveness, that the thief was then given the courage to ask to be remembered in Luke 23:42... And what a Word of reassurance Jesus gives him in Luke 23:43! There Jesus promised to "remember the thief" in his death, and to ensure his safe welcome into Christ's heavenly kingdom! Let us therefore close our reflection today by immersing ourselves in what it means to be "remembered" by our Savior, even as the thief pleads to be remembered by Jesus:

Meditate and Pray: "Lord, in all our trials, heartbreaks and disappointments in this life, please remember us. We must begin there. We believe that in all your mental processes as our Savior that there is a Divine omnipotence:

- For you to *know* our need is for you to mightily help.
- For you to *know* what is right and what ought to be done in every situation is for you to act mightily to weave your righteous deeds into our lives.
- For you to *remember your promises* which you gave us when we first came to know you is for you to mightily work those promises out in every future day of our lives.
- For you to *remember us* in our guilt, like the thief on the Cross, is for you to mightily lift that burden of guilt and put it on your own shoulders.

No wonder, then, that when Christ hears *our* plea, “remember me”, He cannot but rescue us from every sinful pit into which we would sink, were it not for His long arm of saving grace reaching out to grip us. Dear sinner, saved by grace: use this simple prayer every time you come to Jesus with your own spiritual guilt and the lost condition of your unsaved loved ones and neighbors: “Remember me, Remember us! In mercy, remember grace! Remember your promise to forgive all my sins.” Sing about Christ’s daily commitment to remember us and save us, using the words of hymn # 423 by James Montgomery:

*According to Thy gracious word,
In meek humility,
This will I do, my dying Lord,
I will remember Thee.*

*Thy body, broken for my sake,
My bread from Heaven shall be;
The testamental cup I take,
And thus remember Thee.*

*Gethsemane can I forget?
Or there Thy conflict see,
Thine agony, and bloody sweat,
And not remember Thee?*

*When to the cross I turn mine eyes,
And rest on Calvary,
O Lamb of God, my sacrifice!
I must remember Thee*

Thursday: read Luke 23:42-43 & Hebrews 4:7. The emphasis in Jesus’ response to the thief’s plea is regarding the imminent prospect of heavenly communion in paradise. “Today you will be with me in paradise” is the emphatic promise Jesus gives. What a contrast between this glorious word of timely salvation and the life-long sin which this thief practiced during years of victimizing his fellow man. Keep in mind that, to steal in the ancient world meant taking away possessions essential for survival, since goods were scarce, and tools, money and clothing were to be greatly valued because there was not much of it. For example, steal a farmer’s plow for his oxen, or his seed for planting and the efforts of a whole season’s subsistence farming was put in jeopardy. Starvation the next winter could well be the result! There were no ‘Tractor Supply’ or ‘Home Depot’ stores to resort to for replacements of lost items! What a terrible life of crime!

How amazing, then, to hear Christ’s instant response of amazing grace: “Today”! Christ was so confident in the prevailing power of His atoning sacrifice for this thief’s wasted life, that He knew there would be no delay before this thief was enjoying immediate communion with God after dying. As we tell our children in the words of S.G. De Graaf, in Promise and Deliverance,

“The criminal confessed the crucified Jesus as the King and rebuked the criminal who was crucified with him, thus breaking with the emptiness and blasphemy of a godless life!”

Meditate and Pray: Give thanks for the ability of our Lord Jesus to break the power of reigning sin in this thief’s life – even at His moment of greatest suffering! May the Lord hear this prayer from our lips as we pray for ourselves or others who may have lived an empty, wasted life:

“Lord Jesus, if you were able at your moment of greatest weakness at Calvary to bring in this guilt-stained criminal by your mighty words of Gospel hope, calling him to confess your kingship, then surely you can show the same power in our day, for the same types of people, whom we carry to you now by faith. Amen.”

Fri/Sat: read Luke 23:42-46 and Psalm 118:19-25. Jesus’ promise to the thief that, “he would be with Him in paradise” on the very day of his death, is only possible because Christ by His death *earned the right* to provide access into God’s presence through His own body and blood. Even back on Palm Sunday, when the crowds welcomed Christ into Jerusalem with the words of Psalm 118:25, “Hosanna”, Jesus knew that His sufferings would result in a glorious welcome into heaven for the blackest of sinners who believed. As Christ dies, shouting “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit”, He knew that He was bringing many sinners saved by grace along with Him into the Father’s presence. He could therefore demand, in the words of Psalm 118:19, that the gates into paradise be opened for Him, and for all whom He would justify and declare righteous in Psalm 118:20!

As a further illustration of this heavenly access, remember what happened as Jesus breathed His last mighty breath: there was an earthquake, and the temple curtain into the holy of holies was ripped in half: from top to bottom! No human hand could tear this eighty foot high curtain, woven of six inch thick material! God tore open the barrier to His presence, because Christ’s perfect death demanded it! Now we can approach with boldness to the mercy seat of God’s throne, to find help in our day, hour and minute of need (Hebrews 4:16)!

Sunday: read Psalm 118:19-25 & Luke 23:43. As an illustration of the glorious access which Christ’s death secured for sinners like the thief on the Cross, consider these words on Psalm 118:19, found in Spurgeon’s Treasury of David: “*Open to me the gates of righteousness.*”

“The gates won by Christ’s righteousness ... are the gates which needed the “Via Dolorosa and the cross, before they could roll back on their hinges. On a certain stormy afternoon, after the sun had been for three hours darkened, the world again heard of that paradise from which, four thousand years before, Adam had been banished. “Verily I say unto thee, this day shalt thou be with me in paradise.” O blessed thief, who thus entered into the heavenly gardens! O happy thief, that thus stole the kingdom of heaven! And see how valiantly he now enters it. “*Open to me the gates of righteousness.* Not merely, “God be merciful to me a sinner”; nor “Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.”, but this is what is called the omnipotence of prayer. “Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.” *John Mason Neale.*

How wonderful that the Holy Spirit of Christ gave the thief the *humility* to bow the knee to our crucified and dying Savior, as well as the *confidence* of saving faith to boldly approach Christ with his dying request to be remembered. What a welcome this criminal received into Heaven, as Christ would rejoice with the angels at this saved penitent. But most of all, notice that the thief gained more than just access into Heaven. Christ promised immediate and eternal fellowship which they would share: “Today you will be *with me* in paradise! Is there any greater proof of the bliss of Heaven than knowing that we will forever be, “with the Lord”? Amen, come Lord Jesus!