

3-18-12

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR HEAVENLY FATHER AND FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST. The text is Lu 23:35-43

THE PEOPLE STOOD WATCHING WHILE THE LEADERS SNEERED AT HIM AND SAID, "HE SAVED OTHER PEOPLE. IF THIS IS GOD'S MESSIAH - THE CHOSEN ONE - LET HIM SAVE HIMSELF." 37] AND THE SOLDIERS MOCKED HIM, TOO, APPROACHING HIM AND OFFERING HIM VINEGAR AS THEY SAID, "IF YOU'RE THE KING OF THE JEWS, SAVE YOURSELF!" 38] BUT IT WAS IN WRITING ABOVE HIS HEAD: "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS." 39] ONE OF THE TWO HANGING CRIMINALS WAS INSULTING HIM: "AREN'T YOU THE MESSIAH? SAVE YOURSELF AND US!" 40] WHEN THE OTHER ONE CASTIGATED HIM: "AREN'T YOU AFRAID OF GOD EVEN NOW, WHEN YOU'RE SENTENCED THE SAME AS HE IS? 41] AND IT'S FAIR FOR US: WHAT WE'VE DONE DESERVES WHAT WE'RE GETTING. BUT THIS ONE DIDN'T DO ANYTHING WRONG." 42] AND HE SAID, "JESUS, WHEN YOU GET TO YOUR KINGDOM, REMEMBER ME." 43] AND JESUS SAID TO HIM, "I TELL YOU THE TRUTH: YOU'LL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE TODAY."

Three men suffered on Good Friday, Jesus and the two thieves, suffering on either side in rage and pain at the door to Hell, so close to the only One who could save them. One got away from Christ and went raging into the dark. But the other one? The old hymn says, "Nearer my God to Thee, nearer to Thee, ev'n though it be a cross that raiseth me. It *was* a cross that raised him near. I know that the only pain that ever saved anybody is Christ's pain. That man wasn't saved by his suffering. But he was saved *in* it. Because by the end, he was suffering not just close to Jesus, but *with* Him.

None of us has suffered the way that thief did. We haven't been crucified yet. But still, our only choice is to suffer with Jesus or without Him, because suffering comes to us all. Even when the world's as pretty as New England in Spring, Christ says it's also fallen. It takes a while to really believe that He's right. Because we were made for Eden, and growing up includes finding out that this isn't Eden anymore. That's why people who never grow up are always *shocked* by suffering. If they're *Christians* who never grew up, they're shocked because they think that Jesus came to make things sweet here. But He didn't. He came to take us to a whole new Eden.

He says, **IN THIS WORLD YOU WILL HAVE TRIBULATION**. He says, **IT WILL BRING FORTH THORNS AND THISTLES TO YOU**, so that you can't get comfortable here. He says, **IT IS APPOINTED UNTO MEN ONCE TO DIE AND THEN THE JUDGEMENT**. There is no Happy Ending but Jesus Christ and finally all that matters is that we're "Nearer, my God, to Thee; nearer to Thee." And there will be suffering, but if we're with Christ, it's worth it all. He says **WE MUST THROUGH MANY TRIBULATIONS ... ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD!**

When they woke that thief up that Friday morning and he realized: "This is the day they're actually going to crucify me," he didn't know it was the day he was actually going to Heaven. When they opened the door to his cell, he didn't know he was getting dragged through that door to PARADISE. When they stripped him and stretched him out on the wood - when they pounded those nails through his hands and his feet and lifted him up next to Christ, he didn't know they were lifting him "nearer my God, to Thee."

At first he was just like the other convict. Jesus was close, but he wasn't *with* Jesus. At first, he was just raging in pain and taking it out on Jesus, just like his partner in crime, shouting, V. 39] **AREN'T YOU THE MESSIAH? Why don't You *do* something?"**

I've said that to Jesus. Maybe you have, too. When it turned out He was right about **TRIBULATION** and there was pain in your body, or in one of the kids? some horrible trouble, or somebody dying, and **THORNS AND THISTLES**, and how come things still aren't better? Or how come *I* haven't changed yet, when I've prayed and prayed and He knows how I counted on Him? Why doesn't He *do* something?" He *was* doing something on the cross.

He says He *is* doing something now. He says pain prunes and refines and gives **FELLOWSHIP WITH HIS SUFFERING**, and **WORKS FOR US AN ETERNAL WEIGHT OF GLORY BEYOND COMPARE**, and a million more things than we can comprehend. But when the pain is *on*, then it's not about knowing what suffering's *for*; it's only about knowing whom we're *with*.

Sinful nature doesn't want to know. When the pain is on, all sinful nature ever does is what that thief did at first: I mean, takes it out on Jesus and tells Him that He's not fair or He's not good and insults Him with angry unbelief, just like the thief on the cross, and *uses* the suffering as an excuse to turn away from Jesus. But away from Jesus, our sins aren't forgiven and the suffering's still there, and we're just one day nearer to *amazing* suffering that never ends.

It's a miracle if we stop. But that's what happened on Calvary. While one CRIMINAL was still yelling at Jesus, "How about saving somebody?!?" All of a sudden the other one yelled, "Leave Him alone!"

He said, V. 40] AREN'T YOU AFRAID OF GOD EVEN NOW? What happened? The Law hit him. The pain preached to him, that he was actually going to meet God that day. And he called out to the other one, "Haven't we got enough to answer for? Do you want to *die* sinning, too? Don't you get it even now when YOU'RE SENTENCED THE SAME AS HE IS AND ...Listen to this: V. 41] AND FOR US, IT'S FAIR. WHAT WE'VE *DONE* - and you wonder what they'd watched each other do – he says, WHAT WE'VE DONE DESERVES WHAT WE'RE GETTING.

That does not mean that all suffering comes because of some particular sin somebody committed. Yes, sure, if we're wandering from Christ we can get dope slapped very hard. If you're wondering whether that's what's happening to you, just ask your Lord, "Is it something I've been doing?" If it is, you'll know *instantly*. God doesn't spank His children and then make them guess why. If you don't know *instantly* what it is, that's not what the suffering's about. Neither is God ever "*trying* to teach you something" as if, as soon as you figure it out, He'll stop hitting you. That's crazy. Anyway, Jesus doesn't *try* to teach. He *teaches*. Then what's the suffering for? I just said, "pruning and refining and FELLOWSHIP WITH HIS SUFFERING, and WORKING FOR US AN ETERNAL WEIGHT OF GLORY BEYOND COMPARE, and more," not to mention giving us some credentials to testify for Him, so it's not just, "Christ is great. I got everything I want!" but, "Christ is wonderful. Regardless."

And beyond that, you Christians have no idea how much of your sufferings are actually suffering *for* Jesus. He could have taken you away with Him a long time ago. But instead, you're still here in the THORNS for the sake of the people

He wants to save through your work and your words. So you suffer as a missionary suffers on a hard mission field. For Jesus.

But on the other hand, it really, really comforts me that that dying thief knew *he* was getting what he *deserved*. Because I've said, "I could believe that this was for good, if only I hadn't brought it on *myself*." What about when it's something you brought on yourself? But that thief *did* bring it on himself and it *was* for his amazing good and if *him*, then me. Even what I brought on myself can be "a cross that raiseth me nearer, my God, to Thee" if I entrust the whole mess to the One who bought me whole and suffer with *Him*.

Of course, when it comes to the huge things: death and judgment, we've *all* brought *that* on ourselves. And it's the Lord – it's His Law at work when any of us realizes that FOR US, IT'S FAIR. Any pain that wakes me up to that is from Grace closing in. The dying thief didn't *know* yet, that right in Hell's waiting room, grace was closing in on him. He just knew, V. 41] "FOR US, IT'S FAIR, BUT ... THIS ONE DIDN'T DO ANYTHING WRONG. How'd he know that? Was it the *way* Jesus suffered? Was it the way He prayed, hanging from the nails, FATHER, FORGIVE THEM? But that sinner said, THIS ONE's good. THIS ONE's clean. I don't know what THIS ONE's *doing* here." He didn't know.

And he didn't know how much he could ask for. He just said, V. 42] JESUS, REMEMBER ME. I guess it mattered that somebody good might remember him. I don't know how much he understood about Messiahs. But there were the soldiers laughing, V. 37] "KING OF THE JEWS!" And V. 38] IT WAS IN WRITING ABOVE HIS HEAD: "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS." So he just said, "WHEN YOU GET TO YOUR KINGDOM, JESUS – wherever Your kingdom is, JESUS, when You get to that kingdom of Yours, think about me sometime. JESUS, REMEMBER ME." He didn't know what he was asking, but he asked the right Person.

And his *King* answered him, "I won't have to *remember* you." V. 43] I TELL YOU THE TRUTH, YOU'LL BE *WITH* ME IN PARADISE TODAY. And with that promise, *faith* came into that sinner. Faith is being with Jesus. For that guy it was just faith that somehow, *WITH* Jesus, no judgment? Somehow *WITH* Jesus, PARADISE? With those words Jesus saved that soul. It's what He was there for. And it's what that man was there for, too. It really *was* his day to meet God.

When they led him to Calvary, he didn't know he was headed for Christ. But when they led out Jesus Christ, Jesus knew He was headed for that thief. Am I saying that God Almighty got crucified so He'd be there when a convict died? Yes! The same way He got crucified to be there when I die. He got crucified for our sinning so we could live with Him and die with Him and leave with Him in spite of everything. Why *else* did He come down here at all? Why *else* did He crawl under **WHAT WE'VE DONE?** Why else did He get Himself **SENTENCED THE SAME AS us?**

FOR US, IT WAS FAIR, but for Him, it was *love*. Because for Christ Almighty it's always been "Nearer, my *child*, to thee, nearer to thee, ev'n though it be a cross that raiseth Me." JESUS wasn't dragged out of His cell that morning. He headed for that cross by His own will, afraid, yes, and *relentless*. It was the only way to that thief. JESUS wasn't forced down onto His cross. He wouldn't let it get away from Him. It was the only way to you. And when God got fastened to our sins and lifted up into the air, it was, "*Still* all My joy shall be, nearer, My child, to thee."

Through all the years in this bright and bitter world; through all the years of His longing to take us away with Him, He works *all* our suffering **TOGETHER FOR GOOD**, till even death, our enemy, is *forced* to preside at our entrance to a **KINGDOM**. And even the pain of having this sinful nature: That thief's crimes brought him to Calvary. And me – as Luther says, the sin that remains is made my servant, to carry me to Calvary, to the One who loves me, until all sufferings are past.

They aren't past yet. Jesus told our dying brother, **YOU'LL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE TODAY**. But **TODAY** wasn't over yet. **TODAY** wasn't over, but Christ said, **I TELL YOU THE TRUTH: YOU'LL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE**, and by the power of those words, that thief suffered *with* Jesus from there on. The pain wasn't gone; far from it. But his *sins* were gone and all Heaven was wide open with a welcome waiting – even while that sinner was still on a cross.

In fact, he lingered longer than Jesus. He heard Jesus shout, **FATHER! INTO YOUR HANDS!** and he saw Jesus enter that kingdom of His: But he didn't see the *kingdom*, not yet. For how much longer – with nails in his hands and feet, all he

had to hold onto was the *word*, TODAY YOU'LL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE. TODAY YOU'LL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE.

While all he *saw* was – well, they wanted everybody dead by sundown so what he saw was soldiers coming to break his legs so that the pain and shock would kill him – TODAY YOU'LL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE. He saw them coming with an iron bar to break his thigh bones. TODAY YOU'LL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE. And then they lifted that bar to swing it: TODAY YOU'LL BE WITH ME - **JESUS!!!** ... and then, suddenly it was **JESUS!** Face to face, and suddenly and forever, it wasn't about the suffering at all. It was all about being with the One who suffered for him, the One he suffered with once, for a little while.

It's all about being with Jesus. While we laugh with Him and cry with Him and work with Him and die with Him: “Still all our song shall be, “Nearer, my God, to Thee! Nearer to Thee!” Thus says the Lord: I TELL YOU THE TRUTH. YOU SHALL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE +. And any day may be TODAY. Amen.