

Where is Jesus When We Need Him?

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[0 : 0 0] I would like to turn back this evening to the passage that we read together in Luke's Gospel, and the account of Jesus on the cross with the two criminals on either side.

Now, this is the Sunday before Easter Sunday, and there's never been an Easter like it in living memory, if there's ever been an Easter quite like it in some ways for us. And in a very serious situation that we find ourselves in, we often find also that we ask spiritual questions, or people ask spiritual questions, or people ask questions about God. Where is your God at times like this? Where is Jesus? Why is this happening? Why is there, and not just at a time like this, but one of the great, great issues of the world in which we live is people asking the question, why is there so much suffering, and why is there so much death? It's always a huge question. It's an age-old question, it doesn't make it any less real, and any less significant, and any less genuine in people's lives. Can I just say one thing at this point? That it's a question that you can only ask in spiritual terms, it's a question you can only ask if you believe in

God. If you have no concept of God, maybe you wouldn't be watching this particular sermon online, if that's the case, but you may know people who don't believe in God, and who maybe have an atheistic or a secular worldview. With no God, you can't ask that question. You can't ask that question, why? Why are these things happening? Because there is no ultimate reason, it just is. There's no real purpose. You can make no cry to anyone or anything outside of the sealed bubble of humanity's random existence if there is no God. There's nothing ultimate. This is it. This is all we have. And that in itself is a hugely unsatisfying answer to the problem of suffering and death and trials and tribulations that we go through in life. I'm not saying there's any easy answers to suffering, but I think you'll find in the Bible and in God's revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ, that the whole, these questions are addressed. So when we come to this passage of Jesus and the crucified criminals, you wouldn't immediately think it's a passage that deals with that big question primarily. I've never thought, I've never before thought of this passage as speaking clearly or directly into this critical question. But it's absolutely brilliant and powerful in addressing the question of evil and suffering in a very personal and also in a very relevant way for us.

It's a short and clear and powerful and apologetic into the question of suffering as the book of Job is long and also gloriously powerful and mysterious at the same time. So we have this scenario of Jesus on the cross with the criminals on either side of him. And we have that of course, prophesied in Isaiah chapter 53, verse 12, where we have these words, therefore I will divide him a portion with the many and he shall divide the spoil with the strong because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors or the criminals, yet he bore the sin of many and makes intercession for transgressors. So you have these two guys on either side of him. In all probability they were bandits, freedom fighters, we might call them terrorists, we also might call them. They were also probably thieves as well, they're talked about as thieves in one of the other gospels who would have stolen to fund their cause. The word that's used for them here is the same word that's used of the bandits in the story of the parable of the Good Samaritan who robbed him and left him for dead. There were zealots, insurrectionists, similar to Barabbas who was released in order that Jesus would be crucified. In fact, they were probably part of the same gang as the three of them would have been crucified together. So here we have them with Jesus on the cross, on their crosses, a critical time at the end of their lives, and they displayed two very different reactions to their suffering and also to Jesus. And what we find is that they mirror very clearly people's different reactions to

Jesus and to God in the light of their plight or their suffering or evil or death. And you may find that God is speaking into your own reactions and your own responses to Him. And we hope and pray that we will all be challenged by that and challenged to consider who Jesus is. So we have two criminals here. And the first, in verse 39, we're going to look at and we're going to call them the contemptuous criminal. 39, one of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, as Jesus saying, are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us. So here we have this criminal, and even in his desperate state, in his utter agony, he is soon to die. There's no admission of any kind of weakness or vulnerability or need. He has tunnel vision about the situation he's in, and he spews out sarcasm about Jesus and about his claims. You know, are you not the Christ? It's as if he's saying, look Christ, you're here and your reputation is at stake. He wants Jesus to show him that he really is who he claims to be and who he thinks he should be. Come on, he says, come down off that cross and show me what you're made of. And in so doing, get me out of here. I want to come out of this situation and you're supposed to be the Christ, not much of a Christ as you're hanging on the tree. Come on, save me and save my colleague, my friend, and save yourself. I'm not interested in all this forgiveness stuff that you've been speaking about that we read about in verse 33 here in

[7 : 47] The Passage, Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing. Just get me off the cross, do it by some great miracle, and end my suffering and my pain here. I want my life back, save my skin, my way. There's this great cry of self-preservation, and it's almost as if he sees Jesus much more like a superhero that we're used to seeing on the screens. Someone who comes in and saves the day and who does an amazing miracle and whips him off the cross and takes him away and gives him the freedom that he's looking for. Now, in many ways, that's a common response, a common response of unbelief towards God and towards suffering. Everyone wants to be saved at that level. That is in this life. Everyone wants to be free from suffering and to be healthy and to be happy and to have long life. And very often, people will say, but surely, God's reputation is at stake in all of this and this reality of evil and darkness and pain. If he's supposed to be God, he's supposed to be loving, why would he allow me to suffer? Why would he allow anyone to suffer?

Why am I suffering? If God is God, why isn't he doing something? He's all powerful. Why doesn't he climb down off that cross and do something and end my pain and my suffering? Where is his love?

Don't you care? Aren't you interested? Now, we've maybe faced that response many times from people and maybe it's a response that deep down in our hearts, we've also often had to suffering and pain and it's perfectly natural in many ways, especially at a time like this, a time of crisis that we're going through. What sort of Messiah is Jesus? What sort of Savior is He? Now, God knows that we ask these questions and God knows that people say this and accuse Him in this way and that's why I believe this story, at least one of the reasons why this story is recorded. And what is Jesus' answer? What is the answer of Jesus to the criticisms and the accusations and the abuse that he gets from the contemptuous criminal? He didn't flinch. Christ didn't flinch. He stayed exactly where he was. He continued to suffer and so did the criminal. Why? Because the alternative wouldn't have changed the fundamental problem. It would have been a temporary solution, wouldn't it? Jesus could have jumped off that cross and he could have taken the two criminals with them and they could have just ripped their way through the crowd and headed off to freedom. But it wouldn't have provided a solution to suffering and to illness and to death and to sin and to guilt and to the grave, because the cross is the only answer. It wasn't the nails that kept

Jesus Christ on the cross. It was His will. It was His love. It was His divine knowledge that this was the only way to deal with suffering in this world and to deal with evil and to deal with pain and to deal with death. This is the only place, this place, Calvary, God, God as we saw last week, this is the only place in the universe where death's power could be defeated and our guilt before God atoned for and suffering categorized. It's where we can categorize and find some kind of purpose and reason and understanding of suffering. Now, we know that life since the cross goes on in a suffering world and we know that is because evil has been defeated on the cross, but not yet destroyed until he returns. And that means that this life can be desperate and can be tough and there is suffering and there is pain and much of it from our point of view is we don't understand and we don't minimize and we don't regard as insignificant. But he does call us to trust. He does call us to see and understand that it is ultimately temporary for all those who will put their faith in Him to recognize His rescue and to see even that suffering can have a redemptive purpose and can and will be overcome and be beneficial by His grace for all who will call in Him and trust in Him and look to Him for redemption because ultimately death has been defeated for all who put their faith in Jesus. So you've got the contemptuous criminal, but you've also got the repentant terrorist. I might not like that phrase, but it accurately describes who we have here in verse, the next few verses. But the other rebuked him saying, do you not fear God since you're under the same sentence of condemnation? And we justly, for we have received the due rewards of our deed, but this man has done nothing wrong. Jesus said, and he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom, and he said to him, truly I say to you, today you'll be with me in paradise. Another guy in exactly the same situation with a totally different reaction.

You know, when you think of three dying men on a cross here, and yet this repentant terrorist sees something in Jesus that makes him respond absolutely differently. There's a recognition in what he says that somehow God is close. God is intimately involved in this situation, and he is holding God in awe. You know, don't you fear God? Don't you reverence God? Aren't you aware that we're just a hair breadth away from standing before the living God, and we're guilty in this world in human terms, how much more so are we before the living God? He recognizes that he's imminently going to die, and justly, and he confesses that, confesses his wrongdoing, and in so doing also recognizes Jesus' innocence, and he cries out to him. He says, Lord, you know, please, please don't forget me. I know you're doing something here. I know you're someone of influence and someone of authority, and it's remarkable, isn't it, that he says that. It reminds me of the story of Joseph in the Old Testament in Genesis, when he's been, he's flung into prison with the baker and the cupbater, and he interprets their dreams, and we know that they come true, and that the cupbater eventually is released from prison, and back into Pharaoh's service, and as he has been released, Joseph says to him, remember me. You know, you're going into the presence of the Pharaoh again, someone of great influence and importance. Remember me there.

[15 : 54] And of course, we know he forgets for long enough. But here is the same thing you've got. This is a very different situation though, isn't it? Because he's asking someone who apparently is in exactly the same position as him, remember me. Remember me. He's saying it to a man in a cross. As if he's saying, look, I don't understand it, but I know you're a king. And I believe that, that notice that's nailed above your head, King of the Jews, you are a king, but it's much greater than that. And you're going to survive this. You are doing something incredible, and I want to be part of it. I want to live. Remember me when you come into your kingdom. It's a remarkable statement of faith. And Christ answers him, and he answers him in two ways, really. He answers him visually, and also verbally. He answers him visually, really, I guess, in the next few hours where, again, nothing happens. He doesn't come off the cross. He doesn't do anything spectacular. He suffers with them, except that he suffers from midday to three in the afternoon when darkness comes down. We're told that three years of darkness from midday. And the repentant and the repentant terrorist, and the other, thief also sees this, and they hear the cry, it is finished. And they hear him say,

Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit. And there's this visual power that I think sometimes we've lost when we're thinking about Calvary, that this is the center of all things. I don't think it's insignificant that Jesus is in the middle of these two guys. But much more, this is the center of the universe in many ways. This is where all the despair of suffering finds hope, even if we don't have all the answers. This is where God is revealing his answer, his ultimate answer to suffering, in the suffering of God the Son on the cross in our place. There's this great visual darkness where Jesus is suffering and bearing the wrath of our sin and taking death in our place, as the Redeemer, as the Messiah. There's a very visual powerful answer there, but there's also his words. There's a verbal response from Jesus at this time. Words of incredible power and pathos and significance, not just for this individual who hears it, but for every believer right through history down to ourselves today. Truly, I say to you today, you'll be with me in

Paradise. Great words. I'm just going to think about them for a moment. Paradise, it's not final heaven. And I think that's one of the reasons a different word is used here. It's what theologians call an intermediate state. It's not final heaven because it's the place where believers go after they die in this world. So their bodies are in the grave and their souls go to Paradise. And that's not the final state. That's not the ultimate that we look forward to. It's an intermediate time.

The word is only used a couple of times in the New Testament, what's mentioned here, but also in Second Corinthians where Paul's explaining how he received the gospel. He says, I know a man, almost speaks about himself in the third person, I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up into the third heaven, whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know God knows.

And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise, whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know God knows. And he heard things that cannot be told, which man may never utter. And then it's also mentioned in Revelation. He is in here to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches, to the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God. So that place where the soul goes to be with God and with Jesus, it's a picture word, Paradise. It really just means park or garden, maybe as connotations back to the garden of Eden, but it's really illustrative. It's just a picture that tries to convey everything about being free, that being imprisoned and suffering and evil and darkness and death isn't. So when I think of garden and when I think of parks, I think of my granny's garden and Pluckton, who used to run into that when I was wee, and there'd be a smell of summer roses and raspberries, I can still smell them when I think about that garden. Or maybe the swing park with the kids when they were small, and just being there and hearing their laughter and running about and the freedom and happiness of that. Or maybe even standing on the top of a hill overlooking Glenelg or Ullapool, seeing the vastness of the horizon and enjoying the peace and the gentle breeze of a warm summer's evening. Just the connotations of beauty and of openness and of freedom. We don't really know much else. The Bible doesn't say much else about this intermediate time, but it's not only intermediate as this Paradise, it's also immediate. Truly, He says, today you'll be with me in Paradise.

[22 : 16] And these are hugely comforting words for every believer. It verbally takes a sting out of death, because it's a reminder that we immediately enjoy Paradise when we die, that beautiful, but mysterious experience of the disembodied believer. But He said, it's not only Paradise.

Why really is it Paradise? Because it says, today you'll be with me in Paradise. And again, that reminds us of the great hope that believers have of these words in 2 Corinthians 5, 8. Yes, Paul says, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So there's this recognition that this intermediate Paradise is a place where whatever it is, it's a place where we are with Jesus. Or the words of Philippians 1, 23, I'm hard pressed between the two.

My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. So really, we don't know much else than anything else is really speculation. But we do know that we will be with Jesus. We will see Him. However, we can do that. We will worship Him. That will be our great reward. We'll be surrounded by His love, by His life, by the revelation of what we have held on to by faith, even through suffering and darkness and difficulty. And this temporary home that we have in our disembodied state will also be a place of great anticipation, immense anticipation and excitement, along with Jesus looking forward to the ushering in of His eternal resurrection life in the new heavens and the new earth. And that's the great reality that we taste now as Christians, because as Christians now, the opposite is also true. He is with us in the person of His Holy Spirit, in our hearts. Our lives are hid with Christ and God. And so, there is a sense that what we see darkly now, what we hold on to by faith, what we sometimes struggle to understand in Christ, we will know fully and beautifully and gloriously then in paradise until our bodies are resurrected into newness of life, into the new heavens and the new earth. So, it was an amazing statement that Jesus makes to him. And I finished just with a few words that really bring it home to us, the significance and the importance of what Jesus says, because he says, truly I say to you, truly I say to you. And that word truly is a very, is a powerful, powerful formulaic word that Jesus uses. It's the word amen. And Jesus only uses it in the New Testament. He uses actually 76 times in the New Testament. And he is always introducing something of great significance, a statement of pivotal importance. And he says, truly, or you remember we used to read the authorized version, it would be verily, verily I say to you, truly, truly, amen, amen, I say to you. And it was a powerful declarative word that Jesus used. So, let it be. This is certain. This is essential to your understanding. This is important. This is my word to you. And he's saying that to the thief on the cross, and he's saying it to us now, because it's at the very core of what we need to know and understand.

And so, he says, truly, you know, do you believe this? Do you understand it? Do you accept that this is the heart of the gospel right here? Jesus really is giving us a very short summary of the whole gospel in this statement and in what he promises to the thief on the cross. This unnamed criminal who never did any good work for Jesus, who wasn't baptized, who didn't ever sit at the Lord's table, who was probably a nasty piece of work by human standards, never went to church as a believer.

However, he is the one who enters paradise with Jesus as the first trophy of post-crucifixion victory. And that, my friends, is the gospel. That is the gospel. The gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, the message of salvation is that anyone who recognizes like this common criminal in this situation, this incredibly difficult situation, if anyone in that situation recognizes they cannot even meet their own standards of goodness, they can't even sometimes keep the law of the land, let alone God's law, that we are guilty before the living God, that we are facing physical death near or far away, and that that is a reflection of the spiritual condition of death that we are under without our sins being forgiven. And that the only rescue for us is Jesus Christ because he is the King of kings, even though he is here nailed to a cross.

[28 : 06] And that his work on, he stayed on the cross because that was the place. That is the center. That is the message. That is the gospel. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who defeated death, who gave himself over to death. No one took away his life. He gave himself to death in our place, and he did that because of his great love and great commitment and compassion for a lost people like this criminal. And his provision therefore when we trust in him is beyond our wildest dreams. And all we are asked to do is confess our sins to him and ask him to remember us and put our trust in him and follow him. We have the privilege, many of us as Christians, of living a life in this broken and suffering world as followers of Jesus in a way that this criminal didn't. And so our responsibility and our privileges is great. So never has the message of Easter been so relevant. And Jesus Christ is still transforming millions of lives across this broken world and providing an answer and hope and redemption in suffering and through suffering and remarkable transformation and a recognition of its temporary nature and of the wonderful hope of the gospel. So I would just ask all of us to consider our response to Jesus afresh and consider as believers how we respond to suffering and how we cry out and recognize his strength and ability to cope through it. But if you're not a believer tonight, maybe ask the question, where do you stand in all of this? Where is your hope? Or if you're someone who you've just feel you've completely messed up and you're absolutely broken, your life's out of control, cry out to this Jesus. I don't believe your situation was worse than this criminal. And no, the great promises of entrusting your life to him, crying out to him in prayer and asking him to be remembered. Amen. Oh, let's pray. Father God, we ask and pray that you would bless your word.

We thank you for that remarkable picture and illustration and real life summary cameo of the gospel. And we pray that you would touch our lives and our hearts with that truth this evening. Amen.