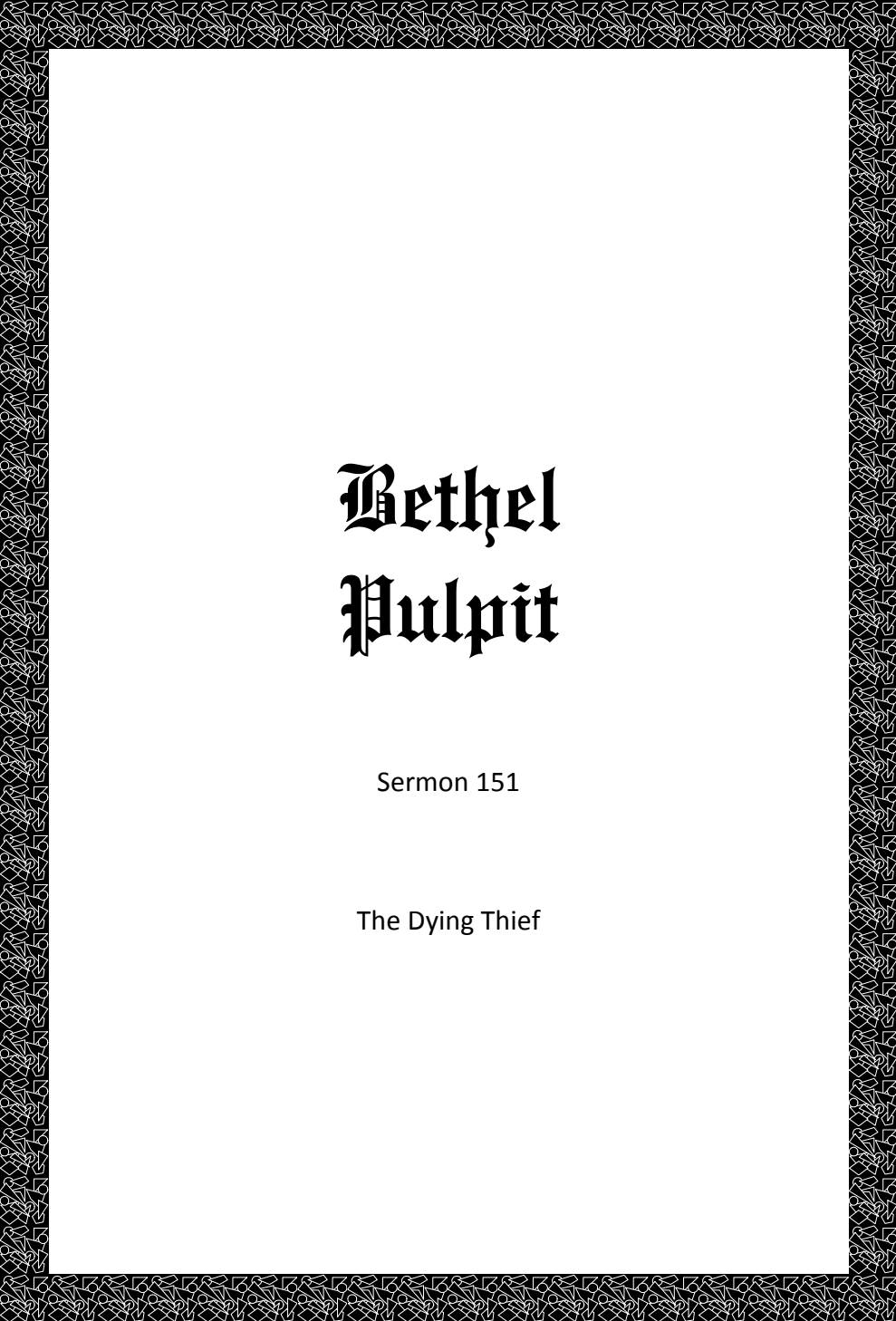




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 151

The Dying Thief

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 31st August, 1997**

Text: *“And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23. 42, 43).*

Here we are on sacred ground, brought to the foot of the cross to look on the death of Christ; the awfulness, the solemnity of it, yet the beauty, the blessedness; to see this dear Man dying on the cross, to view Him as true, almighty God, and to find our hope, our only hope of heaven here. For,

“In vain we seek for peace with God,
By methods of our own.
The death of Christ shall still remain
Sufficient and alone.”

O those wonderful accomplishments of the cross of Christ! A way of forgiveness made, a way opened up for sinners even to heaven itself, the paying of the ransom price, the satisfying of divine justice and the claims of God's righteous law, and the opening of the fountain in the Saviour's precious blood for sin and for uncleanness. Well might our hymnwriter say, “Here it is I find my heaven, while upon the Lamb I gaze.” And to see the wonderful love of the Lord Jesus, that love which is stronger than death. “Many waters cannot quench love.” “Having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end.” What think ye of Christ, Christ crucified? “Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto My sorrow, wherewith the Lord hath afflicted Me in the day of His fierce anger.” Now is it nothing to you? Why, some of us through grace have to say, “Lord Jesus, it is everything to me, my only hope, my only plea, my only foundation.” Sinner, did you ever come to that spot where you could see nothing between you and a deserved hell but the blood of Christ?

Well, of all the amazing happenings on the day the Saviour died, this was not the least: the salvation of the dying thief. Right across it all in letters of gold we can see written, “Where sin abounded, grace did much

more abound.” Why, here is this sinner brought to the end of an ungodly life. He is in his dying hour, his dying moments, and grace reigns in his salvation. He had not any good works to plead. He had not partaken of the Lord’s supper. He was not on the membership roll of any church. It is a sinner saved by free and sovereign grace. There were two thieves, and we read in one of the other gospels that both of them reviled Him, both of them. So you have the one who was saved, even when he was on the cross, still in that state of nature’s darkness and death. You think of it, a dying man and there he is reviling the Lord of life and glory! What made the difference? There were two here suffering the same death, the same penalty. They both heard the Saviour’s words. One was eternally saved and one was eternally lost. We have to bow before the mysterious sovereignty of God. We have to trace the salvation of one to sovereign, eternal, electing love, and we have to tremble at the other one passed by. It is nothing but free, sovereign grace. I once heard an Arminian preacher trying to explain it away. He made this wild statement. He said the dying thief perhaps had a praying mother and she was praying for him, and that was why he was saved and the other one lost. We must not be left to go further than the Word of God.

O but what a scene of matchless grace this! And how the Saviour was specially honoured at His death by faith!. Both at His birth and at His death, the Lord Jesus was specially honoured by remarkable displays of faith, at the beginning and ending of His sacred life on earth. Why, those wise men had had a revelation from heaven. They had seen the star in the east, the revelation of a great and glorious Person and they were willing to leave everything, to set out on this dangerous journey. “Where is He that is born King of the Jews?” They come to the palace in Jerusalem, but He is not here. The star directs them to Bethlehem. At last the long-awaited moment has come to see this great and glorious King. They are led to a poor house, and enter in, and see a poor man and a poor woman, and they see a young Child; and they fall down and worship Him. There is no greater display of faith than that. You will not know any greater display of faith than that, to look on the dear Babe of Bethlehem and worship him as your God. Then they presented Him with gifts: gold, setting forth His kingship, frankincense, setting forth His Godhead, and myrrh, prophetically setting forth His bitter sufferings even unto death as the sacrifice for sin. What a display of faith! And then you have it right at the

end in this amazing display of faith with the dying thief who looks on a poor, suffering Man, seemingly, to the world, being put to death as a criminal, and there in all his weakness, and there by his prayer and witness and testimony, the dying thief acknowledged Him as his God. There is no greater display of faith than this, the one at the beginning, the one at the end, the wise men, the dying thief.

You know, beloved friends, the cross of Christ will always separate. There were three crosses. There was one cross in the midst, the cross of Christ. There was one on the one side eternally saved and one on the other side eternally lost. There was that everlasting separation. And the cross of Christ still separates. It separates this congregation. Dear friends, which side of the cross of Christ are you on tonight? Are you on the side of the saved thief, or are you on the side of the thief that was lost? There were three crosses. There were three men dying there. One was dying *for* sin, and one was dying *to* sin, and one was dying *in* sin. Three crosses.

“And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on Him, saying, If thou be Christ, save Thyself and us.” A few minutes before both of them had been railing on Him. How solemn to come right to the end without God and without hope! But here it is just one of the malefactors continuing to rail on Him. O this mocking, this scorning, this hatred, this bitterness which added to the sufferings of Christ. “If Thou be Christ, save Thyself and us.” There was doubt cast upon His office and His Person. “But the other.” O here you see sovereign, free, abounding grace, which made the change in him from what he once was, which he had been but a moment before, and which made a change between him and his fellow thief. Grace will do that with you. It will make a change between you and the world, and it will make a change between you now and what you once were.

“One of the malefactors which were hanged railed on Him, saying, If Thou be Christ, save Thyself and us. But the other.” O what wonders love has done! “But the other answering rebuked him.” Whether anything in particular affected the dying thief we do not know. The divines down the ages right from apostolic times have come up with all kinds of suggestions: for instance, that he saw the inscription on the cross, “This is the King of the Jews,” and the Lord enlightened his heart to the true meaning. Another suggestion is that he was specially affected and his

heart touched when he heard the Lord Jesus pray, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." But we do not know, and we have to leave this and leave every surmise. "But the other answering rebuked him." So he possessed the evidence of the holy, tender fear of God in his heart, the evidence that he was born again of the Spirit. Because it was this: he could not bear the Saviour to be dishonoured, yet he himself had been reviling a few moments before. Where the new birth takes place, where the fear of God is implanted, there will always be that reverence for the Lord, that holy fear, that tender conscience, that sense of sin. There will always be this: you cannot bear the Lord's name and Person to be dishonoured. "That worthy name by the which ye are called." He said, "Dost not thou fear God?" and gave the clearest evidence that he himself did, through grace. And if you and I are born of the Spirit of God, being prepared for heaven, we too will possess the fear of God. There will be that love, even though you cannot claim it to be love. You will not mind if people say things about you, but you cannot bear it if any scorn or blasphemy is spoken against the Person of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

"Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?" And then another thing: the clear conviction of his sin and guilt, a humble confession of it, no excuses whatsoever made, and a bowing before divine sovereignty in the justice of God. "We indeed justly." It is grace which brings a sinner there. It was a terrible death he was dying. He was in agony and pain. But there was not the rebellion. There was not a fighting against God's sovereignty. "We indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds." And grace will bring you to justify God in your condemnation. "If my soul were sent to hell, Thy righteous law approves it well."

"We indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds." But then what about this? "But this Man hath done nothing amiss." Now who taught the dying thief that? The Lord Jesus was being put to death as if He had been a criminal. Who taught the dying thief that this Man had done nothing amiss? Was it his own witness to the love and grace of the Saviour in His sorrows? Was it listening to His words? Was it viewing His passion? Or was it a sheer revelation from heaven? O but to look on the pure, perfect, spotless humanity of the incarnate Son of God, the Lamb

of God without blemish and without spot, and to “behold that scene of matchless grace, ’tis Jesus in the sinner’s place.”

“But this Man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.” Really, the way this word and the whole subject of the salvation of the dying thief has come upon my spirit today is following the very solemn tidings we heard this morning of the tragedy, the sudden death of Princess Diana. I mean this: the need for *you*, the need for *me*, to be prepared for death. We do not know how long it will be. We do not know how soon it will come. The vital point is to be made ready, to be made right, to be prepared, because by nature we are not right, we are not ready, we are not prepared. And we need the Lord Himself to do it, to make us right for eternity. We do not want to presume. We do not want to take it for granted. “He said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.” And it rested on me like this: the dying thief had a good religion and a good preparation for heaven, and the lessons he learned and the testimony he bore are the lessons you and I need in measure to learn and the testimony you and I need to bear.

Many people have made too much of the dying thief. I mean in this sense: they have presumed upon leaving things until they are older. I think most people brought up under the sound of the truth know in their conscience it is right, and I believe most people brought up under the sound of the truth have thoughts, if only natural, about when they will die. They know there is a judgment day, there is an everlasting sentence, there is a heaven, there is a hell, but there is always a desire to leave it till later; there is plenty of time; when I am old. Of course, people have used the dying thief wrongly. There is only one dying thief in the whole of Scripture. I think it was Samuel Medley who said it: there is *one* dying thief in Scripture so that none may despair, but there is *only one* dying thief in Scripture that none may presume.

Now this was a deathbed repentance, but it was clear repentance; it was a clear work. There was the clear evidence of it, and the Saviour Himself witnessed it was true. But those who have had experience always say, beware of deathbed repentances. There was a minister in London in the last century and he witnessed many very wonderful cases of deathbed repentances, but he said in almost every case where that person did not die,

but was restored to health, they went back to their old ways. What was that deathbed repentance worth? Sometimes you hear a person say, “No-one knows what goes on between a sinner and God in that last moment.” Well, we do not, and it is a mercy we do not. God is sovereign, and God is able to save even to the uttermost, but we must not presume on these things and we must not dabble in them. We want the clear work of the Holy Spirit of God. You have often heard me say that no-one will ever reach heaven except those who travel heavenwards. There is an embarking. There is a setting sail. What about the dying thief? His journey was short, but wasn’t it clear? Didn’t he possess all the vital ingredients of real religion, vital godliness?

So it is in this sense that this very beautiful but very solemn, very sacred subject has been with me today in the light of the solemn shock we have all had and the sadness I believe we have all felt. The finality of it. It is final. As the tree falls, so shall it lie. And the certainty of it. And death is the great leveller. There is none can claim privilege or status before it. “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.” But it is in the light of this, to have a religion like the dying thief, a sinner saved by free and sovereign grace. Because if you and I are ever going to reach heaven at last, we must come to heaven entirely on the same ground as the dying thief, a sinner saved by grace, a sinner hoping only in the blood of Christ.

“And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with Me in paradise.” Now there are some very remarkable things about the dying thief’s prayer. This is real prayer. The Lord Himself bore witness concerning Saul of Tarsus of the reality of his religion: “For, behold, he prayeth.” And the same can be said concerning the dying thief here. “Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto Me.” “For, behold, he prayeth.” The Lord Jesus “shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied.” Here is one whose name was in the book of life. He spent the whole of his life as far from God as sheep can run, and now it is not only the eleventh hour, but it is almost the twelfth. Who is going to prevail, Satan or Christ? There, at the very last moment, the Lord Jesus reached forth a divine, almighty hand and snatched him as a brand from the burning and took him that day to glory as a trophy of love and blood. O you see the wonderful power of the Saviour, a pure, dear, holy

Man, crucified in weakness, but His arm is not shortened that it cannot save. “Able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him.” And now risen, exalted, glorified in heaven this same Jesus, still able to save the vilest of sinners, the chief of sinners, and take them to heaven. “There is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared.”

“And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.” There are many, many things. First of all, who taught the dying thief to call Jesus Lord? All around the people were mocking Him and scoffing Him. The soldiers were insulting Him. And what of Peter and James and John? “They all forsook Him, and fled.” But the Lord Jesus is not without His witness. “And he said unto Jesus, Lord.” “No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost” – that is, in a gracious, saving way. Who taught the dying thief that this dear, dying Man was Lord of all? Who taught him to pray? Who taught him that the Lord Jesus could be prayed to? Who taught him that He could answer prayer? Here you have a religion of divine revelation. “Be this religion mine.” “And he said unto Jesus, Lord.” It seems he had some revelation of being the possessor of an immortal soul and of an after-life. He knew he was dying, but he knew it was not the end, that he had a soul.

“Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.” How did he know that the Lord Jesus was a King, and how did he know that He had a kingdom? How did he know that He had that kingdom to give? O you see the aboundings of grace and you see the gracious, enlightening work of the teaching of the Holy Ghost. Now what a prayer! And it took the dying thief to glory, a sinner saved by grace. He did not have one good work to plead. He could not promise future good to bring. He had nothing. He was just a sinner with nothing. All he could say was, “Lord, remember me,” and he obtained the blessing. He obtained salvation. Good Bishop Hall in his quaint way cries out, “O blessed thief, thou hast stolen heaven!”

“And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me.” It is a good prayer, isn’t it? It was the prayer that Samson prayed at last and the Lord answered it for Samson, and the dying thief prayed it and it took him to heaven. “Lord, remember me.” He had not anything to plead. He did not ask for great things. If only the Lord of life and glory would remember me! I believe there are some of you here and you too have to pray prayers

like this: “Lord, remember me.” Perhaps some of you say, “Remember me, O Lord, with the favour that Thou bearest unto Thy people.” Remember me with this same favour Thou didst bear to the dying thief. Remember me. “O visit me with Thy salvation.” It is so vital. It is so personal. Who taught you to pray that prayer? Did you always pray it? And what makes you pray it now? What is it you really want if the Lord does remember you? O, you say, if only He might forgive my sin. If I have that, then I have everything.

I keep thinking of Joseph Kinghorn. He was quite an eminent preacher and his friends gathered round his dying bed and said, “Sir, think of the wonderful honours reserved in heaven for a faithful minister of Christ!” He said, “’Tis well if we escape condemnation!” It will be a wonderful mercy if you and I escape condemnation. It will be a wonderful mercy if you and I get to heaven at last, but it will be on the same ground as the dying thief, nothing in self, everything in Christ.

“Nor dare I promise future good to bring;
I know my heart deceitful is indeed;
Compelled I am on Christ alone to hang,
And plead that blood by which the church is freed.”

That is the religion that took the dying thief to heaven, and it is the only religion that will take a guilty sinner to heaven.

“Lord, remember me.” There are all the marks of godly repentance here, real repentance here, and there are all the marks of true, saving faith here. It is not how much religion: it is the reality. O to have the religion of the dying thief! “Be this religion mine.” I repeat it, I bring these things before you today in the light of the tragedy that took place and the sudden death of Princess Diana, and the sorrow and the sadness which is in our hearts. We too must die. It may be suddenly, it may not. How soon we do not know. We cannot presume on old age. We cannot presume on a deathbed repentance. We want the religion of the dying thief. We want to be made ready, to be made right. We want to be taught by the Spirit of God, and we want to know the Lord Jesus personally as an almighty Saviour, “able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him.” Now the Lord did remember the dying thief, and he obtained mercy. He obtained forgiveness. He obtained cleansing in the blood of Christ. “Lord, remember me.” O that the Holy Spirit of God might

graciously teach us, each of us, before a dying hour to pray this prayer, to be remembered in love and mercy. “He said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.”

Now here is grace abounding. Here is prayer heard and answered, this simple prayer of this man who was such a great sinner with not one good work to plead. “And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with Me in paradise.” There is no purgatory here: there is heaven here. I take it paradise is that state into which the redeemed enter immediately on their death, a state of perfect peace and joy and happiness and blessedness in the presence of the Saviour – not their final state, because on the resurrection morning their redeemed souls will be forever reunited with their glorified bodies. So shall they ever be with the Lord. O but, “To day shalt thou be with Me in paradise.” That is where the Saviour was. That is where the holy soul of the Saviour was whilst His lifeless body that night lay in the grave. His holy soul in paradise indissolubly united to His divine Person; His sacred, lifeless body in the grave still indissolubly united to His divine Person. Whatever can people say about this who deny the Scriptures concerning the true, reasonable, holy soul of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ? What had left His sacred body in the grave if not His holy soul? Who was in paradise with the Father and with the dying thief? These are deep mysteries. We tremble at them, but may we be kept firm and faithful to the Word of God and may we not compromise nor deviate.

“Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with Me in paradise.” The bliss, the eternal blessedness of the redeemed in heaven, the dying thief knew immediately upon his death! And so we think of our loved ones who have died, those who have died in Christ, who have lived in the fear of His name and who have died in the Lord. We lay their lifeless bodies in the grave, but O the joys that their redeemed souls are enjoying with Christ in paradise! “Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with Me in paradise.” And the Lord Jesus gives the sweet assurance of it. There is not a sinner in the whole of Scripture given a clearer assurance of getting to heaven than the dying thief. As if the Lord’s word was not enough, He puts His own *surely*, His *certainly*, His *verily* upon it. And soon after the Lord Jesus cries with a loud voice, “It is finished,” and He bows His head and dies and there that night in glory He meets the dying thief and there the two feast eternally together. One of the martyrs was

being burned at the stake with a young man and the young man was finding the pain almost intolerable. The old man said, "Fear not, my brother, we shall have a merry supper with Christ in heaven tonight!"

These are real things. But to see that line of demarcation between the thief on the right hand and the thief on the left, and to see that line of demarcation that separates the whole human race, and to see that line of demarcation on the judgment day: "Depart, ye cursed, I never knew you." "Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." "Remember me, Lord." "Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom." "Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with Me in paradise." There is only one other thing to say:

"The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day;
And there would I, as vile as he,
Wash all my sins away.