

“WHERE DO WE GO WHEN WE DIE.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Luke 23:39-43

Introduction.

Glory to God for the four Gospels and for the different stories the different writers included as directed by the Holy Spirit.

Luke is the only one who recounts this incredible story from the cross. Who knows how many countless lost sinners have been saved after reading just this story?

Matthew and Mark tell us both thieves mocked Jesus. But obviously in those many hours that they hung there, one of the thieves saw in Jesus something that convicted him of his own sin and need. His heart was moved by the Holy Spirit to change, his blind eyes were opened.

We want to answer the question what happens when we die. Where do we go? And by we I mean believers Jesus Christ. In order to be a believer and have the hope of eternal life, we must do what the thief on the cross did. So let's briefly consider his story and his example.

We are justly condemned.

The first step in repentance is seeing that we deserve death and judgment, that we are justly under the condemnation of God.

This step includes being able to acknowledging our own sin, to see it for what it is, to call it what it really is and to say we deserve the consequences of all our sin. This first step is utter humility, dying to pride, dying to self.

The other thief paints an entirely different picture. It is truly frightening to see the hardness of a human heart, that even in the midst of the severest punishment and pain and torment, he refuses to bend, but adds insult to injury. Pride is a fearful sin and a great wickedness.

He is like an obstinate child that refuses to bend, no matter how severe the spanking.

Fear such wickedness, pray against it in your own heart and the hearts of others.

He is innocent.

The next step in repentance is to see Jesus for who He really is, to have the faith that He is God and holy, that He is without sin, that He is completely innocent and undeserving of all that was done to Him, that His death on the cross was not for anything He had done.

Luke 23:13-15 Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, 14 and said to them, “You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. 15 Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death.

Luke 23:47 The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.”

Perhaps through the process of all the trials, he knew Pilate and Herod judged Him innocent. He knows by faith Christ is innocent, and unjustly punished for something He didn't do.

Notice the first fruit of his faith, that he rebukes his friend and defends Christ. Do you not even fear God?

The second fruit of his faith, he confesses his own sins publicly.

Public sins should be acknowledged and confessed publicly, in some fashion. It doesn't necessarily mean to the whole world, or whole church, but publicly means to someone beyond ourselves, someone spiritually mature and knowledgeable who is able to hear it and help us with it.

The third fruit of his faith is his trust in Christ's ability to save. He doesn't see an impotent Christ, nailed to a cross, unable to save even Himself.

The thief believed what was written on Jesus' cross, that He was the King of the Jews, and that He had a kingdom and that His death on a cross didn't change any of that. He understood the nature of Christ's kingdom better than the twelve apostles after three years with Jesus.

If he saw so clearly then, what shame for us to be so dull in our understanding, to be so weak in our faith and small in our hope.

Today you will be with me in Paradise.

The man prays a simple prayer of humble faith and repentance. He had only a few minutes to prove this repentance, to show the fruit of faith, but in a few moments with a few words, it was enough. What a testimony.

Do you believe this? Do you believe that after a whole lifetime of sin, that at the very end he can be saved? God is staggeringly merciful, forgiving sins, seven times seventy.

John 6:37 whoever comes to me I will never cast out.

What a picture of God's grace. This man was standing on the very brink of hell, just moments for entering there for all eternity, and suddenly the Holy Spirit changes his heart and opens his blind eyes and removes the scales and callouses and pulls back the curtain.

Hebrews 7:25 He is able to save to the uttermost.

Is there in all of Scripture any more beautiful and powerful and clear an example of God's love and power and mercy and forgiveness than is shown here?

Jesus in the hour of His very greatest weakness, as the blood and life was draining out of Him, in the severest pain, opened the gates of heaven to this sinner, and saved his immortal soul.

People, is salvation by grace or by works? Do you need proof? Consider that there was nothing in this man's past worthy of salvation. And there was nothing in this man's future that could be done to earn or deserve or build up credit or somehow pay back.

All this man brought to the transaction was an ugly, black heart with nothing good in it and no hope of ever doing anything good for the kingdom. Nothing.

He was never baptized, he was never the member of a church, he never gave a tithe, he never did a mission trip, he never worked in the nursery. He was saved by grace alone through faith alone.

Where do our souls go while our body is in the ground?

Roman Catholics hold to the doctrine of purgatory. According to Peter Kreeft, purgatory "refines and purifies those who at the moment of death are neither good enough for an immediate heaven nor bad enough for hell. ... Purgatory is like heaven's porch, or heaven's incubator, or heaven's wash room" (*Catholic Christianity*, p. 149).

They took their support for this doctrine not from the Bible but from the Apocryphal book of II Maccabees 12:42-45.

If there was a purgatory, no one would have needed it more than this thief. According to the purpose of purgatory, a person went there to finish their purification and sanctification for any remaining sin before going to heaven.

This thief had a life time of sin to be purified of because he had no time for penance and works and cleaning up his act before death.

Yet Jesus tells even this thief saved only at the 11th hour he has no need of purgatory and will go straight to Paradise with Jesus.

This false doctrine teaches Christ's suffering and death were insufficient, that He didn't pay our debt in full. It says to be saved it's Christ plus something else. This robs Christ of His glory.

Scripture clearly teaches that Christ's suffering and sacrifice for our sins are entirely sufficient and complete and that we don't have to suffer for our sins.

There is no such place as purgatory or any other intermediate state.

Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists believe in a soul-sleep between death and resurrection. It's a state of complete inactivity and unconsciousness until the resurrection.

No purgatory, but no heaven either. Just nothingness.

They get their support for this idea from those Scriptures that refer to death as sleep or falling asleep. But that's just a metaphorical expression like when we say passed away or passed on. When Scripture uses the word sleep it means death is just temporary, we wake up on the other side.

They say that after we die our next conscious thought will be Christ's Second Coming and being raised to eternal life with our resurrected bodies. Between when we die and that moment we will be unconscious, asleep.

Jesus didn't say, "Today, you won't be conscious of anything, but today you will be with me in Paradise." Paradise meaning a place of conscious joy and blessing.

What does Scripture teach about where believers go when they die?

First, when believers die they are immediately taken into the presence of Christ. Just as Jesus said to the thief, He says to us, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

II Corinthians 5:8 we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

To be away from the body is to be immediately at home with Jesus in the company of all the souls of the righteous who have gone before us.

Philippians 1:23-24 I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. 24 But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.

Second, at the moment of death we will be in a place of absolutely unbelievable splendor and glory, a paradise beyond imagination and description, a place far better than even the best part of earth.

Paradise is mentioned two places in the NT.

II Corinthians 12:2-4 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. 3 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— 4 and ***he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.***

It is a place of indescribable beauty and blessings.

Revelation 2:7 To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

Revelation 22:1-2 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

Dying is great gain because we are going to a far better place.

Third, we will continue to exist, we will be who we are. We will have all our faculties of mind, heart and will, including feeling, perceiving, knowing, thinking and deciding. We will be alive with a fully conscience being.

Death is not the end of life, but the separation of our bodies from our souls. We will continue to exist as souls and have personhood and personality.

In our study of Revelation we saw visions of the souls of the saints in heaven worshipping and praying.

Revelation 6:9-11 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. 10 They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” 11 Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

Revelation 7:9-10 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

This denies unconscious soul sleep.

Fourth, this fully conscious existence will be different from here in that it will be perfect and sinless. Heaven is holy and pure and completely free of sin, evil, wickedness, iniquity, imperfection, weakness, without spot or blemish or wrinkle. We will be conformed to Christ.

Ephesians 5:27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

I Thessalonians 5:23 Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“We experience holiness (no longer being at war with the flesh), happiness, a heightened sense of consciousness, and knowledge of Christ in its fullest” (Sam Storms).

Do not be discouraged by sickness or weakness or infirmity. Do not be distressed by the wasting away of our bodies and our health. These are only temporary. There will not be one spot or deformity. There will not be one brokenness or inadequacy.

Leah's homeliness or comeliness will be turned to great beauty. Mephibosheth will have no limp, Paul's thorn in the flesh will be gone, Timothy will not be sickly with his infirmities.

By whatever standard we use to measure beauty, by whatever ideal we judge a face or body to be beautiful, what we will see will far exceed anything we could imagine.

Fifth, while we are in heaven in this perfect condition of holiness, there will actually be one imperfect thing, or perhaps it would be better to say one incomplete thing. We will be without our bodies.

In this state we will wait for and look forward to the redemption and resurrection of our bodies (Romans 8:21-23).

Romans 8:23 ... we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

At the Second Coming of Christ there will be a resurrection of our dead bodies, but they will be transformed into gloriously new bodies that will be fit for life in heaven, just as our first bodies were fit for life on earth.

Implications and Application.

Whoever in true faith turns from sin and turns to Christ and entrusts to Him his eternal soul, Christ will come and treat him as He did the thief. He will not delay, He will not shun us for a season in some limbo or purgatory.

Christ frees us from every penalty, every work, every penance, every shame and guilt. There is no more cleansing fire, Christ has suffered and died and borne it all.

Repentance and faith are enough. His grace is sufficient, His blood covers it all, paid in full.

Brothers and sister, look forward to the day. Long for the coming of Christ. Welcome every thought of that day and what it will be like. Allow yourself from time to time to contemplate what a glorious day it will be. Think about it, prepare for it, plan for it. Pray for it.

For the believer every mention of death comes with the words, "Fear not." And are there any more comforting words than those of Isaiah 43.

Isaiah 43:1-2 But now thus says the Lord,

he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.