



From Our Lady of Guadalupe Trappist Abbey

## Foundations: From the Cross 2

### TODAY... PARADISE

Luke 23:38-43 (AFBC 2/18/18)

**<sup>38</sup> There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. <sup>39</sup> One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"**

**<sup>40</sup> But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? <sup>41</sup> We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."**

**<sup>42</sup> Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." <sup>43</sup> Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."**

Try to picture this: a rugged, rocky hill—something like you might find as you head toward the mountains, but this hill only has rocks, no trees. The hill is called Golgotha—a word that means "place of the skull."

There are two possibilities for how this hill got its name. It may be due to the skull-like appearance of one of the outcroppings of

rock on the side of the hill; or it may simply be a reference to what took place there—back in Jesus' day.

Golgotha, as most of us know, was the Roman equivalent of our gas chamber, electric chair, or lethal injection room. It was their place of execution for non-Roman citizens. It's where people were crucified—tortured to death on a cross.

On this day that Luke describes for us, three men are condemned to die. The courts declared them unfit to live. They were considered threats to society, so they would be eliminated.

Three crosses stand on top of Golgotha to carry out these death sentences. Three men are nailed to those crosses. It would be for them a slow, painful process; but death would eventually, mercifully, come.

As they hang there dying, they begin to talk among themselves. Luke's Gospel provides us with a record of their words. As we overhear their conversation, we learn a great deal about these men and about how they're facing death.

The first man speaks. He draws upon what little strength he has left to force from his voice a cynical, derisive tone. He calls out to the man on the middle cross, "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

What a strange thing to say to a man dying on a cross. Of course, it wasn't original with him. The soldiers have been taunting the man on the middle cross all along, saying, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."

They had even nailed an inscription over his head: "This is the King of the Jews." Of course, to them, this was a... joke!

Some of the people standing around watching this sneered at him, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One."

It seems that it was all amusing to some, although I suspect for many of them, their sarcasm was really an attempt to cover up their extreme disappointment.

Some who had gathered there had hoped that he really was the Messiah, God's Chosen One--the Christ who would deliver them from Rome's bondage.

But it's obvious to them now that he isn't. What else could they think? After all, it was the Romans who were putting him to death. He's no deliverer--no Savior--they're certain of that now.

They're angry. How dare he build up their hopes for nothing. He deserves what he's getting--dying in this horrendous way--he has it coming.

The first of the condemned men to speak is just repeating what he's heard others saying when he sneers, "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

Now, it's at this point that the third man speaks--not the man in the middle, not the one who is being taunted and berated--but the one on the far side, the man hanging on the third cross. He's the next one to speak.

The man on the middle cross, you see, says not a single word in his own defense. What's more, it had been that way all through his trial. He had remained strangely silent.

Even the Roman authorities had sensed that to crucify this man would be a miscarriage of justice. But he refused to defend himself. And the crowd was so insistent, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Finally, they gave in.

Maybe this third condemned man, though, had observed something unique about the one on the middle cross. Did he perhaps overhear his prayer, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing."

It could be that he had even heard this man speak before, though probably not in the synagogue. I may be surprised about that, but I don't picture him as being a "church-goer."

But perhaps he had encountered Jesus as he spoke out in the countryside. He was drawn by the large crowds and got close enough to hear some of his teachings.

Perhaps he saw Jesus interacting with folks not so different from himself, some of whom might also have been sentenced to a cross if they'd been caught.

He observed Jesus' love for people and the way he accepted them and told them of God's Kingdom--a Kingdom founded upon love and forgiveness, a Kingdom "open to all."

Perhaps he had encountered Jesus before; or, at least, heard about him. You see, for a while, almost everyone had been talking about him. He'd caused quite a stir, done some wonderful things—miraculous things, people were saying.

So, it might have been any of the above; but, for whatever reason, this third man rebuked the first for deriding the one who is being crucified, hanging between them there on that hillside, sharing in this painful ordeal of death.

"Don't you fear God," he says, "since you are under the same sentence?" In other words, "Don't you realize that you're dying too? Must you spend your final breaths ridiculing this man?"

Then he confesses, "We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. (i.e. We had this coming to us.) But this man has done nothing wrong."

And then he does a most remarkable thing: he turns to the man on the middle cross and says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Imagine that! Here both of them are, dying on crosses, and he says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

You cannot help but be struck by the enormous differences in the attitudes of these two men who were crucified with Jesus:

Here's one man who's bitter to the end. He's self-centered--  
"Save yourself and us"—with emphasis on us, or really, me.  
"Save me!"

And he's desperate—because he's centered his whole life around himself, and now he's dying. All that he has, all that has ever

really meant anything to him, was himself, and that's about to end. Death is near.

This man has come to the end of life, and he isn't prepared. He's not ready for it. Now he's dying just as he lived—angry, bitter, and taking it out on someone else—in this case, Jesus—in order to vent his frustration... and despair.

It's a sad scene. It's always sad when a person nears death unprepared. That's what we see in this first man on the cross—a man who has arrived at the outer edge of his life unprepared to face death.

Now, contrast, if you will please, this first man with the man on the third cross. His tone is so unlike the first man's--why?

Their situations are equally desperate. Both of them are experiencing the excruciating pain of crucifixion. For both of them, death is very near.

And yet, this man on the third cross doesn't spend his time ridiculing Jesus, or cursing the crowd. Instead, he actually seems to try to help the first man.

"Don't you fear God?" he asks. "Don't you feel any sense of remorse over the way you've chosen to live your life?"

It's awfully late in coming, but I believe we're listening here to a man whose heart is changing. I think his question indicates a new-found respect for God. I can imagine the other criminal reacting in disbelief to what he's hearing.

Then, after this hint of faith, we hear what amounts to a confession, or repentance. "We are being punished justly." He's coming clean, right? "I've done wrong", he says.

He's openly admitting that he's a sinner. Hopefully we've all done something like this—maybe not this dramatically—but we've also come clean with God and with one another.

The man on the third cross continues: "I've sinned, and not just against my fellowman. I've sinned against God. I deserve to die." Don't you hear this in what he's saying?

Then, with a nod of his head, he motions toward Jesus and says, "This man has done no wrong." Somehow... he understands. He gets it that while he's guilty of sin, Jesus isn't. He recognizes the complete goodness of Jesus.

And, finally, drawing upon what he's seen and heard, he confesses his faith in, and his dependence upon, Jesus when he says "Jesus, remember me... when you come into your kingdom."

The man is dying, and yet he somehow believes that Jesus would live beyond the cross, that His kingdom would come, and that Jesus would be able to do something for him even beyond his physical death.

Do you see what happens here? There is repentance of sin; and there's confession of faith in Jesus Christ. What happens in this man's life is what the Bible says needs to happen in all of our lives: repentance and faith.

Now, how does Jesus respond to this man—this condemned criminal—when he witnesses in him repentance and faith? Well, He responds by saying, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

Finally, we come to Jesus' second word from the cross. So far, only the two criminals on those outer crosses have spoken; but now we hear from Jesus: "I tell you the truth, today... you will be with me in paradise."

My friends, I find great comfort in the knowledge that Jesus spoke these words not to some perfect person, but to a notorious sinner, a man who had made many mistakes, who had failed God often and caused his fellowman much pain.

That's the sort of person Jesus promised, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

You know, if Jesus can offer paradise to a man like that, then there must be hope for me. And there must be hope for you. In fact, I think this means there's hope for everyone!

Actually, this is the message that's at the very heart of the Christian Gospel: "Jesus Christ came into this world to offer people like you and me—folks who really don't deserve it—who otherwise would be condemned in our sin—to the likes of us, Jesus came to offer, among so many other things, paradise!"

This second word from the cross is a message of hope—not just wishful thinking—but a sure and certain hope that when we come to this life's final hour, we will hear by faith this same gracious word of assurance from our Lord, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

Just a quick word about "paradise." Paradise literally means "a beautiful garden." In the Bible, it's used to paint a picture of life as God intends for it to be—life lived in perfect harmony with him, and with one another—more like it was "in the beginning."

Humankind destroyed that Paradise by choosing sin over God, but Jesus Christ came to close the divide, to mend the brokenness of our separation from God and one another, to put all these shattered lives and relationships back together. He came to restore our peace and to offer us paradise once again.

Like the criminal on that third cross, we need to "own-up" to our sin, confess it, and place our faith, our love, and our obedience, in Jesus Christ.

And in doing so, we trust Jesus to keep His promises--to forgive us, to prepare a place for us; and then, when the time comes, to take us home—to live with Him... in Paradise.