

THE BELIEVING THIEF.

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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

“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.

SOME time ago I preached upon the whole story of the dying thief. I do not propose to do the same to-day, but only to look at it from one particular point of view. The story of the salvation of the dying thief is a standing instance of the power of Christ to save, and of his abundant willingness to receive all that come to him, in whatever plight they may be. I cannot regard this act of grace as a solitary instance, any more than the salvation of Zacchaeus, the restoration of Peter, or the call of Saul, the persecutor. Every conversion is, in a sense, singular: no two are exactly alike, and yet any one conversion is a type of others. The case of the dying thief is much more similar to our conversion than it is dissimilar; in point of fact, his case may be regarded as typical, rather than as an extraordinary incident. So I shall use it at this time. May the Holy Spirit speak through it to the encouragement of those who are ready to despair!

Remember, beloved friends, that our Lord Jesus, at the time he saved this malefactor, was at his lowest. His glory had been ebbing out in Gethsemane, and before Caiaphas, and Herod, and Pilate; but it had now reached the utmost low-water mark. Stripped of his garments, and nailed to the cross, our Lord was mocked by a ribald crowd, and was dying in agony: then was he “numbered with the transgressors,” and made as the offscouring of all things. Yet, while in that condition, he achieved this marvellous deed of grace. Behold the wonder wrought by the Savior when emptied of all his glory, and hanged up a spectacle of shame upon the brink

of death! How certain is it that he can do great wonders of mercy now, seeing that he has returned unto his glory, and sitteth upon the throne of light! "He is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them." If a dying Savior saved the thief, my argument is, that he can do even more now that he liveth and reigneth. All power is given unto him in heaven and in earth; can anything at this present time surpass the power of his grace?

It is not only the weakness of our Lord which makes the salvation of the penitent thief memorable; it is the fact that the dying malefactor saw it before his very eyes. Can you put yourself into his place, and suppose yourself to be looking upon one who hangs in agony upon a cross? Could you readily believe him to be the Lord of glory, who would soon come to his kingdom? That was no mean faith which, at such a moment, could believe in Jesus as Lord and King. If the apostle Paul were here, and wanted to add a New Testament chapter to the eleventh of Hebrews, he might certainly commence his instances of remarkable faith with this thief, who believed in a crucified, derided, and dying Christ, and cried to him as to one whose kingdom would surely come. The thief's faith was the more remarkable because he was himself in great pain, and bound to die. It is not easy to exercise confidence when you are tortured with deadly anguish. Our own rest of mind has at times been greatly hindered by pain of body. When we are the subjects of acute suffering it is not easy to exhibit that faith which we fancy we possess at other times. This man, suffering as he did, and seeing the Savior in so sad a state, nevertheless believed unto life eternal. Herein was such faith as is seldom seen.

Recollect, also, that he was surrounded by scoffers. It is easy to swim with the current, and hard to go against the stream. This man heard the priests, in their pride, ridicule the Lord, and the great multitude of the common people, with one consent, joined in the scorning; his comrade caught the spirit of the hour, and mocked also, and perhaps he did the same for a while; but through the grace of God he was changed, and believed in the Lord Jesus in the teeth of all the scorn. His faith was not affected by his surroundings; but he, dying thief as he was, made sure his confidence. Like a jutting rock, standing out in the midst of a torrent, he declared the innocence of the Christ whom others blasphemed. His faith is worthy of our imitation in its fruits. He had no member that was free except his tongue, and he used that member wisely to rebuke his brother malefactor, and defend his Lord. His faith brought forth a brave testimony and a bold

confession. I am not going to praise the thief, or his faith, but to extol the glory of that grace divine which gave the thief such faith, and then freely saved him by its means. I am anxious to show how glorious is the Savior—that Savior to the uttermost, who, at such a time, could save such a man, and give him so great a faith, and so perfectly and speedily prepare him for eternal bliss. Behold the power of that divine Spirit who could produce such faith on soil so unlikely, and in a climate so unpropitious.

Let us enter at once into the center of our sermon. First, note the man who was our Lord's last companion on earth; secondly, note that this same man was our Lord's first companion at the gate of paradise; and then, thirdly, let us note the sermon which our Lord preaches to us from this act of grace. Oh, for a blessing from the Holy Spirit all the sermon through!

I. Carefully NOTE THAT THE CRUCIFIED THIEF WAS OUR LORD'S LAST COMPANION ON EARTH. What sorry company our Lord selected when he was here He did not consort with the religious Pharisees or the philosophic Sadducees, but he was known as "the friend of publicans and sinners." How I rejoice at this! It gives me assurance that he will not refuse to associate with me. When the Lord Jesus made a friend of me, he certainly did not make a choice which brought him credit. Do you think he gained any honor when he made a friend of you? Has he ever gained anything by us? No, my brethren; if Jesus had not stooped very low, he would not have come to me; and if he did not seek the most unworthy, he might not have come to you. You feel it so, and you are thankful that he came "not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." As the great physician, our Lord was much with the sick: he went where there was room for him to exercise his healing art. The whole have no need of a physician: they cannot appreciate him, nor afford scope for his skill; and therefore he did not frequent their abodes. Yes, after all, our Lord did make a good choice when he saved you and me; for in us he has found abundant room for his mercy and grace. There has been elbow room for his love to work within the awful emptinesses of our necessities and sins; and therein he has done great things for us, whereof we are glad.

Lest any here should be despairing, and say, "He will never deign to look on me," I want you to notice that the last companion of Christ on earth was a sinner, and no ordinary sinner. He had broken even the laws of man, for he was a robber. One calls him "a brigand"; and I suppose it is likely to have been the case. The brigands of those days mixed murder with their

robberies: he was probably a freebooter in arms against the Roman government, making this a pretext for plundering as he had opportunity. At last he was arrested, and was condemned by a Roman tribunal, which, on the whole, was usually just, and in this case was certainly just; for he himself confesses the justice of his condemnation. The malefactor who believed upon the cross was a convict, who had lain in the condemned cell, and was then undergoing execution for his crimes. A convicted felon was the person with whom our Lord last consorted upon earth. What a lover of the souls of guilty men is he! What a stoop he makes to the very lowest of mankind! To this most unworthy of men the Lord of glory, ere he quitted life, spoke with matchless grace. He spoke to him such wondrous words as never can be excelled if you search the Scriptures through: "To-day shalt thou be with me in paradise." I do not suppose that anywhere in this Tabernacle there will be found a man who has been convicted before the law, or who is even chargeable with a crime against common honesty; but if there should be such a person among my hearers, I would invite him to find pardon and change of heart through our Lord Jesus Christ. You may come to him, whoever you may be; for this man did. Here is a specimen of one who had gone to the extreme of guilt, and who acknowledged that he had done so; he made no excuse, and sought no cloak for his sin; he was in the hands of justice, confronted with the death-doom, and yet he believed in Jesus, and breathed a humble prayer to him, and he was saved upon the spot. As is the sample, such is the bulk. Jesus saves others of like kind. Let me, therefore, put it very plainly here, that none may mistake me. None of you are excluded from the infinite mercy of Christ, however great your iniquity: if you believe in Jesus, he will save you.

This man was not only a sinner; he was a sinner newly awakened. I do not suppose that he had seriously thought of the Lord Jesus before. According to the other Evangelists, he appears to have joined with his fellow thief in scoffing at Jesus: if he did not actually himself use opprobrious words, he was so far consenting thereunto, that the Evangelist did him no injustice when he said, "The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth." Yet, now, on a sudden, he wakes up to the conviction that the man who is dying at his side is something more than a man. He reads the title over his head, and believes it to be true—"This is Jesus the King of the Jews." Thus believing, he makes his appeal to the Messiah, whom he had so newly found, and commits himself to his hands. My hearer, do you see this truth, that the moment a man knows Jesus to be the

Christ of God he may at once put his trust in him and be saved? A certain preacher, whose gospel was very doubtful, said, "Do you, who have been living in sin for fifty years, believe that you can in a moment be made clean through the blood of Jesus?" I answer, "Yes, we do believe that in one moment, through the precious blood of Jesus, the blackest soul can be made white. We do believe that in a single instant the sins of sixty or seventy years can be absolutely forgiven, and that the old nature, which has gone on growing worse and worse, can receive its death-wound in a moment of time, while the life eternal may be implanted in the soul at once." It was so with this man. He had reached the end of his tether, but all of a sudden he woke up to the assured conviction that the Messiah was at his side, and, believing, he looked to him and lived.

So now, my brothers, if you have never in your life before been the subject of any religious conviction, if you have lived up till now an utterly ungodly life, yet if now you will believe that God's dear Son has come into the world to save men from sin, and will unfeignedly confess your sin and trust in him, you shall be immediately saved. Ay, while I speak the word, the deed of grace may be accomplished by that glorious One who has gone up into the heaven with omnipotent power to save.

I desire to put this case very plainly: this man, who was the last companion of Christ upon earth, was a sinner in misery. His sins had found him out: he was now enduring the reward of his deeds. I constantly meet with persons in this condition: they have lived a life of wantonness, excess, and carelessness, and they begin to feel the fire-flakes of the tempest of wrath falling upon their flesh; they dwell in an earthly hell, a prelude of eternal woe. Remorse, like an asp, has stung them, and set their blood on fire: they cannot rest, they are troubled day and night. "Be sure your sin will find you out." It has found them out, and arrested them, and they feel the strong grip of conviction. This man was in that horrible condition: what is more, he was in extremis. He could not live long: the crucifixion was sure to be fatal; in a short time his legs would be broken, to end his wretched existence. He, poor soul, had but a short time to live—only the space between noon and sundown; but it was long enough for the Savior, who is mighty to save. Some are very much afraid that people will put off coming to Christ, if we state this. I cannot help what wicked men do with truth, but I shall state it all the same. If you are now within an hour of death, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved. If you never reach your homes again, but drop dead on the road, if you will now believe in the

Lord Jesus, you shall be saved: saved now, on the spot. Looking and trusting to Jesus, he will give you a new heart and a right spirit, and blot out your sins. This is the glory of Christ's grace. How I wish I could extol it in proper language! He was last seen on earth before his death in company with a convicted felon, to whom he spoke most lovingly. Come, O ye guilty, and he will receive you graciously!

Once more, this man whom Christ saved at last was a man who could do no good works. If salvation had been by good works, he could not have been saved; for he was fastened hand and foot to the tree of doom. It was all over with him as to any act or deed of righteousness. He could say a good word or two, but that was all; he could perform no acts; and if his salvation had depended on an active life of usefulness, certainly he never could have been saved. He was a sinner also, who could not exhibit a long-enduring repentance for sin, for he had so short a time to live. He could not have experienced bitter convictions, lasting over months and years, for his time was measured by moments, and he was on the borders of the grave. His end was very near, and yet the Savior could save him, and did save him so perfectly, that the sun went not down till he was in paradise with Christ.

This sinner, whom I have painted to you in colors none too black, was one 'who believed in Jesus, and confessed his faith. He did trust the Lord. Jesus was a man, and he called him so; but he knew that he was also Lord, and he called him so, and said, "Lord, remember me." He had such confidence in Jesus, that, if he would but only think of him, if he would only remember him when he came into his kingdom, that would be all that he would ask of him. Alas, my dear hearers! the trouble about some of you is that you know all about my Lord, and yet you do not trust him. Trust is the saving act. Years ago you were on the verge of really trusting Jesus, but you are just as far off from it now as you were then. This man did not hesitate: he grasped the one hope for himself. He did not keep his persuasion of our Lord's Messiahship in his mind as a dry, dead belief, but he turned it into trust and prayer, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." Oh, that in his infinite mercy many of you would trust my Lord this morning! You shall be saved, I am sure you shall: if you are not saved when you trust, I must myself also renounce all hope. This is all that we have done: we looked, and we lived, and we continue to live because we look to the living Savior, Oh, that this morning, feeling your sin, you would look to Jesus, trusting him, and confessing that trust! Owning that he is Lord to the glory of God the Father, you must and shall be saved.

In consequence of having this faith which saved him, this poor man breathed the humble but fitting prayer, "Lord, remember me." This does not seem to ask much; but as he understood it, it meant all that an anxious heart could desire. As he thought of the kingdom, he had such clear ideas of the glory of the Savior, that he felt that if the Lord would think of him his eternal state would be safe. Joseph, in prison, asked the chief butler to remember him when he was restored to power; but he forgot him. Our Joseph never forgets a sinner who cried to him in the low dungeon; in his kingdom he remembers the moanings and groanings of poor sinners who are burdened with a sense of sin. Can you not pray this morning, and thus secure a place in the memory of the Lord Jesus?

Thus I have tried to describe the man; and, after having done my best, I shall fail of my object unless I make you see that whatever this thief was, he is a picture of what you are. Especially if you have been a great offender, and if you have been living long without caring for eternal things, you are like that malefactor; and yet you, even you, may do as that thief did; you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, and commit your souls into his hands, and he will save you as surely as he saved the condemned brigand. Jesus graciously says, "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." This means that if you come and trust him, whoever you may be, he will for no reason, and on no ground, and under no circumstances, ever cast you out. Do you catch that thought? Do you feel that it belongs to you, and that if you come to him, you shall find eternal life? I rejoice if you so far perceive the truth.

Few persons have so much intercourse with desponding and despairing souls as I have. Poor cast down ones write to me continually. I scarce know why. I have no special gift of consolation, but I gladly lay myself out to comfort the distressed, and they seem to know it. What joy I have when I see a despairing one find peace! I have had this joy several times during the week just ended. How much I desire that any of you who are breaking your hearts because you cannot find forgiveness would come to my Lord, and trust him, and enter into rest! Has he not said, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"? Come and try him, and that rest shall be yours.

II. In the second place, NOTE, THAT THIS MAN WAS OUR LORD'S COMPANION AT THE GATE OF PARADISE. I am not going into any speculations as to where our Lord went when he quitted the body which

hung on the cross. It would seem, from some Scriptures, that he descended into the lower parts of the earth, that he might fill all things. But he very rapidly traversed the regions of the dead. Remember that he died, perhaps an hour or two before the thief, and during that time the eternal glory flamed through the underworld, and was flashing through the gates of paradise just when the pardoned thief was entering the eternal world. Who is this that entereth the pearl-gate at the same moment as the King of glory? Who is this favored companion of the Redeemer? Is it some honored martyr? Is it a faithful apostle? Is it a patriarch, like Abraham; or a prince, like David? It is none of these. Behold, and be amazed at sovereign grace. He that goeth in at the gate of paradise, with the King of glory, is a thief, who was saved in the article of death. He is saved in no inferior way, and received into bliss in no secondary style. Verily, there are last which shall be first!

Here I would have you notice the condescension of our Lord's choice. The comrade of the Lord of glory, for whom the cherub turns aside his sword of fire, is no great one, but a newly-converted malefactor. And why? I think the Savior took him with him as a specimen of what he meant to do. He seemed to say to all the heavenly powers, "I bring a sinner with me; he is a sample of the rest." Have you never heard of him who dreamed that he stood without the gate of heaven, and while there he heard sweet music from a band of venerable persons who were on their way to glory? They entered the celestial portals, and there were great rejoicing and shouts. Enquiring "What are these?" he was told that they were the goodly fellowship of the prophets. He sighed, and said, "Alas! I am not one of those." He waited a while, and another band of shining ones drew nigh, who also entered heaven with hallelujahs, and when he enquired, "Who are these, and whence came they?" the answer was, "These are the glorious company of the apostles." Again he sighed, and said, "I cannot enter with them." Then came another body of men white-robed, and bearing palms in their hands, who marched amid great acclamation into the golden city. These he learned were the noble army of martyrs; and again he wept, and said, "I cannot enter with these." In the end he heard the voices of much people, and saw a greater multitude advancing, among whom he perceived Rahab and Mary Magdalene, David and Peter, Manasseh and Saul of Tarsus, and he espied especially the thief, who died at the right hand of Jesus. These all entered in-a strange company. Then he eagerly enquired, "Who are these?" and they answered, "This is the host of sinners saved by

grace.” Then was he exceeding glad, and said, “I can go with these.” Yet, he thought there would be no shouting at the approach of this company, and that they would enter heaven without song; instead of which, there seemed to rise a seven-fold hallelujah of praise unto the Lord of love; for there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over sinners that repent.

I invite any poor soul here that can neither aspire to serve Christ, nor to suffer for him as yet, nevertheless to come in with other believing sinners, in the company of Jesus, who now sets before us an open door.

While we are handling this text, note well the blessedness of the place to which the Lord called this penitent. Jesus said, “To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.” Paradise means a garden, a garden filled with delights. The garden of Eden is the type of heaven. We know that paradise means heaven, for the apostle speaks of such a man caught up into paradise, and anon he calls it the third heaven. Our Savior took this dying thief into the paradise of infinite delight, and this is where he will take all of us sinners who believe in him. If we are trusting him, we shall ultimately be with him in paradise.

The next word is better still. Note the glory of the society to which this sinner is introduced: “To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.” If the Lord said, “To day shalt thou be with me,” we should not need him to add another word; for where he is, is heaven to us. He added the word “paradise,” because else none could have guessed where he was going. Think of it, you uncomely soul; you are to dwell with the Altogether-lovely One for ever. You poor and needy ones, you are to be with him in his glory, in his bliss, in his perfection. Where he is, and as he is, you shall be. The Lord looks into those weeping eyes of yours this morning, and he says, “Poor sinner, thou shalt one day be with me.” I think I hear you say, “Lord, that is bliss too great for such a sinner as I am”; but he replies-I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness will I draw thee, till thou shalt be with me where I am.

The stress of the text lies in the speediness of all this. “Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.” “To day.” Thou shalt not lie in purgatory for ages, nor sleep in limbo for so many years; but thou shalt be ready for bliss at once, and at once thou shalt enjoy it. The sinner was hard by the gates of hell, but almighty mercy lifted him up, and the Lord said, “To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.” What a change from the cross to the crown, from the anguish of Calvary to the glory of the

New Jerusalem! In those few hours the beggar was lifted from the dunghill and set among princes. "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Can you measure the change from that sinner, loathsome in his iniquity, when the sun was high at noon, to that same sinner, clothed in pure white, and accepted in the Beloved, in the paradise of God, when the sun went down? O glorious Savior, what marvels thou canst work! How rapidly canst thou work them!

Please notice, also, the majesty of the Lord's grace in this text. The Savior said to him, "Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Our Lord gives his own will as the reason for saving this man. "I say." He says it who claims the right thus to speak. It is he who will have mercy on whom he will have mercy, and will have compassion on whom he will have compassion. He speaks royally, "Verily I say unto thee." Are they not imperial words? The Lord is a King in whose word there is power. What he says none can gainsay. He that hath the keys of hell and of death saith, "I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Who shall prevent the fulfillment of his word?

Notice the certainty of it. He says, "Verily." Our blessed Lord on the cross returned to his old majestic manner, as he painfully turned his head, and looked on his convert. He was wont to begin his preaching with, "Verily, verily, I say unto you"; and now that he is dying he uses his favourite manner, and says, "Verily." Our Lord took no oath; his strongest asseveration was, "Verily, verily." To give the penitent the plainest assurance, he says, "Verily I say unto thee, To-day shalt thou be with me in paradise." In this he had an absolutely indisputable assurance that though he must die, yet he would live and find himself in paradise with his Lord.

I have thus shown you that our Lord passed within the pearly gate in company with one to whom he had pledged himself. Why should not you and I pass through that pearl-gate in due time, clothed in his merit, washed in his blood, resting on his power? One of these days angels will say of you, and of me, "Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?" The shining ones will be amazed to see some of us coming. If you have lived a life of sin until now, and yet shall repent and enter heaven, what an amazement there will be in every golden street to think that you have come there! In the early Christian church Marcus Caius Victorinus was converted; but he had reached so great an age, and had been so gross a sinner, that the pastor and church doubted him. He gave,

however, clear proof of having undergone the divine change, and then there were great acclamations, and many shouts of “Victorinus has become a Christian!” Oh, that some of you big sinners might be saved! How gladly would we rejoice over you! Why not? Would it not glorify God? The salvation of this convicted highwayman has made our Lord illustrious for mercy even unto this day; would not your case do the same? Would not saints cry, “Hallelujah! hallelujah!” if they heard that some of you had been turned from darkness to marvellous light? Why should it not be? Believe in Jesus, and it is so.

III. Now I come to my third and most practical point: NOTE THE LORD’S SERMON TO US FROM ALL THIS.

The devil wants to preach this morning a bit. Yes, Satan asks to come to the front and preach to you; but he cannot be allowed. Avaunt, thou deceiver! Yet I should not wonder if he gets at certain of you when the sermon is over, and whispers, “You see you can be saved at the very last. Put off repentance and faith; you may be forgiven on your death-bed.” Sirs, you know who it is that would ruin you by this suggestion. Abhor his deceitful teaching. Do not be ungrateful because God is kind. Do not provoke the Lord because he is patient. Such conduct would be unworthy and ungrateful. Do not run an awful risk because one escaped the tremendous peril. The Lord will accept all who repent; but how do you know that you will repent? It is true that one thief was saved-but the other thief was lost. One is saved, and we may not despair; the other is lost, and we may not presume. Dear friends, I trust you are not made of such diabolical stuff as to fetch from the mercy of God an argument for continuing in sin. If you do, I can only say of you, your damnation will be just; you will have brought it upon yourselves.

Consider now the teaching of our Lord; see the glory, of Christ in salvation. He is ready to save at the last moment. He was just passing away; his foot was on the doorstep of the Father’s house. Up comes this poor sinner the last thing at night, at the eleventh hour, and the Savior smiles and declares that he will not enter except with this belated wanderer. At the very gate he declares that this seeking soul shall enter with him. There was plenty of time for him to have come before: you know how apt we are to say, “You have waited to the last moment. I am just going off, and I cannot attend to you now.” Our Lord had his dying pangs upon him, and yet he attends to the perishing criminal, and permits him to pass

through the heavenly portal in his company. Jesus easily saves the sinners for whom he painfully died. Jesus loves to rescue sinners from going down into the pit. You will be very happy if you are saved, but you will not be one half so happy as he will be when he saves you. See how gentle he is!

*“His hand no thunder bears,
No terror clothes his brow;
No bolts to drive our guilty souls
To fiercer flames below.”*

He comes to us full of tenderness, with tears in his eyes, mercy in his hands, and love in his heart. Believe him to be a great Savior of great sinners. I have heard of one who had received great mercy who went about saying, “He is a great forgiver;” and I would have you say the same. You shall find your transgressions put away, and your sins pardoned once for all, if you now trust him.

The next doctrine Christ preaches from this wonderful story is faith in its permitted attachment. This man believed that Jesus was the Christ. The next thing he did was to appropriate that Christ. He said, “Lord, remember me.” Jesus might have said, “What have I to do with you, and what have you to do with me? What has a thief to do with the perfect One?” Many of you, good people, try to get as far away as you can from the erring and fallen. They might infect your innocence! Society claims that we should not be familiar with people who have offended against its laws. We must not be seen associating with them, for it might discredit us. Infamous bosh! Can anything discredit sinners such as we are by nature and by practice? If we know ourselves before God we are degraded enough in and of ourselves? Is there anybody, after all, in the world, who is worse than we are when we see ourselves in the faithful glass of the Word? As soon as ever a man believes that Jesus is the Christ, let him hook himself on to him. The moment you believe Jesus to be the Savior, seize upon him as your Savior. If I remember rightly, Augustine called this man, “*Latro laudabilis et mirabilis*,” a thief to be praised and wondered at, who dared, as it were, to seize the Savior for his own. In this he is to be imitated. Take the Lord to be yours, and you have him. Jesus is the common property of all sinners who make bold to take him. Every sinner who has the will to do so may take the Lord home with him. He came into the world to save the sinful. Take him by force, as robbers take their prey; for the kingdom of heaven suffereth the violence of daring faith. Get him, and he will never get himself away from you. If you trust him, he must save you.

Next, notice the doctrine of faith in its immediate power.

*“The moment a sinner believes,
And trusts in his crucified God,
His pardon at once he receives,
Redemption in full through his blood.”*

“To-day shalt thou be with me in paradise.” He has no sooner believed than Christ gives him the seal of his believing in the full assurance that he shall be with him for ever in his glory. O dear hearts, if you believe this morning, you shall be saved this morning! God grant that you, by his rich grace, may be brought into salvation here, on the spot, and at once!

The next thing is, the nearness of eternal things. Think of that a minute. Heaven and hell are not places far away. You may be in heaven before the clock ticks again, it is so near. Could we but rend that veil which parts us from the unseen! It is all there, and all near. “To day,” said the Lord; within three or four hours at the longest, “shalt thou be with me in paradise;” so near is it. A statesman has given us the expression of being “within measurable distance.” We are all within measurable distance of heaven or hell; if there be any difficulty in measuring the distance, it lies in its brevity rather than in its length.

*One gentle sigh the fetter breaks,
We scarce can say, ‘He’s gone,’
Before the ransomed spirit takes
Its mansion near the throne.”*

Oh, that we, instead of trifling about such things, because they seem so far away, would solemnly realize them, since they are so very near! This very day, before the sun goes down, some hearer, now sitting in this place, may see, in his own spirit, the realities of heaven or hell. It has frequently happened, in this large congregation, that some one of our audience has died ere the next Sabbath has come round: it may happen this week. Think of that, and let eternal things impress you all the more because they lie so near.

Furthermore, know that if you have believed in Jesus you are prepared for heaven. It may be that you will have to live on earth twenty, or thirty, or forty years to glorify Christ; and, if so, be thankful for the privilege; but if you do not live another hour, your instantaneous death would not alter the fact that he that believeth in the Son of God is meet for heaven. Surely, if

anything beyond faith is needed to make us fit to enter paradise, the thief would have been kept a little longer here; but no, he is, in the morning, in the state of nature, at noon he enters the state of grace, and by sunset he is in the state of glory. The question never is whether a death-bed repentance is accepted if it be sincere: the question is-Is it sincere? If it be so, if the man dies five minutes after his first act of faith, he is as safe as if he had served the Lord for fifty years. If your faith is true, if you die one moment after you have believed in Christ, you will be admitted into paradise, even if you shall have enjoyed no time in which to produce good works and other evidences of grace. He that reads the heart will read your faith written on its fleshy tablets, and he will accept you through Jesus Christ, even though no act of grace has been visible to the eye of man.

I conclude by again saying that this is not an exceptional case. I began with that, and I want to finish with it, because so many demi-semi-gospellers are so terribly afraid of preaching free grace too fully. I read somewhere, and I think it is true, that some ministers preach the gospel in the same way as donkeys eat thistles, namely, very, very cautiously. On the contrary, I will preach it boldly. I have not the slightest alarm about the matter. If any of you misuse free-grace teaching, I cannot help it. He that will be damned can as well ruin himself by perverting the gospel as by anything else. I cannot help what base hearts may invent; but mine it is to set forth the gospel in all its fullness of grace, and I will do it. If the thief was an exceptional case-and our Lord does not usually act in such a way- there would have been a hint given of so important a fact. A hedge would have been set about this exception to all rules. Would not the Savior have whispered quietly to the dying man, "You are the only one I am going to treat in this way"? Whenever I have to do an exceptional favor to a person, I have to say, "Do not mention this, or I shall have so many besieging me." If the Savior had meant this to be a solitary case, he would have faintly said to him, "Do not let anybody know; but you shall to day be in the kingdom with me." No, our Lord spoke openly, and those about him heard what he said. Moreover, the inspired penman has recorded it. If it had been an exceptional case, it would not have been written in the Word of God. Men will not publish their actions in the newspapers if they feel that the record might lead others to expect from them what they cannot give. The Savior had this wonder of grace reported in the daily news of the gospel, because he means to repeat the marvel every day. The bulk shall be equal to sample, and therefore he sets the sample before you all. He is able to save to the

uttermost, for he saved the dying thief. The case would not have been put there to encourage hopes which he cannot fulfill. Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, and not for our disappointing. I pray you, therefore, if any of you have not yet trusted in my Lord Jesus, come and trust in him now. Trust him wholly; trust him only; trust him at once. Then will you sing with me-

*“The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day,
And there have I, though vile as he,
Washed all my sins away.”*