

The Miracle of Easter as It Applies to the Life of the Statesman

As we approach Easter, we are about to celebrate the greatest miracle ever. I will understand if you wish to argue that the greatest miracle was that the God of the universe entered human history as a baby born of a virgin. However, just as important to me is the miracle accomplished as Jesus gave up His life.

As Jesus was being crucified, we learn much from His interaction with the two criminals who were being crucified alongside Him:

Then one of the criminals hanging there began to yell insults at Him: "Aren't You the Messiah? Save Yourself and us!" But the other answered, rebuking him: "Don't you even fear God, since you are undergoing the same punishment? We are punished justly, because we're getting back what we deserve for the things we did, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom!" And He said to him, "I assure you: Today you will be with Me in paradise" (Luke 23:39-43).

The first criminal acted as if he did not believe there was anything beyond this life. He was appealing for an earthly solution. The second criminal understood, albeit imperfectly. This criminal knew he deserved punishment. In spite of the life he had lived, he clearly had sufficient fear of God to make this request. He also recognized Jesus' nature to forgive when he implored Jesus "Remember me when You come into Your kingdom!" We can surmise that this criminal had a repentant heart and sufficient fear of God to be afraid of what lay ahead for him and hope that Jesus had a solution. Jesus demonstrated that He accepted the criminal's repentance and extended grace toward him – grace that the criminal knew he did not deserve in his words to the other criminal.

Let us pause to reflect on the truths behind this. The Apostle Paul clarifies the situation for us:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

Even if, in our own eyes, we have not sinned as badly as the repentant criminal, every one of us has sinned against our morally perfect Creator. The Apostle Paul proceeds:

For the wages of sin is death (separation from God) (Romans 6:23).

However, the Apostle Paul does not stop there:

but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

And it is this that Jesus promised to the repentant criminal on the cross.

We know that this earthly existence is not the end of our existence. At the end of this earthly existence, we stand before God to be judged for the way we responded to Him while on this earth. As a consequence of that judgment, every human faces an eternity of intimate relationship with our Creator in heaven or an eternity of separation from Him in hell. Thus, the repentant criminal speaks for each one of us at the point of facing death and God's judgment: "Jesus, remember me." We know we do not deserve the privilege

of entering God's presence. The criminal's words show a boldness, or a hopefulness, in asking for something we do not deserve --- to be forgiven and allowed into God's presence. We need His help in overcoming this dilemma and anticipated eternal separation from Him. Thus, the power of Jesus's words to the criminal:

I assure you: Today you will be with Me in paradise.

This is Jesus' unmistakable promise of forgiveness for our acts against God – whether on purpose or even unknowingly – forgiveness not deserved but forgiveness based on Jesus paying the penalty for us through His death on the cross on our behalf. “You will be with Me in paradise.”

Apparently, the criminal did not know that Jesus' forgiveness of him would be based on something Jesus would accomplish within moments of this conversation. But he was confident God would accomplish this miracle.

But there is one more element. Jesus said “Today.” Jesus added this nugget to the repentant criminal. Both Jesus and the criminal were going to lose the physical bodies that had housed their spirits. However, the criminal could know that the essence of his being would go on without interruption. His spirit would go immediately into the presence of God and the essence of his life – his spirit – would be uninterrupted. I realize there is a debate among Church scholars. However, Jesus – God – described us as going directly into the presence of God at the moment of the death of our physical body.

Jesus added this promise: “I assure you.” Jesus invoked the integrity of the King of the universe to give us confidence. Is there anything that could be more assuring?

This truth sets us free! We are human beings first and foremost before being public servants. Based upon the confidence in our relationship with our Creator and our confidence in eternity with Him, we can now be free to serve His sheep. Reflecting on this promise to the criminal on the cross, this comes at an especially significant time. With the coronavirus pandemic haunting us, there are those of us who will enter eternity early. Furthermore, many who are dependent upon us will enter eternity prematurely. This is a truth that everyone needs to understand.

Let us rejoice in being set free through this promise from God Himself! And let us do as the repentant criminal, and with the same confidence:

Jesus, remember me!