

## The prayer of the thief on the cross

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**O**F ALL THE people present at the crucifixion of Jesus, the contrite malefactor was perhaps the only one who believed that Jesus would rise from the dead. His prayer is one of the shortest recorded in Scripture: “And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom” (Lk. 23:42). He is also one of the few that appear to have had an instant reply to his prayer, for Jesus answered him positively: “And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise” (v. 43). The word “paradise” has the meaning ‘garden or park—a place of happiness’. Jesus could have been asking a question, “*Shalt thou be with me in paradise?*”. Alternatively, he could have been indicating that because the malefactor was repentant he would be in the Kingdom. This second possibility is one we want to explore a little more.

### A disciple?

We do not know if this malefactor had been previously baptized by John the Baptist or his disciples, or by the disciples of Jesus. Being a Jew, he was, of course, still in covenant relationship with God through the Law established at Sinai, which did not cease until Christ actually died and the temple veil was rent in two. From the record in Luke 23:39-43 we can infer a number of possible beliefs held by this repentant malefactor:

- Jesus would rise from the dead
- Jesus would ascend to heaven and return to earth
- Jesus would establish the Kingdom
- Jesus would judge those that are to enter the Kingdom
- Jesus was Saviour and Lord.

So this sinner acknowledged his sinful state, with a repentant attitude, feared God, and pleaded with Jesus that he might be forgiven and might enter the Kingdom. He was literally “planted together in the likeness of [Jesus’s] death”, and it could be said of him that his “old man” was literally crucified with Christ (Rom. 6:5,6). Here is an example of prayer based on knowledge, repentance and an acceptance of Christ. This prompts the question, What had this man done to justify his being crucified at

exactly the same time as Jesus? Was it just a coincidence that a man with this attitude should be hanging next to Jesus at the time of his greatest agony?

Any answers we give to these questions must contain a certain amount of speculation. There is perhaps, though, a clue in the Matthew account of the trial of Jesus before the Jewish council. Matthew 26:60 tells us that eventually two false witnesses were produced whose testimony held up, after the failure of a number of others. They recounted words that Jesus had uttered, recorded in John 2:19-22, which were misunderstood then and were deliberately misconstrued at the trial of Jesus. This testimony ultimately opened up the way for the council to condemn Jesus to death.

These words of Jesus concerning his death and resurrection were uttered early on in his ministry. It could be that the two false witnesses were part of that large number who became disciples early on, enthusiastic in the beginning, but who eventually “went back, and walked no more with him” (6:66). Now they were prepared to bear false witness, perhaps, like Judas, helped by a large bribe. Or perhaps they succumbed to threats to themselves and their families if they did not cooperate. To succeed where many had failed they had to have been present when Jesus was teaching and to have been able to come up with words of the Master that could be used against him.

### Those that bear false witness

What were the Pharisees and scribes and the rest of the council to do with these men once they had served their purpose?—for they could have revealed the trial to be the sham that it was. The Law of Moses was strict in the treatment of those that bore false witness: “if the witness be a false witness, and hath testified falsely against his brother; then shall ye do unto him, as he had thought to have done unto his brother” (Deut. 19:18,19). (As an interesting aside, remember what happened to Haman under the providential care of God for Mordecai and His people.)

The false witnesses had been used to procure the death sentence for Christ. The hypocritical and evil rulers could then have turned on them

and sent them to be crucified, so tying up all the loose ends, as they thought. The writer willingly acknowledges, as stated above, that the foregoing is at best interesting speculation. What is important is for us to note that, as our Lord hung dying on the cross, God had provided in His mercy and love that one should be next to His Son who would confirm a belief in Jesus as Saviour and Lord. Was this an answer to a prayer of Jesus?

### The God of comfort

The Apostle Paul describes God as “the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation”, and as “God, That comforteth those that are cast down” (2 Cor. 1:3,4; 7:6). The purpose of receiving comfort is explained by Paul as being “that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God” (1:4). The word translated ‘comfort’ (*paraklēsis*) is related to *paraklētos*, literally ‘one who comes alongside’. In Christ’s greatest hour of agony and need, God

had provided one next to him who confirmed the purpose of his life and death.

The prayer of the malefactor, “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom”, would have been a comfort to Christ, and the reply of Christ a comfort to the malefactor. Christ could not remove for that man the consequence of his sin, which was death. He was, though, able to direct him past the present suffering to the promise of the Kingdom.

We too can be of comfort to Christ as we fellowship his suffering and look forward to the Kingdom. As we pray, “Thy kingdom come”, and as we ask, “forgive us our sins”, we acknowledge Christ as Saviour and Lord. In prayer to God through Christ we can recall the joy that is set before us which will enable us to endure the crucifying of the flesh. In true repentance we must recognise our sins and the provision God has made for our forgiveness, and be comforted by those words of Jesus: “Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Lk. 12:32).

## The prayer of Solomon

1 Kings 8 and 2 Chronicles 6

Edward Carr

**P**RAYER IS a deeply personal matter. Communication with our Maker leads, almost inevitably, to a feeling of inadequacy and insufficiency. Consequently, a problem arises as to how to translate this very personal communication into prayer on behalf of others, particularly those made in a public setting. Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the temple gives us some indications as to how this transition can be achieved, as well as giving more general lessons in regard to our own individual attitudes to our prayers.

### Content

Solomon’s prayer of dedication is an exhortation. He expounds the Scriptures, and in doing so draws out strong lessons, both of encouragement and warning, for his original hearers, and us along with them. It is not by any means argued that every prayer should take this exact form, but perhaps this mix of encouragement and warning is one which is appropriate to ex-

amine in relation to our own prayers, particularly our communal and public prayers.

The occasion of the dedication of the new temple afforded Solomon the opportunity to reaffirm the truth of the blessed position of “the . . . congregation [LXX, ecclesia] of Israel” (2 Chron. 6:3). The parallels between our own situation and those of the “congregation of Israel” are striking. They, like us, had been called out by God. They, like us, were to have the presence of God embodied in their midst—they with the temple, us with the Lord Jesus Christ, the cornerstone of the living temple. They, like us, were to be a part of the worship of God in that temple, the place where God had chosen to place His Name.

The way Solomon reaffirms these truths is by reminding the hearers of their place in a covenant relationship. Solomon expounds the blessings and curses enumerated in Deuteronomy 28, and more particularly Leviticus 26 (see table for brief comparisons). The people were to remem-