

“Conversations on the Cross 2”

Reading: Isaiah 50:2-51:3; Luke 23:35-43

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The Roman emperor Constantine is known in history as “Constantine the Great” for several reasons, but the church remembers him as “the Great” because he was the first emperor to make Christianity legal in the Roman Empire. Up until Constantine’s reign, you could very easily be persecuted, tortured, or even killed simply for being a Christian. Constantine gave the church a legitimacy in the world that it had never known before. He also took leadership in settling some theological disputes of the time, and in fact the decisions that were made back then are still maintained today, almost 1700 years later, as being the definition of the true Christian faith. There is a lot of debate today about some of the lasting consequences of Constantine’s role in church history, but one of the things that is particularly interesting about him is that as important a role as he played in shaping the church, he was not baptized until just a matter of days before he died. You could make the case that he was a sincere Christian long before then, but he deliberately delayed coming into full communion with the church until his deathbed. Of course we don’t really know what goes on in anyone’s heart, but presumably Constantine held off for so long because he didn’t want to risk missing out on heaven because of committing some sin after baptism.

Constantine the Great is kind of the definition of a deathbed conversion, which is what we call it when someone makes a confession of faith in Christ at the last moment they can, when they’re confronted with the uncertainty of eternity and are reaching out for some hope when they’re facing death. Maybe you’ve heard that saying that “there are no atheists in foxholes,” and it’s a similar sort of thing, that cry to God out of fear of death. “God, if you’re out there, just get me out of this and I’ll serve you!”

On the one hand, I don’t want to sound like a deathbed conversion or a foxhole conversion doesn’t count for eternity, because I’m sure there are many stories of people whose lives were transformed by that cry to Christ when the bombs were falling all around them, and indeed we rejoice when we hear of a lifelong scoundrel who turns to God in the last moment and is saved. But even so, I think it’s clear that a deathbed conversion isn’t really what we hope to see in a person’s life. Much more than just someone making it into heaven at the last minute, we’d rather see heaven working in their lives for many years before death. We’d much rather see someone saved from the power of sin during their life, not just after death. We’d much rather see them grow to maturity in Christ, so that the ashes of their life can be redeemed into a powerful witness of how God can transform us. You can tell a tree by its fruit, and if you don’t get the chance to see the fruit before the tree is cut down, well, it’s hard to have the same level of certainty in that tree’s true character.

I’m generally a skeptical, cautious sort of guy, so I’m very reluctant to speculate on the eternal destiny of people I don’t know. I trust that when you die, you are in God’s hands, and however things turn out, there is no better place for you to be. So personally, I’m much more comfortable with lives that have been transformed by Christ than I am with deathbed conversions. And that’s why today’s word from the cross makes me so uncomfortable. I don’t want people to count on their deathbed conversion, thinking that they can live like the devil all their lives, then turn to God in the last possible moment and sneak into heaven. You can count on Death to visit you, but you can’t count on him to

keep to a schedule; you don't know when or where your deathbed will be. I don't want that criminal on the cross to be an example to us today of faith in Christ.

For crying out loud, you would be hard-pressed to find an example of a conversion that is more last-minute than this one. Matthew's gospel tells us that when the crucifixion of Jesus began, *both* of the criminals He was crucified with were mocking Him. So not only was this man a criminal who was receiving punishment for his crimes, he was actively insulting Jesus just a matter of hours, maybe even minutes, before he had a change of heart and trusted that Jesus could save him. And this man is in the process of dying, and he's crying out to a dying savior. Clearly, this is an act of desperation. If I had to preach this man's funeral, I'd choose my words pretty carefully, because I wouldn't want to give his family any false hopes. I'm not sure I'd have much faith in a deathbed conversion like this; this is not the sort of faith I want people to use as their example.

And then Jesus speaks from His cross, and the words that He says are, I think, some of the most theologically challenging words in the Bible. "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." Today. You *will* be with me. In paradise. Jesus does not waste time with half-measures or evasion. He doesn't hedge His bets or try to avoid giving this guy a straight answer. Today you will be with me in paradise. He doesn't give this criminal a list of questions to answer to prove that he's really penitent. There is nothing but the cry for help and the powerful decree of salvation. Jesus isn't even in doubt about whether He Himself will be in paradise before the day is out. The conventional wisdom of the time was that those who were crucified were cursed. They were an embarrassment. You'd probably avoid talking about them, to say nothing of whether you thought they were going to heaven when they died. Jesus ought to be worried about whether *He* is going to paradise; this is not the time to be making promises to scoundrels and thieves who haven't even had time to be reformed.

And on top of all of that, this behavior is exactly the sort of thing that got Jesus where He is on that cross. You don't go around first century Judea claiming the sort of authority only God can have. You don't claim to have the authority to forgive people of their sins, and you don't go around acting like you have more religious authority than the priests and the scholars, and you *certainly* don't claim to have authority over the kingdom of God and whom it includes. They conspired against Jesus precisely because He kept telling undesirable people like this criminal that they could be included in God's kingdom. Jesus' authority was one of the recurring sources of conflict throughout His life, and here He is, at what everyone expected to be the end of that life, claiming more authority than ever: He's claiming to be the determiner of who goes to paradise. That's audacious, scandalous, outrageous authority.

One of the things the British writer C.S. Lewis argued was that you can't say and do the things Jesus said and did unless there's something very odd about you. If you go around doing the sorts of things that only God can do, you're probably either out of touch with reality, or you're trying to manipulate or trick people, or, just maybe, you're telling the truth. "If you think you are a poached egg when you are looking for a piece of toast to suit you, you may be sane," Lewis said, "but if you think you are God, there is no chance for you." If you're going to claim the authority of God Himself, you'd better *be* God Himself, or else you're in trouble. Normally if I run across someone who thinks they're God, I would just write them off as being insane or a liar; if a criminal in the electric chair starts handing out promises to people that he'll take them to heaven with him, I would be pretty secure in not expecting him to have that kind of authority. But when you think about the other sorts

of things Jesus did during His life — the healings and the miracles and the impossible knowledge — you have to think a little harder. Maybe this time, just this once, *maybe* He actually *does* have that kind of authority.

If *this* is the kind of authority Jesus has — if He can merely say the word, and a justly convicted criminal can be plucked from the jaws of hell, if He can make the declaration that this man who has just been mocking Him will join Him in paradise *that very day*, if He can turn the tables on those who think they are cursing Him to hell by proclaiming that He has the authority over heaven and hell — if *this* is the kind of authority Jesus has, and if *this* is the way He chooses to use that authority, by using one of His last breaths to save a crook like this, I have to confess to you that I'm not sure I've been taking Him seriously enough. I'm not sure I've been listening to Him closely enough. I'm not sure I've been acting like He really has as much power and authority as He does. I'm not sure my prayers have been big enough for a God who has that kind of authority. I'm not sure I've been looking at people the way Jesus does.

On the one hand, this word from the cross today ought to challenge each one of us in our commitment and submission to Jesus Christ. If He's got the authority to tell this man that he *will* be in paradise *today*, then that means Jesus has the kind of authority that we should follow without hesitation, wholeheartedly. It's the classic difference between making Him your Savior and making Him your Lord. It's one thing to go running to Jesus and ask Him to save you when you die. It's another thing to give your life to Him, to let Him guide you, to desire to know Him and cultivate a relationship with Him. I think of it kind of like what a relationship is sometimes like between a parent and child: when you're immature, you rely on your parents or your guardians for everything. They're your providers and sustainers; they save you every time they give you food to eat. But as you mature, the relationship changes, if it's a good relationship: you learn from them, they guide you and teach you, so that you become who you are in their image. And I know that I for one sometimes have trouble listening to His voice during my daily life, in both the big decisions and the small ones. I need to be reminded to make Him my Lord every day, to give Him the authority over me every day, to live as He would have me live every day, in public and in private. And I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one who struggles with that.

And at the same time, this word from the cross is a challenge to our church, and to every church through the ages. I'm sure there have been a lot of good churches and good pastors and good Christians who would look at someone like this man on the cross and think that surely, it's too late for him. There he is, on his last day on earth, mocking Jesus to His face. What hope would there be for a man like that? God can work miracles, yes, but sometimes peoples' hearts are just too hard for God to break through. And then, yes, miraculously, he turns to Jesus and trusts Him, and our Lord promises that *today* this man will be with Him in paradise. When is someone too far gone for God to save them? When are they so bad that they aren't worth our prayers? Not as long as they still draw breath. Jesus proved that He would literally use His last breath saving the scum of the earth; would we?

So to all of us, wherever we are, this word of the cross is a message of hope and encouragement. It is not too late to hand your life over to the one who has the authority and the power to transform you. Especially in this season of Lent, when we focus on our own sins and our need for the cross, this is the time to make a new commitment. And it is not too late for our neighbors and loved ones and strangers around us. Jesus has the authority; do we believe that in our

prayers? Are we praying big enough for the God who has such great power? Christ is speaking to us from His cross. Will we hear Him?



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