

The Three Crosses.

Luke 23: 39-43.

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Turn aside with us for a few moments and meditate upon those three crosses. If we mistake not, we will find a very wide field of truth opened before us in the brief but comprehensive record given at the head of this article.

1. First of all, we must gaze at the centre cross, or rather at Him who was nailed thereon — Jesus of Nazareth — that blessed One who had spent His life in labours of love, healing the sick, cleansing the lepers, opening the eyes of the blind, raising the dead, feeding the hungry, drying the widow's tears, meeting every form of human need, ever ready to drop the tear of true sympathy with every child of sorrow; whose meat and drink it was to do the will of God, and to do good to man; a holy, spotless, perfectly gracious man; the only pure, untainted sheaf of human fruit ever seen in this world; "a man approved of God," who had perfectly glorified God on this earth and perfectly manifested Him in all His ways.

Such, then, was the One who occupied the centre cross; and when we come to inquire what it was that placed Him there, we learn a threefold lesson; or rather, we should say, three profound truths are unfolded to our hearts.

In the first place, we are taught, as nothing else can teach us, what man's heart is toward God. Nothing has ever displayed this — nothing could display it — as the cross has. If we want a perfect standard by which to measure the world, to measure the human heart, to measure sin, we must look at the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot stop short of the cross, and we cannot go beyond it, if we want to know what the world is, inasmuch as it was there that the world fully uttered itself — there fallen humanity fully let itself out. When the human voice cried out, "Crucify Him! crucify Him!" that voice was the utterance of the human heart, declaring, as nothing else could declare, its true condition in the sight of God. When man nailed the Son of God to the cross, he reached the full height of his guilt, and the depth of moral turpitude. When man preferred a robber and murderer to Christ, he proved that he would rather have robbery and murder than light and love. The cross demonstrates this tremendous fact; and the demonstration is so clear as to leave not the shadow of a question.

It is well to seize this point. It is certainly not seen with sufficient clearness. We are very prone to judge of the world according to its treatment of ourselves. We speak of its hollowness, its faithlessness, its baseness, its deceitfulness, and such like; but we are too apt to make *self* the measure in all this, and hence we fall short of the real mark. In order to reach a just conclusion, we must judge by a perfect standard, and this can only be found in the cross. The cross is the only perfect measure of man, of the world, of sin. If we really want to know what the world is, we must remember that it preferred to robber to Christ, and crucified between two thieves the only perfect man that ever lived.

Such is the world in which we live. Such is its character — such its moral condition — such its true state as proved by its own deliberately planned and determinedly perpetrated act. And therefore we need not marvel at aught that we hear or see of the world's wickedness, seeing that in crucifying the Lord of glory, it gave the strongest proof that could be given of wickedness and guilt. It will perhaps be said, in reply, the world is changed. It is not now what it was in the days of Herod and Pontius Pilate. The world of the nineteenth century is very different from the world of the first. It has made progress in

every way. Civilisation has flung its fair mantle over the scene; and, as respects a large portion of the world, Christianity has shed its purifying and enlightening influence upon the masses; so that it would be *very* unwarrantable to measure the world that is by the terrible act of the world that *was*.

Reader, do you really believe that the world is changed? Is it really improved in the deep springs of its moral being — is it altered at its heart's core? We readily admit all that a free gospel and an open Bible have, by the rich mercy of God, achieved here and there. We think, with grateful hearts and worshipping spirits, of thousands and hundreds of thousands of precious souls converted to God. We bless the Lord, with all our hearts, for multitudes who have lived and died in the faith of Christ; and for multitudes who, at this very moment, are giving most convincing evidence of their genuine attachment to the name, the person, and the cause of Christ.

But, after allowing the broadest margin in which to insert all these glorious results, we return, with firm decision, to our conviction that the world is the world still, and if it had the opportunity, the act that was perpetrated in Jerusalem in the year 33, would be perpetrated in Christendom now. (1873)

This may seem severe and sweeping; but is it true? Is the Name of Jesus one whit more agreeable to the world to-day, than it was when its great religious leaders cried out, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Only try it. Go and breathe that peerless and precious Name amid the brilliant circles that throng the drawing-rooms of the polite, the fashionable, the wealthy, and the noble of this our own day. Name Him in the steamboat saloon, in the railway carriage, or in the public hall, and see if you will not very speedily be told that such a subject is out of place. Any other name, any other subject will be tolerated. You may talk folly and nonsense in the ear of the world, and you will never be told it is out of place; but talk of Jesus, and you will very soon be silenced. How often have we seen our leading thoroughfares literally blocked up by crowds of people looking at a puppet show, or listening to a ballad singer or a German band, and no policeman tells them to move on. Let a servant of Christ stand to preach in our thoroughfares and he will be summoned before the magistrates. There is room in our public streets for the devil, but there is no room for Jesus Christ. "Not this man, but Barabbas."

Can any one deny these things? Have they not been witnessed again and again? And what do they prove? They prove, beyond all question, the fallacy of the notion that the world is improved. They prove that the world of the nineteenth century is the world of the first. It has, in some places, changed its dress, but not its real *animus*. It has doffed the robes of paganism, and donned the cloak of Christianity; but underneath that cloak may be seen all the hideous features of paganism's spirit. Compare Romans 1: 29-31 with 2 Timothy 3 and there you will find the very traits and lineaments of nature in darkest heathenism, reproduced in connection with "the form of godliness" — the grossest forms of moral pravity covered with the robe of Christian profession.

No; it is a fatal mistake to imagine that the world is improving. It is stained with the murder of the Son of God; and it proves its consent to the deed in every stage of its history, in every phase of its condition. The world is under judgement. Its sentence is passed; the awful day of its execution is rapidly approaching. The world is simply a deep, dark, rapid stream rushing onward to the lake of fire. Nothing but the sword of judgement can ever settle the heavy question pending between the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and that world which murdered His Son.

Thus it is, if Scripture is to be our guide. Judgement is coming. It is at the very door. Eighteen hundred years ago, the inspired apostle penned the solemn sentence, that "God is *ready* to judge." If He was ready then, surely He is ready now. And why tarries He? In long-suffering mercy, not willing that *any* should perish, but that *all* should come to repentance. Precious words! Words of exquisite tenderness and matchless grace! Words that tell out the large, loving, gracious heart of our God, and

His intense desire for man's salvation.

But judgement is coming. The awful day of vengeance is at hand; and, meanwhile, the voice of Jesus, sounding through the lips of His dear ambassadors, may be heard on every side calling men to flee out of the terrible vortex, and make their escape to the stronghold of God's salvation.

2. But this leads us, in the second place, to look at the cross as the expression of God's heart toward man. If on the cross of our adorable Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, we read, in characters deep, broad, and unmistakable, the true state of man's heart Godward; in the selfsame cross, we may read, with no less clearness surely, the state of God's heart toward man. The cross is the divinely perfect measure of both.

The very spear that pierced Thy side,
Drew forth the blood to save.

We behold, at the cross, the marvellous meeting of enmity and love — sin and grace. Man displayed at Calvary, the very height of his enmity against God. God, blessed for ever be His name, displayed the height of His love. Hatred and love met; but love proved victorious. God and sin met; God triumphed, sin was put away, and now, at the resurrection side of the cross, the eternal Spirit announces the glad tidings, that grace reigns through righteousness, unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord. At the cross, the battle was fought and the victory won; and now the liberal hand of sovereign grace is scattering far and wide the spoils of victory.

Do you really desire to know what the heart of God is toward man? If so, go and gaze on that centre cross to which Jesus Christ was nailed, by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God. True it is, as we have already seen, man did, with wicked hands, crucify and slay the blessed One. This is the dark side of this question. But there is a bright side also, for God is seen in it. No doubt, man fully let himself out at the cross; but God was above him. Yes, above all the powers of earth and hell which were there ranged in their terrible array.

As it was, in the case of Joseph and his brethren; they told out the enmity of their hearts in flinging him into the pit, and selling him to the Ishmaelites. Here was the dark side. But then, mark these words of Joseph: "Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither; for God did send me before you to preserve life."

Here was the bright side. But to whom were these wondrous words of grace addressed? To broken hearts and penitent spirits, and convicted consciences. To men who had learnt to say, "We are verily guilty." It is only such that can at all enter into the line of truth which is now before us. Those who have taken their true place, who have accepted the judgement of God against themselves, who truly own that the cross is the measure of their guilt — they can appreciate the cross as the expression of God's heart of love toward them; they can enter into the glorious truth that the selfsame cross which demonstrates man's hatred of God sets forth also God's love to man. The two things ever go together. It is when we see and own our guilt, as proved in the cross, that we learn the purifying and peace — speaking power of that precious blood which cleanseth us from all sin.

Yes; beloved reader, it is only a broken heart and a contrite spirit that can truly enter into the marvellous love of God as set forth in the cross of Christ. How could Joseph ever have said, "Be not grieved with yourselves," if he had not seen his brethren broken down in his presence? Impossible. And how can an unbroken heart, an unreached conscience, an impenitent soul enter into the value of the atoning blood of Christ, or taste the sweetness of the love of God? Utterly impossible. Joseph "spake roughly" to his brethren at the first, but the very moment those accents emanated from their broken

hearts, "We are verily guilty," they were in a condition to understand and value the words, "Be not grieved with yourselves." It is when we are completely broken down in the presence of the cross, seeing it as the perfect measure of our own deep personal guilt, that we are prepared to see it as the glorious display of God's love towards us.

And then and there we escape from a guilty world. Then and there we are rescued completely from that dark and rapid current of which we have spoken, and brought within the hallowed and peaceful circle of God's salvation, where we can walk up and down in the very sunlight of a Father's countenance and breathe the pure air of the new creation. "Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift!"

3. And now, one word, ere closing this branch of our subject on the cross as displaying the heart of Christ toward God. We can do little more than indicate this point, leaving the reader to prove its suggestive power, under the immediate ministry of the Holy Ghost.

It is an unspeakable comfort to the heart, in the midst of such a world as this, to remember that God has been perfectly glorified by One, at least. There has been One on this earth whose meat and drink was to do the will of God, to glorify Him, and finish His work. In life and death, Jesus perfectly glorified God. From the manger to the cross, His heart was perfectly devoted to *the* one great object, namely, to accomplish the will of God, whatever that will might be. "Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of Me) to do Thy will, O God." In the roll of Scripture it was written of the Son that, in due time, He should come into this world, according to God's eternal counsels, and accomplish the will of the Godhead. To this He dedicated Himself with all the energies of His perfect being. From this He never swerved a hair's breadth from first to last; and when we gaze on that centre cross which is now engaging our attention, we behold the perfect consummation of that which had filled the heart of Jesus from the very beginning, even the accomplishment of the will of God.

All this is blessedly unfolded to us in that charming passage in Philippians 2. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus; who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God; but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (ver. 5-8).

How wonderful is all this! What profound depths there are in the mystery of the cross! What lines of truth converge in it! What rays of light emanated from it! What unfoldings of heart there! The heart of man to Godward — the heart of God to manward — the heart of Christ to God! All this we have in the cross. We can gaze on that One who hung there between two thieves, a spectacle to Heaven, earth, and hell, and see the perfect measure of every one and everything in the whole universe of God. Would we know the measure of the heart of God — His love to us — His hatred of sin? we must look at the cross. Would we know the measure of the heart of man, his real condition, his hatred of all that is divinely good, his innate love of all that is thoroughly bad? we must look at the cross.

Would we know what the world is — what sin is — what Satan is? we must look at the cross. Assuredly, then, there is nothing like the cross. Well may we ponder it. It shall be our theme throughout the everlasting ages. May it be, more and more, our theme now! May the Holy Ghost so lead our souls into the living depths of the cross, that we may be absorbed with the One who was nailed thereto, and thus weaned from the world that placed Him there. May the real utterance of our hearts ever be, "God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." God grant it, for Jesus Christ's sake!

Having dwelt, for a little, on that marvellous centre cross to which the Lord of glory was nailed, for our redemption, we shall now turn to the other two, and seek to learn some solemn and weighty

lessons from the inspired record concerning the men who hung thereon. We shall find in these two men samples of the two great classes into which the human family is divided, from the beginning to the end of time, namely the receivers and the rejecters of the Christ of God — those who believe in Jesus, and those who believe not. In the first place, it is of the utmost importance to see that there was no essential difference between those two men. In nature, in their recorded history, in their circumstances, they were one. Some have laboured to establish a distinction between them; but for what object it is difficult to say, unless it be to dim the lustre of the grace that shines forth in the narrative of the penitent thief. It is maintained that there must have been some event in his previous history to account for his marvellous end — some redeeming feature — some hopeful circumstance on account of which his prayer was heard at the last.

But Scripture is totally silent as to aught of this kind. And not only is it silent as to any redeeming or qualifying circumstance, but it actually gives us the testimony of two inspired witnesses to prove that, up to the very moment in which Luke introduces him to our notice, he, like his fellow on the other side, was engaged in the terrible work of railing on the Son of God. In Matthew 27: 44, we read that "The *thieves* also, which were crucified with Him, cast the same in His teeth." So also in Mark 15: 32, "*They* that were crucified with Him reviled Him."

Now, this is divinely conclusive. It proves, beyond all question, that there was no difference between the two thieves. They were both condemned malefactors; and not only so, but when actually on the very confines of the eternal world, they were both occupied in the awful sin of reviling the blessed Son of God.

It is utterly vain, therefore, for any one to seek to establish a distinction between these two men, inasmuch as they were alike in their nature, in their guilt, in their criminality, and in their profane wickedness. There was no difference up to the moment in which the arrow of conviction entered the soul of him whom we call the penitent thief. The more clearly this is seen, the more the sovereign grace of God shines out in all its blessed brightness. "There is no difference; for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." And, on the other hand, "There is no difference, for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon Him" (compare Rom. 3: 22-23, with Rom. 10: 12).

The only standard by which men are to be measured is "the glory of God"; and inasmuch as all have come short of that — the best as well as the worst of men — there is no difference. Were it merely a question of conscience, or of human righteousness, there might be some difference. Were the standard of measurement merely human, then indeed some shades of distinction might easily be established. But it is not so. All must be ruled by the glory of God; and, thus ruled, all are alike deficient. "There is no difference; for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."

But, blessed be God, there is another side to this great question. "The same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon Him." The riches of the grace of God are such as to reach down to the very deepest depths of human ruin, guilt and misery. If the light of divine glory reveals — as nothing else could reveal — man's utter ruin; the riches of divine grace, as displayed in the person and work of Christ, have perfectly met that ruin, and provided a remedy in every way adequate to meet the claims of the divine glory.

But let us see how all this is illustrated in the striking and beautiful narrative of the penitent thief.

It is very evident that the Spirit of God, in the evangelist Luke, takes up this interesting case at that special point in the which a divine work had really begun. Matthew and Mark present him as a blaspheming malefactor. We can hardly conceive a deeper shade of moral turpitude than that which he, according to their inspired record, exhibits to our view! There is not so much as a single relieving tint.

All is dark as midnight — dark almost as hell; yet not too dark to be reached by the light that was shining straight down from Heaven through the mysterious medium of that centre cross.

It is well to get a very profound sense of our true condition by nature. We cannot possibly go too deep in this line. The ruin of nature is complete — of nature in all its phases and in all its stages. If all have not gone to the same length as the thief on the cross — if all have not brought forth the same fruit — if all have not clothed themselves in forms equally hideous, it is no thanks to their nature. The human heart is a seed plot in which may be found the seed of every crime that has ever stained the page of human history. If the seed has not germinated and fructified, it is not owing to a difference in the soul, but a difference in surrounding circumstances and influences

The testimony of Scripture on this great question, is distinct and conclusive, "There is no difference." Men do not like this. It is too levelling for them. Self-righteousness is cut out by the roots by this sweeping statement of inspiration. Man likes to establish distinctions. He cannot bear to be placed in the same category with the Magdalenes and the Samaritans, and such like. But it cannot be otherwise. Grace levels all distinctions now; and judgement will level them all by-and-by. If we are saved, it is in company with Magdalenes and Samaritans; and if we are lost, it will be in company with such likewise. There will, no doubt, be degrees of glory; as there will be degrees of punishment; but as to the real nature and character of the human heart, "there is no difference." "The *heart is* deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked." What heart? Man's heart — the heart of the writer and the reader of these lines. "For out of *the heart* proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies." Out of what heart? Man's heart — the heart of the writer and the reader of these lines. These things could not come out of the heart if they were not there; and if they do not come out in action, it is not because they are not there, but that circumstances have operated to prevent.

Such is the clear and unvarying testimony of Holy Scripture; and whenever the Spirit of God begins to operate on the heart and conscience of a man He produces the deep sense and full confession of the truth of this testimony. Every divinely convicted soul is ready to adopt as his own these words, "In me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good." Every truly contrite spirit owns the fact of his total ruin. All wisdom's children justify God and condemn themselves — there is no exception. All who are really brought under the convicting power of the Holy Spirit will, without any reserve, set their seal — the seal of their whole moral being to the inspired statement, "there is no difference."

Any who hesitate to own this have yet to learn themselves, in the light of the holiness of God. The most refined, polished and cultivated person, if enlightened by the Spirit of God, will readily take his place with the thief on the cross, inasmuch as the divine light shining in upon him, reveals the hidden springs of his being, leads him to see the profound depths of his nature — the roots and sources of things. Thus while relatives, friends and acquaintances — mere onlookers, judging from the surface, may think very highly of his character, he himself, knowing better, because of divine light, can only exclaim, "O wretched man that I am" — "Behold I am vile" — "Woe is me, I am undone" — "I am a sinful man, O Lord."

These are the proper utterances of a divinely convicted soul; and it is only when we can thus truly and heartily express ourselves that we are really prepared to appreciate the riches of the grace of God as unfolded in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Grace takes up real sinners. "The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which is lost;" and the more fully I realize my lost estate, my hopeless ruin, my utter wretchedness, the more fully I can enter into the fullness and freeness of God's salvation — a salvation purchased by the blood of the cross.

Hence we see how brightly grace shines in the salvation of the thief on the cross. There can be no possible mistake as to him. Clearly he had no good works to trust in. He had performed no deeds of charity. Of baptism and the Lord's Supper he knew nothing. The rites, ceremonies, and ordinances of religion had done — could do nothing for him. In a word, his case was a thoroughly hopeless one, so far as *he* was concerned. For what could *he* do? Whither could he turn? His hands and his feet were nailed fast to a malefactor's cross. It was useless to talk to him about doing or going His hands, while he had the use of them, had been stretched forth in deeds of violence; and now they were nailed to the tree, and could do nothing. His feet, while he had the use of them, had trodden the terrible path of the transgressor; and now they were nailed to the tree, and could not carry him anywhere.

But, note this. Although the poor thief no longer had the use of his hands and his feet — so indispensable to a religion of works — his heart and his tongue were free; and these are the very things that are called into exercise in a religion of faith, as we read in that lovely tenth of Romans, "With the *heart* man believeth unto righteousness; and with the *mouth* confession is made unto salvation."

Precious words! How suited to the thief on the cross! How suited and seasonable for *every* poor helpless, hopeless, self-destroyed sinner! And we must all be saved in like manner as the thief on the cross. There are no two ways to Heaven. There is not one way for the religionist, the moralist, the Pharisee, and another way for the malefactor. There is but one way, and that way is marked from the very throne of God down to where the guilty sinner lies, dead in trespasses and sins, with the footprints of redeeming love; and from thence back to the throne by the precious atoning blood of Christ. This is the way to Heaven — a way paved with love, sprinkled with blood, and trodden by a happy holy band of redeemed worshipers gathered from all the ends of the earth, to chant the heavenly anthem, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain."

We have said that the heart of the thief was free; yes, free under the mighty action of the Holy Ghost, to turn toward that blessed One who hung beside him — that One whom he had just been reviling, but on whom he could now fix his repentant gaze, and to whom he could now bear the noblest testimony ever uttered by men or angels.

But it is most instructive and interesting to mark the progress of the work of God in the soul of the dying thief. Indeed the work of God in any soul is ever of the deepest possible interest. The operations of the Holy Spirit *in* us must never be separated from the work of Christ for us; and, we may add, both the one and the other are founded upon, and inseparably linked with the eternal counsels of God with respect to us. This is what makes it all so real, so solid, so entirely divine. It is not of man. It is all of God, from first to last — from the first dawning of conviction in the soul until it is introduced into the full-orbed light of the glorious gospel of the grace of God. The Lord be praised that it is so! Were it otherwise — were there a single atom of the creature in it, from beginning to end, that one atom would neutralise and destroy the whole, and render it not worth having.

Now in the case of the penitent thief, we discern the first touch of the Eternal Spirit — the very earliest fruit of His sanctifying work, in the words addressed to his fellow, "Dost thou not fear God?" He does not say, "Dost thou not fear punishment?" The sanctification of the Spirit, in every case, is evidenced by the fear of the Lord, and a holy abhorrence of evil for its own sake. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." There may be a fear of judgement, a fear of hell, a fear of the consequences of sin, without the smallest particle of hatred of sin itself. But where the Spirit of God is really at work in the heart, He produces the real sense of sin and the judgement thereof in the sight of God.

This is repentance; let the reader ponder it deeply. It is a grand reality; an essential element, in

every case. "God commandeth all men, everywhere, to repent" (Acts 17: 30). There is no getting over this — no setting it aside. Some may seek to do away with man's responsibility on the plea of his inability to do anything right or good. They may seek to persuade us that it is useless, yea unsound, to call upon men to repent and believe, seeing that men can do nothing of themselves. But the question is, what is the meaning of the words which we have just culled from the apostle's address at Athens? Did Paul preach the truth? Was he sound in the faith? Was he sufficiently high in doctrine?

Well then Paul declares, in the clearest and most emphatic manner, that "God commandeth all men, everywhere, to repent." Will any turn around and say they cannot? Will any venture to deny man's responsibility to obey a divine command? If so, where are they? On very dangerous ground. If God commands all men to repent, woe be to those who refuse to do so; and woe be to those who teach that they are not responsible to do so.

But let us devote a few moments to the examination of this great practical question in the light of the New Testament. Let us see whether our Lord and His apostles called upon men — "all men, everywhere, to repent."

In the third chapter of Matthew's Gospel, we read, "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, and saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

It will, perhaps, be said that John addressed himself specially to Israel — a people in recognized relationship with Jehovah — and hence this passage cannot be adduced in proof of the universal and abiding necessity of repentance. Well, we merely quote it here in order to show that man, whether Jew or Gentile, is responsible to repent, and that the very first voice which falls upon the ear, in the time of the New Testament, is heard calling sinners to repentance. Was the Baptist right or wrong? Was he trespassing upon the domain of sound doctrine when he summoned men to repent? Would some of our modern theologians have called him aside, after he was done preaching, and taken him to task for deceiving men by leading them to suppose that they could repent? We should like to have heard the Baptist's reply.

But we have the example of a greater than John the Baptist, as our warrant for preaching repentance, for in Matthew 4 we read, "From that time, Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Dare any one turn round and say to the divine Preacher, "We cannot repent. We have no power. We are not responsible!" Ah, no! men may argue and reason, and talk theology; but there stands the living record before us — Jesus called upon men to repent, and that, too, without entering, in any way, upon the question of man's ability here or there. He addressed man as a responsible being, as one who was imperatively called to judge himself and his ways, to confess his sins, and repent in dust and ashes. The only true place for a sinner is the place of repentance; and if he refuses to take that place in the presence of divine grace, he will be compelled to take it in the presence of divine judgement, when repentance will be too late. "God commandeth all men, everywhere, to repent."

Passing on to the opening of the Acts of the Apostles, we are privileged to harken to Peter's address on the day of Pentecost — the most fruitful sermon ever preached in this world — crowned with the glorious result of three thousand souls! And what did Peter preach? He preached Christ, and he called upon men to repent. Yes, the great apostle of the circumcision insisted upon repentance — self-judgement — true contrition of heart before God. "Then said Peter unto them, Repent, and be baptised *every one of you* in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 2: 38). And, again, "Repent ye therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3: 19).

Was Peter right in calling upon men to repent and be converted? Would any one be justified in saying to him, at the close of his preaching, "How can men repent? How can they be converted? They can do nothing." We should vastly like to hear Peter's reply. One thing is certain, the power of the Holy Ghost accompanied the preaching. He set His seal to it, and that is enough. "God commandeth *all men, everywhere*, to repent." Woe to all who refuse.

We have already referred to the preaching of the blessed apostle of the Gentiles, and the great teacher of the Church of God. He himself, referring to his ministry at Ephesus, declares in the audience of the elders, "I kept back nothing that was profitable, but have showed you, and have taught you publicly, and from house to house, testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20: 20-21). So also, in his pungent address to Agrippa, he says, "I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision; but showed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance."

Thus we have a body of evidence, drawn from Scripture, such as cannot be gainsaid, proving the universal and abiding necessity of repentance. "God commandeth all men, everywhere, to *repent*." There is no avoiding this. Let men beware how they set it aside. No system of theology can be sound that denies the responsibility of the sinner to repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.

We have digressed; but the digression was needful, and we now return to our theme.

The case of the penitent thief furnishes a very fine illustration of Peter's weighty sentence, "Repent and be converted." It teaches us in a clear and forcible manner, the true meaning of repentance and conversion — two subjects so little understood, so sadly clouded by false teaching.

The human heart is ever prone to take divine things by the wrong end; and when false theology combines with this tendency of the heart, by presenting things in a one-sided manner, the moral effect upon the soul is something terrible. Hence it is that, when men are called upon in the gospel message to repent and turn to God, they think it needful to set about doing something or other, in the shape of reading, praying, and attending upon the ordinances and offices of religion, so called. Thus they become occupied with their doings instead of judging their state.

This is a fatal mistake — the result of the combined influence of self-righteousness and bad theology — these fruitful sources of darkness and misery to precious souls, and of serious damage to the truth of God.

It is perfectly marvellous to note the varied forms in which self-righteousness clothes itself. Indeed so varied are these forms that one would scarcely recognize it to be what it really is. Sometimes it looks like humility, and speaks largely of the evil and danger of being too presumptuous. Then again, it assumes the garb and adopts the language of what is called experimental religion, which, very often, is nothing more than intense self-occupation. At other times, it expresses itself in the threadbare formularies of systematic divinity — that stumbling-block of souls and the sepulchre of divine revelation.

What then is repentance? It is, in one of its grand elements, the thorough judgement of self — of its history and its ways. It is the complete breaking up of the entire system of self-righteousness and the discovery of our complete wreck, ruin and bankruptcy. It is the sense of personal vileness, guilt, and danger — a sense produced by the mighty action of the Word and Spirit of God upon the heart and conscience. It is a hearty sorrow for sin, and a loathing of it for its own sake.

True, there are other features and elements in genuine repentance. There is a change of mind as to

self, and the world, and God. And further, there are various degrees in the depths and intensity of the exercise. But, for the present, we confine ourselves to that deeply important feature of repentance illustrated in the touching narrative of the penitent thief, which we may term, in one word, self-judgement. This must be insisted upon constantly. We greatly fear it is sadly lost sight of in much of our modern preaching and teaching. In our efforts to make the gospel simple and easy, we are in danger of forgetting that "God commandeth all men everywhere to repent." The sinner must be made to feel that he is a sinner, a lost sinner, a guilty sinner, a hell-deserving sinner. He must be made to feel that sin is a terrible thing in the sight of God; so terrible, that nothing short of the death of Christ could atone for it — so terrible, that all who die unpardoned must inevitably be damned — must spend a dreary, never-ending eternity in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone.

Is there, then, anything meritorious in repentance? Is there anything to build upon or to boast in? Has it aught to do with the ground of our salvation, our righteousness, or our acceptance with God? As well might we inquire if the consciousness of bankruptcy could form the basis of a man's credit or future fortune. No, no, reader; repentance, in its deepest and most intensified form, has nothing to do with the ground of our pardon. How could the sense of guilt have aught to do with the ground of pardon? How could the feelings of a drowning man have aught to do with the life-boat that saves him? Or how could the agonies of a man in a house on fire have aught to do with the fire-escape by which he descends from the burning pile?

Look at the case of the thief on the cross. Harken to his words: "Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation: *and we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds.*" Here are the accents of a genuine repentance, "we indeed justly." He felt and owned that he was justly condemned; that he was reaping only "the due reward of his deeds." Was there anything meritorious in this? By no means. It was the judgement of himself, the condemnation of his ways, the sense of his guilt. And this was right. It was the sure precursor of conversion to God. It was the fruit of the Spirit's work in his soul, and enabled him to appreciate God's salvation. It was the hearty acknowledgement of his own just condemnation; and, most surely, this could in no wise contribute to his righteousness before God. It is utterly impossible that the sense of guilt could ever form the basis of righteousness.

Still, there must be repentance; and the deeper the better. It is well that the plough should do its work in breaking up the fallow ground, and making deep the furrows in which the incorruptible seed of the Word may take root. We do not believe that any one had ever to complain that the ploughshare entered too deeply into the soul. Nay, we feel assured that the more we are led down into the profound depths of our own moral ruin, the more fully we shall appreciate the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ, unto all, and upon all them that believe.

But, be it well understood, repentance is not doing this or that. What did the thief do? What could he do? He could not move hand or foot. And yet he was truly repentant. He is handed down, on the page of history, as "the penitent thief." Yes, he was penitent; and his penitence expressed itself in the unmistakable accents of self-judgement. Thus it must ever be. There must be the judgement of sin, sooner or later; and the sooner, the better; and the deeper, the better.

And what then? What is the divine order? "Repent, and be converted." "Repent, and turn to God." Beautiful order! It is conviction and conversion. It is the discovery of self and its ruin, and the discovery of God and His remedy. It is condemning myself and justifying God. It is finding out the emptiness of self, and finding out the fullness of Christ. It is learning the force and application of those few words, "Thou hast destroyed thyself; but in Me is thy help."

And see how all this comes out in the brief but comprehensive record of the thief. No sooner does

he give expression to the sense of his own just condemnation, than he turns so that blessed One who was hanging beside him, and bears the sweet testimony, "This man hath done nothing amiss." Here he gives a flat contradiction to the whole world. He joins issue with the chief priests, elders, and scribes, who had delivered up the holy One as a malefactor. They had declared, "If He were not a malefactor, we would not have delivered Him up unto thee." But the dying thief declares, "This man hath done nothing amiss." Thus he stands forth in clear and decided testimony to the spotless humanity of the Lord Jesus Christ — that grand truth which lies at the very base of "the great mystery of godliness." He turns from a guilty self to a spotless Christ; and he tells the world that it had made a terrible mistake in crucifying the Lord of glory.

And was not this a good work? Yes, truly, the very best work that any one could do. To bear a full, clear, bold testimony to Christ, is the most acceptable and fragrant service that any mortal can render to God. Millions bestowed in charity, continents traversed in the interests of philanthropy, a lifetime spent in the dreary exercises of mechanical religiousness — all these things put together are as the small dust of the balance when compared with one word of heartfelt, genuine, Spirit-taught testimony to God's beloved Son. The poor thief could do nothing and give nothing; but oh, he was permitted to enjoy the richest and rarest privilege that could possibly fall to the lot of any mortal, even the privilege of bearing witness to Christ, when the whole world had cast Him out, when one of His own disciples had denied Him, another had sold Him, and all had forsaken Him. This, indeed, was service; this was work; a service and a work which shall live in the records and the memory of Heaven when the proudest monuments of human genius and benevolence shall have crumbled and sunk in eternal oblivion.

But we have some further lessons to learn from the lips of the dying malefactor. Not only does he bear a bright and blessed testimony to the spotless humanity of Christ, but he also owns Him as Lord and King; and this, too, at a moment, and amid a scene when, to nature's view, there was not a single trace of lordship or royalty. "He said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom."

Think of this! Think of one who had, as it were, a moment before, been railing on the dying Saviour, now owning Him as Lord and King! Truly this was divine work. Surely this was real conversion — a true turning to God. "Lord, remember *me*." Oh, how unspeakably precious is this golden chain with its three links! How lovely to see a poor worthless, guilty, hell-deserving "me" linked on to the divine Saviour by that one word, "*remember!*"

This was life eternal. A Saviour and a sinner linked together, is everlasting salvation. Nothing can be simpler. People may talk of works, of feelings, of experiences; but here we have the matter presented in its divine simplicity, and in its divine order. We have first the fruit of a genuine repentance, in the words, "We indeed justly"; and then the sweet result of spiritual conversion in the one simple but powerful utterance, "Lord, remember me." "Repent and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out." "Repent and turn to God."

What marvellous depth and power in those words! To repent is to see the utter ruin of self. To turn to God, is life, and peace, and everlasting salvation. We discover self and we loathe and abhor it. We discover God and turn to Him with the whole heart, and find in Him all we want for time and for eternity. It is all divinely simple and unspeakably blessed. Repentance and conversion are inseparably linked together. They are distinct, yet intimately connected. They must neither be separated nor confounded.

And, now, let us note the divine response to the appeal of the penitent thief. He had said "Lord,

remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom." What is the answer? "To-day shalt thou be with Me in Paradise." It is as though the blessed Saviour had said to him, "You need not wait for the *glory* of the *kingdom*; this very day thou shalt taste the *grace* of the *house* — the love of My Father's home above; I shall have you with Me in that bright paradise, to enjoy full communion with Me long before the glories of the kingdom shall be unfolded." Most blessed Saviour, such was Thy matchless grace!

And not one reproving word! Not a single reference to the past! Not even a glance at the recent heartless wickedness! Ah, no; there is never aught of this in the divine dealing with a penitent soul. The thief had said — said from the depths of a broken and contrite heart, "We indeed justly." This was enough. True, it was needful; but it was enough. "A broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise." No; and not only will He not despise it, but He will pour into it the rich and precious consolation of His grace and pardoning love. It is the joy of God to pardon a penitent sinner; and none but a penitent sinner can truly enjoy the pardon of God.

"*To-day* shalt thou be *with Me* in paradise." Here the glories of a present, personal, and perfect salvation pour themselves in divine lustre upon the gaze of the astonished thief.

And, be it noted, that there is not one syllable about doing, or giving, or feeling, or aught else that might turn the eye in upon self. The eye had been turned in, and rightly so; and it had seen nothing but a deep, dark abyss of guilt and ruin. This was enough. The eye must henceforth and for evermore be turned outward and upward; it must be fixed on the precious Saviour who was bringing him to paradise, and on that bright paradise to which He was bringing him.

No doubt the thief could never forget what a sinner he had been — never forget his guilt and wickedness — he never could, he never shall; yea, throughout the countless ages of eternity, he and all the redeemed shall remember the past. How could it be otherwise? Shall we lose the power of memory in the future? Surely not. But every remembrance of the past shall only tend to swell the note of praise which the heart shall give forth as we think of the grace that shines in those precious words, "Their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more." Such is the style of divine forgiveness! God will never again refer to those sins which His own loving hand has cancelled by the blood of the cross. Never! No, never! He has cast them behind His back for ever. They have sunk as lead into the deep waters of His eternal forgetfulness. All praise to His glorious Name!

Let us now fix the eye, for a brief moment, upon the third cross. On it we behold — what? A guilty sinner? Not merely that. The penitent thief was that. They were in the same condemnation. No one need go to hell simply because he is a sinner, inasmuch as Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, "even the chief." There is not a sinner this day, outside the precincts of hell, who is not within the reach of God's salvation if he only feel his need of it. No one need be lost, merely because he is a ruined, guilty, hell-deserving sinner.

But what do we behold on that third cross? We behold an *unbelieving* sinner. This is the solemn point. We may, without any hesitation, declare that had the occupant of that cross, like his penitent companion, cast himself upon the grace of the dying Saviour, he would, most assuredly, have met with the same response. There was grace in the heart of Jesus to meet the one as well as the other. But he did not want it, would not have it. He remained impenitent and unbelieving until the dark shadows of death gathered round him, and the darker horrors of hell burst upon his guilty soul. He perished within arm's length of the Saviour and salvation.

Tremendous thought! what finite mind can take it in? Who can fully estimate the contrast between those two men? True, the contrast was in one point; but that one point involved consequences of eternal moment. What was it? It was this — *the reception or rejection of the Son of God*; believing

or not believing on that blessed One who was hanging between them — as near to the one as He was to the other. There was no difference in their nature; no difference in their condition; no difference in their circumstances. The grand and all-important difference lay in this, that one believed in Jesus, and the other did not; one was enabled to say, "Lord, remember me"; the other said, "If thou be the Christ."

What a contrast! What a broad line of demarcation! What an awful chasm between two men so like in other respects — so near to one another — so near to the divine Saviour! But it is just the same in all cases, everywhere, and at all times. The one simple but solemn question for each and for all is this, "What is my relation to Christ?" All hinges upon this — yes, for time and eternity. Have I received Christ? or have I not? Am I in Him? or am I not?

The two thieves represent the two great classes into which mankind has been divided, from the days of Cain and Abel down to this very moment. God's Christ is the one great and all-deciding test in every case. All the shades of moral character; all the grades of social life; all the castes, classes, sects and parties into which the human family has been, is, or ever shall be divided — all are absorbed in this one momentous point — "*In or out of Christ.*" The difference between the two thieves is just the difference between the saved and the lost; the Church and the world — the children of God and the children of God's great enemy. True it is that, in the case of the two thieves, the matter is brought to a point, so that we can see it at a glance; but it is the same in every case. The person of Christ is the one great boundary line that marks off the new creation from the old — the kingdom of God from the kingdom of Satan — the children of light from the children of darkness; and this boundary line stretches away into eternity.

Reader, what sayest thou to these things? On which side of this line art thou, at this moment, standing? Art thou, like the penitent thief, linked on to Christ by a simple faith? Or dost thou, like his impenitent companion speak of Christ with an "if"? Say dear friend, how is it? Do not put this question away from thee. Take it up and look it solemnly in the face. Your eternal weal or woe hangs on your answer to this question. Turn to Jesus now! Come now! God commands thee! Delay not! Reason not Come just as thou art to Jesus, who hung on that centre cross for us.

* NOTE. — The two thieves furnish a powerful answer to the ritualist and the rationalist. In one, we see a man going straight to paradise who had never been baptised, and never received what ritualists call "the holy communion. — In the other, we see a man who perishes, within arm's length of a Saviour, through a sceptical, rationalistic, infidel "if." Let all ritualists and rationalists ponder *these facts*.