

This Day in Paradise • Luke 23:34–43

Dismas is my name. And I'm not a thief, regardless of what you say and what you've heard, or regardless of what you've read in your Bibles. Matthew was correct in what he said, it is just that you have some inept translators. A thief I was not, nor robber. I'm an insurrectionist by occupation, an anarchist, a revolutionary – a gorrilla soldier.

You see, it is those Romans, they are the ones who came and took over our land - one more in a lengthy list of foreign invaders who spoiled our cities and took away our money, who desecrated our temple. Those Romans; those pigs! They are the worst of all that this world ever has had.

Most of my countrymen went along with them. Most of my countrymen just watched as Israel was desecrated, but not me. I joined with the Zealots. A few of us formed an underground. Yes, I've robbed, and yes, I've killed, and yes, I've broken the law, but I'm no robber; I'm no murderer; I'm no criminal. It is the Roman's – they're the ones who've done it. Along with the other Zealots, I'm among the righteous, the ones who legitimately have stood for Jehovah God and for the nation of Israel.

Those Romans, they caught us - three of us, you know: Cestas and Barabbas and me, Dismas. They captured us. They captured us and they tried us in their illegal courts and then they sentenced us to be crucified. Barabbas, he was set free. The crowds [at least it was supposed to be the crowds - you see, actually, it was some of our Zealots who decided in a clandestine meeting that they would pick Barabbas because he was more valuable to the cause] salted themselves through the crowds, and when Pilate stood there that day, they pleaded that Barabbas be set free rather than Dismas, rather than Cestas. And so Barabbas was set free by Pilate, that uncircumcised Gentile.

Cestas and I talked that Thursday night. We discussed how we would die and we decided that

we would teach those Romans a lesson of how a true soldier dies. A true soldier, a Jewish patriot, would be one that would die with courage and with strength. One who would not cry or whimper, one who would be under control even under the most painful of agonizing deaths. We resolved that that is the way it would be.

None of that seems to matter much now. By dawn our hearts were still bent on dying like men. Along with Cestas I carried my cross through the streets of Jerusalem, out the gates on our way to Skull Hill. And then my heart started to pound, my breath became short, and I gathered up my courage and I kept my composure.

They laid me down on the cross. I tried to look away, but out of the corner of my eye I saw that mallet coming down on the nail. Oh, the pain. It was far worse than anything I ever imagined it possibly could be. You couldn't know unless you experienced it. You couldn't know what it was like to be crucified unless you'd been nailed to that cross. Then, with arms outstretched and feet

nailed to the bar, to be lifted up, dropped into the hole and again the pain, the agony. I could keep my composure no longer. I screamed out and I swore and I cursed.

You may think that

was the wrong thing to do, that those were inappropriate words to say, but wait until you experience something like that; wait until you've been crucified.

Yes, I joined in the taunts against Jesus. I swore at him, I made fun of him, along with Cestas. You should have seen the comparison. I mean, here we were, being crucified, and we're swearing and cursing and screaming. You know what he's doing? [And they did the same things to him.] He turned and said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

I started to hate him for that. I hated him for

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his composure that I didn't have. And then Cestas started to mock him and said, "Hey, if you're the Christ, why don't you save yourself and save us?"

I've wondered since then if there wasn't a bit of hope in Cestas when he prayed his seemingly sacrilegious prayer. I've wondered if Cestas didn't hope that maybe Jesus the Christ would perform another miracle. Maybe he would come down off the cross and maybe he would take us down as well. It was at least worth a try; it was at least worth a hope.

It was right about then that I started to compare myself with those who were around me. I looked at Cestas and I thought him to be a pathetic sort. I heard him swearing and cursing, blatantly out of control, and I thought to myself, I may not be fully under control, but at least I'm doing better than he is. I thought myself more righteous, and I certainly thought myself stronger than Cestas, my comrade.

I looked at the Romans, those pigs. I hated them. I hated them for all they had done. I had seen the way they treated my people. I had seen the way they pillaged my land. I had seen the way they had desecrated everything that we as Jews had held sacred and holy. I hated them. And I compared myself in those brief fleeting moments and I thought how much better I am. A Jewish patriot, one who was willing to die for a cause rather than be a mercenary like those Roman soldiers with their fancy uniforms on.

Then I looked at the crowds and, as I compared myself to the crowds, I thought to myself, listen to them; look at them. How easy it is to stand at the foot of the cross or the bottom of a hill and throw taunts, to say the words, to make the comparisons. I wonder what they would be like if they were crucified.

Yes, I made the comparisons, and then I compared myself to this Jesus. No longer did I see myself as better. No longer did I seem good. It was as if a brilliant light shone down and revealed it all to me, although it was the darkest of days. Terribly dark. It was in that moment that I saw myself in Jesus. I knew that Cestas was there; I knew the Romans were there; I knew the crowds were there. But the words, the sounds, the sights,

they all dimmed into the background and it was just Jesus and me. I'll tell you, it was a frightening comparison, an awful comparison, for I saw myself as a sinner. I saw myself as far worse of a criminal than ever they had argued me to be. I saw myself as the ugliest I had ever seen.

It is called repentance, you know. It was a change. I was going one direction and now I was going another direction - a switch, an about face. I had to speak. I had to say something. The first thing I thought that came to my mind was to Cestas and I told him to shut up. "Cestas, what are you doing saying these words to Jesus? We're criminals; this is obviously an innocent man. Who are we to compare? Be quiet."

But then I had to speak to Jesus. And so the conversation began. I turned to him and said, "Jesus." Jesus!

You know that, when you read the New Testament, he is sometimes called Rabbi and he is sometimes called Teacher. He is sometimes called Jesus of Nazareth; he is sometimes called Jesus the Son of God; he is often called Lord; but only once, in all the Bible, did anyone ever simply call him "Jesus." And I was the one. Only once ever recorded, and I was the one. There has been a lot of speculation about that. There are some who say that I had read the sign on the cross, that when I saw the sign that said, This is Jesus, the King of the Jews, I knew what to call him. There are others, though, who say that I was from Nazareth, that I grew up with Jesus, that we were boyhood friends, and in the streets of Nazareth he called me Dismiss and I called him Jesus. They say it had been years and years since we had seen one another, but now the dying man used the same title as the playing boy and I called him, simply, Jesus. The answer - I'm going to hold you in suspense for the answer. Someday, though, someday when we meet in the marketplace of heaven, you ask me and I'll tell you the answer for sure, but that was not the most significant of all.

Most significant of all was the beginning of that conversation when I simply prayed the shortest, littlest, prayer that I could come out with. I said, "Jesus, Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Now, I didn't have a lot of faith. My faith was a tiny little speck, but I had faith. Oh, I had faith. I didn't say, Jesus, remember me IF you come into your kingdom. I said, Jesus, remember me WHEN you come into your kingdom. Because I believed he was not just a king of A kingdom, I believed he was the king of THE kingdom.

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." I didn't have anything much to offer, just a little bit of faith; no good works. I couldn't give him money, I didn't have any. In fact, as you know from the crucifixion, I had been stripped naked.

Completely naked. So I didn't even have what the poorest of you might have. I had nothing at all to pay.

Good works? Well, I protested too much a moment ago. I was a criminal. I had robbed; I had killed; I had broken law upon law. Good works? I had no time left for good works. There was no place for me to go; there was nothing for me to do. Baptism? I had never been baptized. Church member? I had never been a member of a church, never had I even gone to a church. None of those things that sometimes people count to be the important stuff, the important matters to get merit with God.

It was later on in the Bible that the words were written, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." But I, Dismas, did just that. I called. I called on the name of Jesus to be saved. The word that I used means "think kindly of me, think graciously of me, when you come into your kingdom." I wasn't asking much. But Jesus gave to me far more than I asked.

Now, I'll admit to you that I didn't know him very well then, hardly at all. But I'll also tell you that I've been with him now for almost 2000 years and I know him very, very well. And I will tell you that it is just like Jesus to be asked a little and to give a lot. "Jesus, think kindly of me when you come into your kingdom."

And then he began to speak. Only a sentence, but in it he gave to me all the assurances that

ever I needed. He assured me that he spoke with authority when he said, "I tell you the truth." I could sense his presence, it was unlike the presence of any man before whom I have ever stood before or spoken to or followed. He had a presence about him, the way he spoke, the words that he said. As simple as they were, "I tell you the truth," - it was the authority and confidence of God himself speaking. "I tell you the truth, Dismas." How personal and intimate it was. There

he was, dying for all the sinners of all the world, on his mind was his relationship with the Father, on his mind was his relationship to

all those who were around him, the words he spoke, the infinite variety of thoughts which must have pressed in upon him, but he was concerned about me. He gave individual attention for me. "I tell you the truth, Dismas."

And then he gave me the assurance of instant salvation. He said, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." Today! Not when I had earned it. Not when I had gone through years of purgatory to be prepared. Not after some lengthy interim soul sleep, but today. Here I had the opportunity to exchange a cross for paradise today. "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

The word that he said was 'paradesos'. He actually said that word. It is kind of like your English word. It is a word that the Persians first coined that came over into many languages, including Greek and then into Hebrew and eventually into English, as well. The Persians used it to refer to a garden that was enclosed in walls. It was kind of the idea that there were all the difficulties of the world roundabout, but here was a garden of luxury all contained in walls. Safe and secure, luxurious and magnificent - paradise. It was what was being offered to me that very day.

At the time, I was overjoyed, but I had not yet begun to understand what paradise is all about. For 20 centuries now, paradise has been my home. I've had a mansion there; I've walked on the streets; I've talked with the people. I've

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asked them how they got there, and everyone has given me precisely the same answer. They say, “Dismas, if anyone ought to know, you ought to know, because it was at Calvary’s cross that my place in paradise was bought.”

Let me tell you what it’s like. I can’t tell you what it’s like. You know the way Paul wrote to the Corinthians and he said it is indescribable. A man can’t utter a description of what heaven is like. He is right. There are no words I can speak; you just wouldn’t understand the analogies, the comparisons, the vocabulary. All I can tell you is that it is so good. It is so joyful. It is so happy. It is so rich. Those words just don’t make it. It is paradise. It’s paradise!

Ahh, but Jesus said, “Today you will be with ME in paradise.” That is another lesson I learned that I didn’t fully understand back then. You see, it is being with Jesus that makes paradise paradise. Being with him in paradise that day and every day. Paradise! Yes, that is my home now, and soon I must go back to that home from which I have come to share with you. But I am looking forward to meeting you there. I am looking forward to the time when we’ll be able to cross paths on the street, when I’ll be able to take you down the little lane where I live. We’ll be able to visit you in your mansion, as well.

You’re coming, aren’t you? I mean, coming to paradise. Oh, surely you’re coming to paradise! Don’t be like Cestas. Poor Cestas. On the cross he was equal distance to the Christ as I, but he chose sin. He rejected forgiveness. He said “no” to paradise.

Let me tell you, maybe you’re wondering, I hear some people do, maybe you wonder if, perchance, there is no way ever you could go to paradise. Oh, I have good news for you. Because if the likes of Dismas can get into paradise, a sinner like me, then there is no doubt at all that a sinner like you can make it to paradise, as well.

You wonder how? You want to know the way? I’ll tell you. Just do as I did. Come in simple faith. You don’t have to understand it all, hardly did I understand it. It isn’t because of the good things you’ve done or the money you have or baptism or church membership or any of those

kinds of things. It’s simple faith and repentance. It’s turning from going away from Jesus and making an about face and going the way of Jesus.

It’s simple faith and repentance and prayer. I don’t know that the words are what matter as much as the conclusion of the heart. I prayed, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Whatever your prayer, a sinner like you, a sinner like me, you can turn to this same Jesus in faith and repentance and prayer, and you, too, can come to be with Jesus forever in paradise.

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