

Gospel and Persecution

Outline

1. Blessed are you **when** (and not if) you are persecuted
2. Blessed are you **only** if you are persecuted because of Jesus
3. Blessed are you **when** you are persecuted, **and** your life glorifies God
4. Blessedness comes by **beholding** Jesus crucified and **identifying** with Him

1. Blessed are you **when** (and not if) you are persecuted

Matt 5:3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

*Matt 5:10-11 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are you **when** people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.*

The beatitudes in Matt 5 are the values of the Kingdom of God. They are opposite to the values of the world. They are the heart of what it is to be a Christian. First, if people are self-sufficient and self-righteous, they will never understand how much they need a Saviour and will not believe the gospel.

- So, only people who are poor in spirit will believe and become true Christians and enter the kingdom of heaven—which is the first beatitude (Matt 5:3).
- And out of their poverty of spirit, they will mourn for their sinful life—the second beatitude (Matt 5:4),
- It will cause them to be meek and not proud—third beatitude (Matt 5:5)
- And will hunger to grow in righteousness—the fourth beatitude (Matt 5:6)
- However, they often failed to be righteous and would have tasted God's mercy and encouragement. Therefore, true Christians would tend to be merciful to others—the fifth beatitude (Matt 5:7)
- Having tasted God's unfailing love, they will love others—which is the heart of God. So, they become pure in heart—the sixth beatitude (Matt 5:8).
- They can display God's heart when conflict arises, thus becoming peacemakers.

The most significant conflict is that we are enemies of God. But God takes the initiative to make peace with us through the gospel of Jesus Christ. As believers, God calls us to preach the gospel and become ministers of reconciliation between God and man—the seventh beatitude (Matt 5:9)

These are the values of a faithful Christian. The world will misunderstand them because theirs are the opposite. A Christian will eventually face persecution for our Lord Jesus, the King in God's Kingdom (Matt 5:10-11).

Notice that the first and the last beatitude have the same blessedness of being in God's kingdom and belonging to a faithful Christian.

Persecution, therefore, is a biblical guarantee for a faithful Christian. Paul says, *"In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Tim 3:12).* Jesus says, *"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first...If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:18, 20).* So, **when** you are hated and persecuted because of Jesus, pray hard for grace to humbly embrace it as part of being His disciple. Even Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane when He faced the ultimate persecution of death on the cross.

2. Blessed are you only when you are persecuted because of Jesus

*Matt 5:11 Blessed are you **when** people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you **because of me.***

A young born-again Christian was working in a commercial company. He began to witness Jesus during his working hours in the office. His manager sacked him. The Christian said they persecuted him because of Jesus. I told him no. They persecuted him because of his lousy working habits and not because of Jesus. During office working hours, he should be working and not witnessing. He could preach the gospel as much as he wanted after office working hours.

There was an Indian pastor who baptised many non-Christians and put photos of their baptism on social media. Soon afterwards, he was beaten. Was it because

of Jesus or because of himself? You can answer that yourself.

1 Peter 4:15 says, *"If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a **meddler**".* What's a meddler? Meddlers interfere in other people's affairs in an inappropriate, insensitive, and often abrasive manner. And, generally, without love, humility and understanding. Then, when people oppose them, they feel persecuted. But for their own sake, **not** for Jesus' sake. They are not blessed.

3. Blessed are you when you are persecuted, and your life glorifies God

Recently in India, I read about a police officer who defended a Christian pastor falsely charged with a crime by a group of non-Christians. The police department immediately transferred the police officer and explained that it was a routine transfer. But we all knew they persecuted the police officer because he stood up for righteousness. And we admired him and praised God for his character. *1Pet*

2:20 *But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.*

Finding out whether people are persecuting you for Jesus's or your own sake is by being the salt and light of the world.

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:13-16)

Some people will look at your life and faith and persecute you. Others will look at that same life, admire you, and "glorify your Father in heaven." Some non-Christians will be hostile to you, while others will respect your life as a Christian. I know of some Indian Hindu politicians that prefer Christian secretaries known for their righteousness.

Here are some ways to test ourselves:

- If people persecute us, but few or none are attracted to Jesus through us, then perhaps people are persecuting us for our own sake (for our un-Christlike behaviour) and not because of Jesus.
- If people never persecute us, we may be compromising, or we may be too quiet about our faith.
- But if we are persecuted and yet some people find our behaviour attractive and Christlike, then we should rejoice because we are persecuted for Jesus' sake. This will result in us being blessed.

Here are four cases, with the best case first and the worst case last.

- (i) Some preach the gospel with love and in a very culturally sensitive way. They bear good fruit. People also persecute them for Jesus' sake. But they are blessed. This is the best case.
- (ii) Some Christians preach without love and sensitivity. They will be persecuted, partly for Jesus' sake but partly for their own sake.
- (iii) Many others are very loving without preaching the uncompromised gospel—but that is man-pleasing and a waste of time and energy. It will bring no fruit.

(iv) One of the most disturbing things about churches is when they are not preaching the gospel. They neither see persecution nor attraction. That's the worst case.

4. Blessedness comes by beholding Jesus crucified and identifying with Him

However, persecution because of gospel preaching is never pleasant but involves suffering and severe pain. So, how can a persecuted Christian be "blessed"? The answer is: **By beholding God's love for us.**

1 John 3:1 says, "*Behold what manner of love the Father has given unto us that we should be called sons of God, and that is what we are*". How do we behold God's infinite love? By beholding Jesus on the cross. He lived the life we should have lived but didn't. Then He paid the price we should have paid for our sinful life but couldn't. He went on the cross to save us from a perishing world of sin, misery and death that He conquered by rising from the dead. He did it because He loved us first. He makes us God's children and part of a new creation that will never perish. This is the gospel.

When we **behold** God's infinite love for us displayed in Christ Jesus on the cross, His love starts to take root in us. Then we will find the motivation to love God more than to love this perishing world. We will be willing to identify with Jesus, His Cross, and His gospel. Take the example of Paul. He rejoiced in his suffering to bring the gospel to the Colossians.

Col 1:24 Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.

Hasn't Christ paid the total price for our sins? So, what is lacking in Christ's afflictions that Paul says must fill up by his suffering for you in his flesh? In one sense, Jesus completed the work of our salvation through His death and resurrection. But in another sense, your salvation is incomplete until you hear and believe the gospel. (*Rom 10:14 And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?*).

And if it takes my suffering (persecution) to bring the gospel to you, I will gladly embrace that suffering. Because in my heart, I have beheld God's love for me by what Jesus did for me, and I will gladly do it for you to complete the circuit. One pastor said, "*Christ suffered to accomplish salvation; we suffer to spread*

salvation." Suffering is the means God has ordained to bring salvation to the world. Another pastor said, "Life in the world comes through death in the Church."

So, here is a question you must repeatedly ask yourself as you seek to serve Christ. "What will you do for people worldwide to hear the gospel? Because apart from your wounds, they will not listen and not believe the gospel".

End Note:

In 2022-23, Christian pastors, especially in North India, are being beaten daily, their churches burnt or destroyed, and the pastor jailed for preaching the gospel.

Kindly pray for the persecuted church. And also give thanks to God that His gospel is bearing fruit like never before. Hallelujah.

Gospel and Culture

Introduction: Every culture on earth is God-given. But sin distorts every culture, and culture can oppress you instead of displaying God's love and beauty. Today, many Asian people think that Western culture is better than theirs. But that is not true. Western culture has many good things, like cleanliness, good educational institutions and great opportunities for those who work hard. But they also have many problems like racial discrimination against black people, loose morality, unsatisfactory family relationships, etc. Asian culture (including India) has different good and bad things. Many Indians (and other Asians) think the Gospel is of Western origin and say gospel believers adopt Western culture. Unfortunately, the Indian Church has extensively adopted Western culture (including their dress) because Western missionaries believed almost everything here was evil. But the truth is that the Gospel will transform every culture (Eastern or Western) while retaining the beautiful things within that culture. What we need to do is to present Jesus to every culture and let Him transform us. The Gospel is "good news" of God's actions in Jesus Christ. And believing the gospel will transform your life. In Isaiah 54, we will examine two beautiful transformations.

Outline

1. The Gospel gives you a new identity in your heart
2. The Gospel changes the values in your heart

1. The Gospel gives you a new identity in your heart

Isa 54:1-5 "Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labour; because more are the children of

the

desolate woman than of her who has a husband," says the LORD. Enlarge the place

of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back, lengthen your cords, and strengthen your stakes. 3 For you will spread out to the right and to the left; your descendants will dispossess nations and settle in their

desolate cities. 4 "Do not be afraid; you will not be put to shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth and

*remember no more the reproach of your widowhood. 5 **For your Maker is your husband** — the LORD Almighty is his name — the Holy One of Israel is your*

Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth.

To understand this passage, we must know how vital child-bearing was in ancient cultures when farming and cattle breeding was the main occupation. Briefly, the more children you have, the more your family prospered — because:

- More children meant you had more labour to work on your farm; therefore, you had more income and were more successful in the eyes of your society.
- The tribe with more children would conquer the tribe with fewer children.
 - When you become old, your children will look after you. If you wanted three adult children in your old age, you must start with having 8-10 children because many would not survive.

That would put much pressure on women to produce children. And if they were barren (childless), they would be worthless according to their culture. In Gen 30:1, Rachel cried to her husband Jacob to give her children, or she would die. She illustrated a fundamental principle that if you build your identity and self-worth on anything outside God and don't get it, you will face mental and social death.

In the Bible, written at least 2000 years ago, we don't read of women with

weight

problems because their identity mainly depends on the number of children, not their figure. In general, whether you are a man or woman:

- Old cultures say that your worth (identity) depends on your family or caste.
- Modern culture or City Culture says that your worth (identity) depends upon your looks, money, accomplishments etc

But every culture, whether Ancient or Modern, Eastern or Western, City or

Rural,

puts pressure on you to build your identity on something or the other. And every culture forces you to fit in and seek approval from others. It is "**almost impossible**" when everybody goes after these objects not to go along with them. But the good news (Gospel) is something **completely different**. It gives you valuable self-worth apart from your cultural pressure, NOW!

In Isa 54:1-4, God says He will give you beauty, honour, self-worth, identity etc., apart from what is valuable in your culture. And how does He do that? — "*Your maker is your husband*" (Isa 54:5).

Consider a usual marriage. A moment **before** you take your wedding vows, your status is single. The moment **after** you take your wedding vows, your status changes completely. You're married. And if your husband is a great man, your significance is automatically upgraded. But the Gospel offers you something no religion or culture can offer. The moment you commit to Jesus as your Saviour

and Lord, **God joins you to Him**, and you have the delight of your Maker. God delights in you just like a husband delights in his bride.

So, God says, "Don't look to anyone and anything else for self-worth. I am your value. What value can you have more than what I give you? Don't seek value from anything that the world gives you".

Now that you are free from the pressure forced upon you by your birth culture, you can start loving it. All cultures contain something beautiful. But your birth culture will not oppress you anymore by its expectations to fit in. **The identity** you once got from fulfilling those cultural expectations is not essential anymore to you. It is not number one in your heart. Instead, you base your identity on your relationship with God (*Your Maker is your husband*)—and that identity is now number one in your heart. So, the Gospel gives your heart a new identity. You can live in your birth culture and enjoy its beauty, but it won't enslave you anymore.

2. The Gospel changes the values of your heart

Isa 54:11-12 Afflicted city, lashed by storms and not comforted, I will rebuild you with stones of turquoise, your foundations with lapis lazuli. 12 I will make

your

battlements of rubies, your gates of sparkling jewels, and all your walls of precious stones. Now, Isa 54 has two pictures of redemption:

- A barren woman singing for joy (*Isa 54:1-5*), which we have already discussed
- The afflicted city rebuilt with beauty and perfection— *Isa 54:11-12*. We will discuss it below.

Such a city never existed in history, so where do we find such a city? We see it in the Book of Revelation at the end of this age. Such a city comes down from heaven (*Rev 21:1-5, 10-21*). It tells us that God will recreate the world how He wants it to be. And He invites us to participate in that project by preaching the Gospel. It is through the Gospel that we are a new creation.

2 Cor 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

But God does not use the wise and strong of the world; instead, He uses weak and humble people to build His kingdom.

1 Cor 1:26-27 Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; few were of noble birth. 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame

the wise and the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

Our Lord Jesus achieved our salvation through the weakness of the cross, which is the complete opposite of worldly values. On the cross, God openly demonstrates His love and intention to transform us from self-seeking, proud people to new people that will have His heart and values. When we believe in Jesus, He transforms our hearts—He gives us a new heart with new values. Race, caste and class, superiority, money, power, beauty, hunger for popularity and recognition—all these things are values of the world and opposite of the values of people changed by the *Gospel*. Such a changed person will view life differently:

- They will look at people of other races, classes, professions, and castes and will look at them as brothers and sisters of the same human race that God created.
- They will have cultural freedom because they don't make their culture an idol.
- They will look at money differently because it no longer gives significance and security.
- They will pour out their lives to bring about, bit by bit, the city that God is building and will eventually complete at the end of this age.

Ref: Tim Keller's Sermon on Isa 54

Gospel and Dignity of Work

Outline

1. Introduction
2. Gospel and your Work
3. The Doctrine of Work and the Dignity of Work
4. Doctrine of Work & Discipleship
5. Doctrine of Work and Priesthood of all Believers
6. Doctrine of Work and Authority in Work
7. Conclusion

1. Introduction: Many Christians have faulty views of their daily work at home or where they earn a living (office, factory, farm, services, etc).

- They think only church ministry members do real "spiritual" work.
 - They think working at home or in their workplace to earn a living is not as important as volunteering to help in Sunday School or go on a mission trip because only then would they do something really "spiritual".
 - They think the church ministers are serving God and powerfully pleasing God, whereas those who earn a livelihood in their workplace serve themselves and do not please God so much.

Now, volunteering to conduct Sunday School or go on a mission trip is always a blessing, but to think that their work at home or in their workplace is less important or less spiritual is just not true — because it goes against the gospel

2. Gospel and your Work

For Martin Luther, the revelation of the Gospel in Jesus set him free of the guilt of sin and brought him rest and peace in his relationship with God. And as he meditated on the gospel, he began to teach the **Doctrine of Work** in church, state, and family, transformed society during his time (around 1530 AD) and can transform our present Christian culture.

Before Luther, the church taught that certain works in life were more holy than others. They said that the priest, monk and nun were in a better position than a farmer to go to heaven because the priest, monk and nun served God, whereas the farmer served only himself. But Luther said everybody is a sinner and needs a Saviour (Jesus); salvation is only by faith in Jesus. Luther used the term "vocation" (calling) for every work that a Christian might be engaged like a farmer, mother, wife, cobbler, cook, director, driver, accountant, pastor etc., and all have

equal standing before God based on salvation by faith alone and not by works (the gospel).

The Gospel removed the difference between sacred and secular work because it taught that one's work, whether inside or outside, never determined one's salvation. We receive salvation only by faith in Jesus as our Saviour and Lord—the Gospel.

Now, when God declares a sinner is righteous *apart from works*, he is free to perform good works in every area of his life: in church, in the home or the workplace (office, factory, farm or services).

Eph 2:8-10 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

3. The Doctrine of Work and the Dignity of Work. When we pray "Give us this day our daily bread", in the Lord's prayer, Luther argued that the farmer ploughed his field and produced the wheat that the carriage driver brought to the worker at the mill who grinds the grain into flour, which the baker made into bread, which the grocer sold to the community. Therefore, he said that all the workers in the food chain—the farmer, the driver, the miller, the baker, and the grocer, were part of how God gives us our daily bread.

We can truly say that the term "bread" can include every human necessity, like housing and sanitation, food and clothing, education, entertainment, governance, the justice system, etc. God is using all workers in these professions to provide our daily necessities. Though **hidden**, God was behind everything and every job, so Luther concluded that they all wear the "masks of God" just as those who provide our spiritual food like in ministry do.

When Christians work, this one thing alone should motivate us that we serve and benefit others in all that we do, And when we do it with faith, excellence, hard work and joy in our heart to help our neighbour — we reflect the goodness and provision of God in all our work.

✓

Mothers work to keep a well-kept home for their family.

✓

Fathers works to provide daily necessities for his family.

✓

Farmers provide wheat for their community.

✓

Drivers carry wheat to bakers, who bake bread for the community.

✓ Labourers provide buildings and houses for the community

✓

Police provide safety for the community

✓

Soldiers protect the community

✓

Judges and the courts provide justice for the community

✓

Pastors provide scriptural food and counsel to the community

Luther said, *"God does not need your good works, but your neighbour does."*

We also sin in our place of work when we insist on being served rather than serving, loving ourselves rather than our neighbours.

But as we hear God's word, the Holy Spirit convicts us, and we repent. God forgives us and sends us back into the world with all its trials to live a life of faith, love and serve our neighbours, be holy, display Christ in our character, and glorify God. **The gospel must shape our hearts to serve our neighbour with the gifts God has given us.**

4. Doctrine of Work & Discipleship

Pastor Nicky Gumble of London spoke of a lady who operated the cash counter in the local supermarket. She always had the longest queue of shoppers to pay their bills at her counter than on other counters. Because she did her work with kindness, genuinely asking each shopper about their health, their family etc. and said she would pray for them. Her service attracted shoppers, who didn't mind standing in long queues to pay their bills.

The entire community attended her funeral when she died because she had made a difference in their lives. She believed God had called her to work at the cash counter, and she did her job cheerfully and excellently. She served her community, displaying the character of Christ there. We would call her a good disciple of Christ.

Likewise, a mother of four young children, wiping their snotty noses, changing their diapers, keeping home etc., should not wonder whether she is serving Christ there — she is! Especially when she is always loving them, disciplining them and eventually teaching them the ways of God as they grow up.

In 2 Kings 5, we read how the prophet Elisha miraculously healed the enemy commander Namaan of leprosy. But the young Israelite servant girl, whom the enemy had captured and made to serve Namaan's wife, played a significant role in encouraging Namaan to meet Elisha, obey his instructions, and receive his miraculous healing (2Kings 5:2-3, 13). This young servant girl did not sulk at her position of being a captive and a servant of the enemy, but she encouraged her

master to humble himself before Israel's prophet. I believe she pleased the God of Israel.

But some young men today excuse their poor work habits at their workplace because they think evangelism matters more. Then they are not disciples.

5. Doctrine of Work and Priesthood of all Believers:

In Luther's time (1530 AD), Western society had three social classes of people:

- Priests, monks and nuns prayed and took vows of chastity (no sex, remaining single), poverty, and obedience. People considered them more holy than the others.
- Kings and warriors ruled the state and fought in wars.
- Labourers worked. But were uneducated.

But Luther said prayer is for every believer, not just for the priestly class. The state is for all its citizens, not just for the kings. Work is for everyone, not just for labourers. If they want to, family is for everyone, including the priestly class.

Everyone prays. Everyone rules in their sphere of responsibility. Everyone works.

Everybody wanted to read God's Word. So, Luther and his followers started schools, and so, education flourished.

Educated labourers moved up the social ladder and would eventually govern themselves.

Workers, who loved and served their customers with excellence and hard work, found financial success.

At their workplace, Christians embraced new opportunities God was calling them. Thus, Luther's teachings brought enormous social transformation. **So, proper preaching of the gospel will prosper society.**

6. Doctrine of Work and Authority in Work

Responsibility accompanies authority and vice versa. And God establishes all lawful authority.

Rom 13:1-2 Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. 2 Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

In the church, the elders have the authority of God's Word.

The person himself does not carry the authority, but the person's office has the authority. In all cases, authority at work does not matter who gets to boss whom.

But all those who exercise authority must exercise it in love and service to those in their sphere of responsibility.

Matt 20:25-28 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 26 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wants to be first must be your slave — 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Gene Edward Veith writes, "This self-sacrificial love is the foundation of Christian authority. It allows for no tyranny. A husband is not called to hurt, use, or brutalise his wife. Rather, he is called to love and serve her by giving himself up for her sanctification (Eph 5:26). Parents are not called to harm their children or even provoke them to anger but rather to "bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4).

Earthly rulers, too, are to exercise their office in love and service to their subjects. According to Romans 13, earthly rulers are called to protect the innocent and punish wrongdoers. A ruler who protects wrongdoers and punishes the innocent has no call — and thus no authority — from God.

God is hidden in vocations that bear authority. But that puts the pressure on the human being who exercises that authority to act with God's justice and grace."

7. Conclusion

"The Christian life is to be lived in the work that God has called us, in the seemingly ordinary walks of life that take up nearly all the hours of our day. The Christian life is to be lived out in our family, work, community and church. Such things seem ordinary, but this is because of our blindness. God is present in them and us in a mighty, though hidden, way." (Gene Edward Veith)

There is dignity in all our work in our journey with God to become like Christ. So, let us work with faith, love, and excellence to serve our neighbour and glorify God.

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Gospel at the Cross (1) — 4 Responses to Redemption

Outline

1. Spiritual Battle for our Redemption

(a) Darkness (Luke 23:44-45)

(b) Torn Curtain (Luke 23:45)

2. Four Responses to Redemption (Redemption is setting free from slavery)

(i) Centurion — the unclean and hated Gentile person (Luke 23:47)

(ii) Women — the lowly social persons (Luke 23:49)

(iii) Penitent Criminal — the despised evil person (Luke 23:32-43)

(iv) Joseph of Arimathea — the highly esteemed wealthy person (Luke 23:50-53)

1. Spiritual Battle for our Redemption *Luke 23:44-48* It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, 45 for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the Temple was torn in two. 46 Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last. ...48 When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away.

(a) Darkness (Luke 23:44-45, 48): This was not a solar eclipse. The Jews observed a lunar calendar, and Passover always fell on a full moon. Furthermore, the darkness lasted for three hours, making a solar eclipse impossible from noon to 3 pm (v44). It was supernatural darkness. It symbolises two things:

- God's wrath on Jesus. Jesus took humanity's sin upon Himself and suffered God's wrath for our sake. Many bystanders beat their breasts in mourning because they knew Jesus was innocent. (The Old Testament prophesied about it in *Amos 8:9-10* *In that day," declares the Sovereign LORD, "I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. 10 I will turn your religious festivals into mourning and all your singing into weeping. I will make all of you wear sackcloth and shave your heads. I will make that time like mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day).*

- Satan uses all his evil dark forces to defeat God's plan for Redemption (Jesus says in *Luke 22:53*, "This is the hour when darkness reigns")

(b) The curtain of the Temple was torn in two (Luke 23:45). According to Jewish history, the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies was four-inch-thick, 30 feet high and 60 feet long. And Matthew tells us that it was torn from top to bottom (*Matt 27:51*), indicating four things:

- God tore the curtain, starting from the top and ending at the bottom.
- The Temple is no longer the centre of God's worship (*John 4:21-24*).
- We can approach God directly through Jesus' atoning death (*Heb 9-10*)
- Jesus wins the Cosmic Battle for our Redemption (slavery from sin).

2. Responses to Redemption (Redemption means setting free from slavery to sin — see *Deut 7:8, Lev 11:45, John 8:34, 36*)

(i) Centurion — the unclean and hated Gentile person. *Luke 23:47 The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man". He also declared, "Surely this man was the Son of God" (Matt 27:54 and Mark 15:39).* So, the centurion wasn't just saying Jesus was merely innocent, and it was so sad they crucified him. But he declared that Jesus was the righteous Son of God. His declaration opposed that of the Jews who disowned the Holy and Righteous One (*Acts 3:14*).

The centurion was a high-ranking officer of Roman forces that occupied Israel.

In the eyes of the Jews, he was an unclean Gentile and an oppressor. Yet, God opened his eyes to see what happened at the cross and responded with reverent awe and belief in Jesus, the righteous Son of God.

(ii) Women were lowly social persons. *Luke 23:49,55-56 But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things... ..55The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. 56 Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.*

In the Middle Eastern culture at that time, women were social outsiders. Society excluded them from social power, and their testimony was invalid in court. But Jesus respects them. The Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well was the first evangelist, and Mary Magdalene was the first to witness and announce the resurrection of Jesus. At the very end, when most of the male disciples (excluding John) have forsaken Jesus, the women are the only ones still following Him.

(iii) Penitent Criminal — the despised evil person *Luke 23:32-33, 39-43* Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. 33 When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left... .. 39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" 40 But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." 42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43 Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

The Romans executed criminals by crucifixion for major crimes like murder. So, both the criminals on either side of Jesus were evil men. Society despised such bad people. Yet, when the penitent criminal, just before dying, admitted his crimes, turned to Jesus and acknowledged Him as the Righteous King (vv 41-42), Jesus promised him instant salvation.

(iv) Joseph of Arimathea — the highly esteemed wealthy person: *Luke 23:50-53* Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, 51 who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea, and he himself was waiting for the kingdom of God. 52 Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. 53 Then he took it

down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid.

John 19:39 He was accompanied by **Nicodemus**, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds.

In the gospels, when Jesus meets a religious leader, influential person, or moral person, they oppose Him. But every time Jesus meets a person the world calls a failure or a loser, they respond to Jesus, and He embraces them.

Yet, when it comes to Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, two upright men of the highly esteemed and wealthy members of the Sanhedrin (Jewish Council), they seem to find favour with God. **Why are they exceptions?** Because salvation is by grace alone, by faith alone, in Christ alone. **This is the gospel—the good news!** Therefore, being an outsider or an insider, being rich or poor, being good or bad, being high caste or outcaste — our moral performance, our social status—none matter! None can earn salvation because Jesus' salvation is

strictly by grace alone that you receive by faith alone. We see everybody on the same level at the foot of the cross — all sinners whose only hope of salvation is by faith in a gracious Divine Saviour, Jesus Christ. Nothing else!

But we also notice a pattern. When it comes to the gospel, generally: women respond to it before men,

people at the bottom of the social ladder respond to it before those at the top,

laypeople respond to it before the priests.

Why so? Because Jesus tries to tell us that success, high social status, power, or wealth will generally draw our focus more towards the world than God. It will drive us toward what we can accomplish ourselves rather than our dependency on Him. From birth, our parents, teachers, media, and society influence us with worldly values — be beautiful, outstanding, intelligent, wealthy, etc. But the value of God's kingdom is "*be poor in spirit*". In other words, the poor can't make worldly standards, so they need God desperately.

When Jesus came on the scene, He began preaching: "*Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand*". By "repent", He means, "Stop. Stop. Stop the way you are going. You are going along the way of the world. The kingdom of God is near, and if you don't stop and turn around, you will entirely miss the kingdom of God".

Jesus is **not** on the side of the failures because they are failures.

Jesus is **not** on the side of the poor because they are poor.

Jesus is **not** on the side of the outcast because they are outcasts.

But, the entrance to the kingdom of God and the way of salvation is such that women respond to it before men; people at the bottom of society tend to respond to it before those at the top. Jesus says, "*So the last will be first, and the first will be last (Matt 20:16, Mark 10:31, Luke 13:30)*". Jesus means that those first and highly esteemed by the world are blinded by it and find it hard to be spiritually aware of God's kingdom. At the same time, those who are the least and last in the world are the first to become aware of God's kingdom and salvation. **It will always happen that way everywhere in the world.** It is happening in India right now. The Dalit (outcaste) responds to the kingdom of God before the Brahmin (highest caste). And most high-caste Hindus think that Christianity is a "Dalit" religion. The way of salvation is such that the last (the Dalit) will be the first to see it, and the first (the Brahmin) will be the last to see it. But there are exceptions!

And Joseph of Arimathea, a highly esteemed and wealthy member of the Jewish Council, was an exception because he was waiting for the kingdom of God (Luke 23:50-53). When he noticed something of it in Jesus, he went boldly to Pilate. He asked for the body of Jesus to bury in a particular tomb. Nicodemus accompanied him (John 19:39). In the face of widespread rejection of Jesus (Luke 23:10-11, 18, 21, 23, 35-36), both Joseph and Nicodemus did not seek to please men but sought to please God.

So, here is another principle for us. *Luke 14:33* *In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.* So, the essence of discipleship is a total commitment to Him. It involves holding the things of this world loosely—wealth, reputation, social status, accomplishments etc. It involves not holding them tightly to find identity in them. **A disciple's identity is fully realised only as a child of God through the gospel.** We must keep all other things at a distance. If we fail here, it will lead us to spiritual blindness.

Therefore, Jesus gives clear instructions to his disciples in *Mark 9:35* *Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."* Jesus demonstrated this **by washing His disciple's feet** in John 13. He said, *"Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them" (John 13:17).* Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were highly esteemed and wealthy. But they held their wealth, reputation and social status lightly. They did not keep it as their identity. Therefore, they could see, enter, and go for the kingdom of God.

End Note: I mentioned, **"A disciple's identity is fully realised only as a child of God through the gospel"**. Christians should build one another up to see themselves as chosen children of God. This will please our Father in Heaven.

Ps 16:2-3 *I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good*

thing." 3 I say of the holy people who are in the land, "They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight."

Reference: Tim Keller's Sermon on Luke 23

Gospel at the Cross (2) — Two Criminal Responses

Outline

1. The First Criminal — his words and meaning
2. The Second Criminal — his words and meaning
3. Jesus' response to the Second Criminal — His words and meaning

Introduction: I remember the time, many years ago, when, as a new Christian, I met a wealthy Hindu gentleman and a Christian missionary. The Hindu asked, "How can it be that a very evil man, when he is about to die, should say sorry to Jesus and Jesus would forgive him and take him to heaven?" The Christian missionary answered, "Because Jesus is wonderful!" The answer did not convince the Hindu because it needed processing. I will try to process it here by comparing the last words spoken by the two criminals and Jesus before all three died by crucifixion.

Read Luke 23:32-47

1. The First Criminal—his words and meaning (Luke 23:39) The first criminal turns to Jesus and says, *"If you are the Christ, save yourself and us."*

(Note: Christ or Christos in Greek means Messiah in Hebrew. It means Anointed One and Chosen One)

The first criminal joins the unbelieving crowd and soldiers around the cross, mocking Jesus (Luke 23:35-39). They all said, "If you are the Messiah and King, save yourself." The glorious truth is that Jesus is the Messiah and King. He could save Himself, but He wouldn't be able to save us. He came to save us by dying for us in our place. It's the Gospel, the good news.

But the first criminal didn't fear God, had no sorrow for his sinful life, and couldn't see Jesus's innocence. The second criminal rebuked him for all that (Luke 23:40-41 *But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."*)

The first criminal uses the language of a self-centred person in v39. He says to Jesus, "Can't you see I am suffering and about to die an excruciating death? So, **IF** you are what you claim to be, then get me out of here". Millions of unbelievers say something very similar. They may say, "**IF** you are indeed God, get me out of my troubles. But **IF** you don't do what I ask, then I am not interested in you." God will not answer them because of their self-centeredness. A problematic word

they use in their prayer is "IF". The moment they use the word "IF" shows their centre is themselves, and God is on the outside at their beck and call. There is no humility, no acknowledgement of sin in their lives and no fear of God. Of course, Jesus did not answer the first criminal.

[However, I have come across some people who used the word "IF" and said to God, "IF you are truly who You say You are, answer my prayer, and I will follow You." And God answered their prayer, and they followed Him. To these people, God knew the sincerity in their hearts to follow God as King of their life. And answered them.]

When believers adopt a similar attitude, they are testing God. They, too, are self-centred and will also get **no** answer. And when they make this a habit, they will make **no** progress in their walk with God and their spiritual life. They are ungrateful for what Jesus has done for them on the cross. Therefore, always be grateful for what Jesus has done for you on the cross and always remember to include thanksgiving in your prayers (Phil 4:6-7, 1 Thess 5:16-18).

*Phil 4:6-7 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, **with thanksgiving**, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*

*1 Thess 5:16-18 Rejoice always, 17 pray continually, 18 **give thanks in all circumstances**; this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

2. The Second Criminal — his words and meaning: Luke 23:41-42 *We are punished justly for getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." 42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

The second criminal acknowledges that he is a very sinful man and deserves his punishment. But he doesn't ask for relief. Instead, he believes Jesus to be innocent of wrongdoing, and Jesus has a kingdom, so He is a king (v42). All he wants is to be in Jesus' kingdom. The second criminal realised he was self-centred

and had done horrible things his entire life. Now he wants to replace the centre of his life with Jesus as King. He doesn't use the word "IF" like the first criminal.

He understands what many don't, that throughout his life, with himself as the centre; it got him into big trouble. He is fed up with that kind of self-centred living. So, he humbles himself and asks Jesus to be the King of his life. Jesus is not just a Saviour that wants to get you out of the mess you got into because you want to be in the centre of your life. **Jesus can only get you out of your confusion**

when you make Him your King. The world is a mess because we are self-centred people. Unless you replace your old self with Jesus as Lord in the centre of your life, you will not get to see nor enter the kingdom of God where there is righteousness, peace and joy (Rom 14:17).

3. Jesus' response to the Second Criminal — His words and meaning: *Luke 23:43 Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

When the second criminal accepts Jesus as Lord, Jesus takes him into His kingdom. On what basis could Jesus do this?

Because judgment for our sins fell upon Jesus on the cross—symbolised by supernatural darkness covering the land. (vv 44-45 *It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, 45 for the sun*

stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two). For further notes, read *Gospel at the Cross* — 1.

The second criminal asks Jesus, "Remember me". Instead, Jesus answers, "You will be with me." This means the second criminal will enjoy heaven with Jesus.

But there's more to it. The Bible explains in the following verses:

Eph 2:1-9 *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were, by nature, deserving of wrath. 4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive **with Christ** even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. 6 And God raised us up **with Christ** and seated us **with him** in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.*

We deserved the wrath of God (v3), but God raised us **with Christ** and seated us **with Him** in heaven (v6).

Raising and seated us **with** Him means we enjoy what Jesus enjoys — the incredible love within the Trinity. We receive all this when we accept Jesus as Saviour and Lord, irrespective of our sinful past.

John 15:9 [Jesus says] "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love."

John 17:23 [Jesus says, "You, Father] have loved them even as you have loved me".

Rom 8:16-18 *The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. 17 Now, if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. 18 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*

We become God's children when we receive Jesus as our Saviour and Lord. God will not judge us. Instead, He now becomes our helper. There is an inward sense of sonship (v16) by which we can call Him Abba Father. There is the promise of present and future inheritance. But just like our elder brother Jesus, we will receive the cross and the crown that the gospel promises (v17). The way of the cross is the only path to the glory awaiting "co-heirs **with Christ**." The Gospel means strength for trials, not escape from them. However, through all the trials as Christians, we remain confident that we are God's children.

A.W. Tozer (1897-1963) writes, "Our great honour lies in being just what Jesus was and is — to be accepted by those who accept him, rejected by all who reject him, loved by those who love him and hated by everyone who hates him. What greater glory could come to any man?"

End Notes:

"**The Skull**" is the crucifixion site (Luke 23:33). In Aramaic, it is called Golgotha, which means the place of the Skull (Matt 27:33, Mark 15:22, John 19:17). The English term "Calvary" comes from the Latin word "Calvaria", which also means "The Skull". The name "The Skull" is probably because the Romans used it as a place of execution, or perhaps the mount looked like a skull. The exact location remains to be discovered to this day.

"**Paradise**." Luke 23:43 may refer to the "New Creation" (Isa 51:3) as recreating a type of the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:8-10). But paradise refers to eternal life beyond the grave (2 Cor 12:4).