

MATTHEW 27:42

ONE THING JESUS COULD NOT DO

“He saved others; He cannot save himself.”¹

Boisterous, mocking religious men surrounded the cross. Laughing at the helpless man hanging suspended between life and death, they belched out vile, venomous scorn. Among the taunts they hurled at Him as He gasped for breath was a reminder of His mission on earth. Privately, He had testified to His disciples immediately before His death that “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” [LUKE 19:10]. Publicly, He had enraged the religious elite when He had testified, “I did not come to judge the world but to save the world” [JOHN 12:47]. Now they threw His words in His face, “He saved others; He cannot save Himself.” Of course, they unknowingly spoke the truth.

At His crucifixion, the Lord Jesus took upon Himself all the vile hatred of mankind. Isaiah spoke prophetically of Jesus’ suffering when he wrote,

“Surely He has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed Him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But He was wounded for our transgressions;
He was crushed for our iniquities;
upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with His stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on Him
the iniquity of us all.”

[ISAIAH 53:4-6]

In the final strophe of the sixth verse, Isaiah uses especially strong language. The NET Bible states that, “The LORD caused the sin of all of us to attack Him.” It was not, therefore, only the Jewish religious leaders who caused the Saviour to give His life, but it was the sin of each of us.

Had we not been sinners, it would not have been necessary for the Saviour to give His life as a sacrifice for us. However, we are sinners. Therefore, God did present His Son as our sacrifice. We now see the Saviour as “the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” [see GALATIANS 2:20].

This is Easter Sunday, the day Christians usually set aside to commemorate Christ’s victory over death. For us as Christians, Easter is a celebration of Jesus’ powerful conquest of death. This is a day of hope for all who are born from above and into the Kingdom of God. Together with believers throughout the world, we rejoice in the knowledge of life in the Beloved Son. However, we durst not forget that in order to see the day of conquest, Christ would need experience the pain of death. That is the focus of our study this Easter morning.

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JESUS SAVED OTHERS — The religious leaders that mocked Jesus ridiculed the thought that He saved others. After all, they could not see salvation. Reclining at dinner on one occasion, a notorious sinner crept to the feet of the Master. Standing there, contrasting her woeful condition to the purity of the man stretched out before her, her tears began to fall; and the tears spilling from her eyes wetted His feet. Undoubtedly embarrassed at her emotional display, and having nothing to dry His feet, she unloosed her hair and wiped the tears from His feet with her hair. Having wiped His feet, she anointed His tired feet with an alabaster flask of ointment.

Simon, the Pharisee in whose home Jesus was a guest, watched, bemused at the spectacle and at the fact that the Prophet of Galilee seemed unconcerned by what was happening. He thought to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner” [LUKE 7:39]. However, Jesus was aware of Simon’s inner musing and the critical nature of his thoughts. So, he addressed Simon.

First, Jesus told a parable. “‘A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?’ Simon answered, ‘The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.’ And He said to him, ‘You have judged rightly.’”

Score one for the Pharisee; he knew what was being said in the parable. However, he was not prepared for what would come out of his admission of essential justice. The text continues, “Then turning toward the woman [Jesus] said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.’”

What is important for our meditation this day is what Jesus next said to the woman at His feet. Jesus said to this notorious sinner, “‘Your sins are forgiven.’ Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this, who even forgives sins?’ And He said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace’” [LUKE 7:41-50].

Simon, and all his guests—likely Pharisees all—heard Jesus of Nazareth say that this vile sinner was saved. She came into the house looking like a harlot; she left the house looking like a harlot. Visually, she was despicable in their eyes; yet, Jesus said she was saved.

There was another incident that must have stuck in the memory of those so enraged at Jesus. He had crossed the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum. Upon debarking, some people brought a paralytic. Seeing the unfortunate man, Jesus said, “Take heart, My son; your sins are forgiven” [MATTHEW 9:2]. Instantly, some of the scribes who seem always to have slunk about on the fringes of every group, groused to themselves, “This man is blaspheming” [MATTHEW 9:3]. Perhaps their faces betrayed them, for Jesus knew what they were thinking. So, He asked them, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk?’ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—Jesus then addressed the paralytic—“Rise, pick up your bed and go home” [MATTHEW 9:4-6]. At that, the man who was formerly bedridden rose up and went home.

I am quite certain that he looked no different from what he had looked moments before. He likely still had the pallor associated with having lain in bed for such a long time. His hair was likely still unkempt. His clothing was yet the comfortable clothing of one laid in bed. Nothing had changed, except his sins were pronounced forgiven and he walked home.

On another occasion, a mob of Jewish leaders heard Jesus say, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father” [JOHN 10:7-18].

His words stung them and initiated an animated discussion among them. Ultimately, their rage burned so intensely that they gathered stones, intent on stoning Him [see JOHN 10:31-39]. He had blasphemed; after all, they knew no one could save, except God. He had claimed that anyone entering the sheepfold—entrance to which He controlled—would be saved [JOHN 10:9]. The sheep on the inside of the sheepfold and those on the outside would have looked the same; there would have been no immediate difference in their appearance.

Recalling these times that He had spoken of saving people, together with other instances when He claimed to be able to save others, stormed to the forefront of their memories causing them to deride Him, “He saved others; He cannot save Himself.”

He reminded them of truths that are easily forgotten—truths that we must remember if we will live. We must remember that people are lost; this is a universal condition that cannot be changed through education. None are exempt from this situation, regardless of where they were born or where they may live. Moreover, it is a fact that the wages of sin is death. It does not require genius to note that the statistics on death are startling—one out of one dies. These truths being undeniable, there is a third truth that we must consider—we need a Saviour.

Man’s lost condition is a reality. Both the Word of God and our own observation testify that man is lost. Long years before the Lord Jesus walked among men, David confessed:

“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.”

[PSALM 51:5]

Jesus identified mankind as “lost” [LUKE 19:10]; and He testified that He did not come to call righteous people, but sinners [MATTHEW 9:13]. Truth compels us to admit that “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” [ROMANS 3:23]. To be “lost” is to be a sinner; to be a sinner is to be excluded from the glory of God. To be excluded from the glory of God is to be separated from Christ, “having no hope and without God in the world” [see EPHESIANS 2:12].

Using his fertile imagination, man attempts to assure himself of acceptance before God. The old saying that there are no atheists in the foxhole is likely correct. Why else do we hear at moments of grave danger the involuntary exclamation, “Oh, God?” We each intuitively know “It is appointed for men to die once,” and likewise, man instinctively knows that “after that comes judgement” [HEBREWS 9:27]. The preacher only reminds hearers of what is already known.

Because we are lost, we seek to do something to make ourselves acceptable to God. We design rites and rituals in a futile effort to compel God to accept us. We compose beautiful prayers hoping to induce God to overlook our lack of personal piety. We convince ourselves that we are really good through comparing ourselves to a standard that we created. Thus compared to others, any one of us meets the standard that others fail, and so we suppose that we are now good enough to satisfy the holy demands of the True and Living God. However, for all our efforts, there is still the nagging thought that perhaps we have not done enough.

If five prayers a day is necessary to please Allah, how do you know that six are not required? And if six are required, how do you know that you did not miss a prayer? Or how can you know whether the prayer you mindlessly recited was insufficiently sincere to be acceptable? If baptism is necessary to pass muster before God, how can you know whether it will address sins committed following the rite? What happens if you fail to confess a sin before you die? If being a “good person” is necessary to obtain divine mercy, whose standard determines whether you are good enough? There are so many imponderables that we are left wandering in a spiritual desert of our own making when we begin to think that we can create our own righteousness.

Man is a sinner, and God is holy. Sinful man cannot come into the presence of Holy God. This is man’s condition and this is the horrible reality of man’s situation before God. The Qoheleth wrote, “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins” [ECCLESIASTES 7:20]. Before God, Solomon confessed this same truth when he prayed at the dedication of the first Temple, “There is no one who does not sin” [1 KINGS 8:46]. This is our condition. We are unrighteous, unholy, impure, excluded from the presence of God’s glory. More tragic still, I do not need to convince you; you know that you are lost.

The wages of sin is death. This is the testimony of the Word of God [ROMANS 6:23]. Certainly, this statement speaks of physical death, but it also warns of spiritual death. The Word of God states, “Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam” [ROMANS 5:12-14]. The evidence that I am a sinner is that I shall die. If I were perfect, I would never die. However, death reigns over all mankind, contaminating the entire race.

It is one thing to be lost, but we also live in the knowledge that because we are lost, we are dead. Death is often misunderstood. Fearful of dying, few are able to say precisely why they fear death. Some think in terms of the loss of what they possess. Indeed, if our existence is tied solely to this present world, then we lose everything when we die. Some perhaps think of the cessation of pleasures; and as sinners our pleasures are all conditioned upon our present existence. Others view death as the end of all things; this life is all they know and all their hopes die with them. They realise that they will be forgotten, and life for others will go on. However, I suggest to you that all people know that death presents a far more intimidating prospect. I have already pointed out that “It is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgement” [HEBREWS 9:27].

Death is not a cessation, but a transition. Man is a tripartite being—man has a body, but man is a living soul, and man has a spirit. The body is the physical expression of an individual, conveying the real person. The soul is the animating force that we speak of as life. It is the intellectual and emotional aspect of man’s being. The spirit, created to know God and to interact with Him, identifies a higher aspect of man’s being. Though God is able to distinguish between soul and spirit, man sees this distinction as a theoretical matter for the most part.

Because the spirit is now dead as result of the rebellion of our first parents, God promises a new spirit to all who are made alive in Christ. The soul is separated from the body at the moment of physical death; and the Word of God promises that He is able to save the soul. To die physically is to sever the soul and the spirit from the body. When a friend or loved one has died, the body that remains is no longer animated because the soul is no longer associated with the body. Death, then, is a separation—the soul is separated from the body.

Spiritually, death is separation from God who is life. We are born sinners—spiritually dead and dying physically. We are separated from God and unable to find our way to life. Should we die before receiving life from God, we will be eternally separated from Him, unless there should be divine intervention as in the case of infants. An old saying cautions that the one who dies without benefit of the second birth will surely see the second death.

We need a Saviour. If anyone is to have hope, God must intervene. If any of us are to be saved—set free from condemnation and made holy so that we will be accepted before God—then God Himself must provide what we cannot do. He must provide a Saviour; and God has already provided His own Son to be the Saviour of all who believe.

“There is no other Name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved,” [ACTS 4:12] declared Peter. Salvation, the forgiveness of sin, acceptance before God, freedom from condemnation, is promised to everyone who believes the Good News concerning Jesus. “Everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His Name” [see ACTS 10:43]. What a wonderful promise is cited in Paul’s prayer for the Christians of Colossae. “May you be strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the Kingdom of His Beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” [COLOSSIANS 1:11-14].

HE COULD NOT SAVE HIMSELF — Hanging suspended between heaven and earth, Jesus endured the derision of wicked men. Among the taunts flung in His face was the one that serves as our text in this hour: “He saved others; He cannot save Himself.” As already noted, the people making this statement meant to ridicule His helpless condition, adding to the sorrow He was already experiencing. They could not know that they spoke the truth.

Jesus could not save Himself. I do not mean that He had no power to deliver Himself from suffering. He had calmly stated to Pilate, “If My Kingdom were of this world, My servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But My Kingdom is not from the world” [JOHN 18:36]. When His disciples attempted to strike out with the sword against those who took Him captive, He reminded them, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once send Me more than twelve legions of angels” [MATTHEW 26:53]? In heaven, “a thousand thousands served Him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him” [DANIEL 7:10]. When I say that Jesus could not save Himself, His ability to save Himself is not at issue nor even in question; it is rather His will not to save Himself that is in view.

The Apostle speaks of “the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” [GALATIANS 2:20]. In that designation is stated the reason Jesus could not save Himself. Writing the Corinthian Christians in his second letter, the Apostle makes a startling statement. He says, “For our sake [God] made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:21]. Jesus, who knew no sin, was made sin for our sake. He freed us forever from sin and from all condemnation by taking our punishment upon Himself—if we receive the sacrifice that He presented.

There is an extended passage that bears on this truth of the necessity for Christ to present His body as a sacrifice because of our sin. I want you to listen as I read that portion of the Word. I begin reading in **HEBREWS 9:23**. “It was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with [ancient, sacrificial] rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

“For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

“Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,

“‘Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body have you prepared for me;
in burnt offerings and sin offerings
you have taken no pleasure.
Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God,
as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’”

“When he said above, ‘You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings’ (these are offered according to the law), then he added, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will.’ He does away with the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

“And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” [**HEBREWS 9:23-10:14**].

Did you notice the truth emphasised in the final paragraph? Christ offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins. By that single offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. What we could not accomplish, Christ has already accomplished for us. We could not make ourselves holy, but Christ the Lord presented His life as a sacrifice in our place so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. His sacrifice was offered once, and can never be repeated. Those who imagine that there is another way must contend with the testimony of the Word of God. Those who imagine that they can again and again offer a bloodless offering to God must admit that no such teaching is found in the Word of God.

Christ Jesus the Lord could not save Himself, if He was to provide atonement for us. Christ the Lord could not save Himself, if a sacrifice were to be presented because of our sin. The mocking crowd was correct—He could not save Himself. As Scripture says, He would indeed “taste death for everyone” [**HEBREWS 2:9**]. He could not save Himself, because you and I required a Saviour who was Himself God. Christ the Lord would need to present His life as a sacrifice in our place if we were ever to be received into the Kingdom of Heaven.

That is indeed powerful encouragement that Peter gives to those reading his first letter. He urged all who are Christians, “Set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” [**1 PETER 1:13-19**].

Christians have been ransomed with the precious blood of Christ. Because this is true, we are urged to live lives that honour God the Father and that honour the sacrifice offered because of our sin. Of course, the Good News is not simply that Christ has presented Himself as a sacrifice for our sin. Without His resurrection from the dead, there is no salvation. The Apostle to the Gentiles says that Jesus “was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of Holiness by His resurrection from the dead” [**ROMANS 1:4**]. We place our faith in Christ Jesus the Lord, “who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” [**ROMANS 4:25**].

The Good News about Jesus Christ is that He gave Himself for our sins. Having presented Himself as a sacrifice, He came to life and rose from the dead. Therefore, He is the “Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe” [**1 TIMOTHY 4:10**]. This simple message calls on all people to “believe in the Lord Jesus” that they may be saved. Tragically, this simple message of life in God’s Son is too often distorted from pulpits throughout the land.

We live in a man-centred world that teaches us to focus on our own wants. We are taught to seek ease of life, rather than seeking to glorify the Master. We refuse to allow God to reign over our lives. The highest good is deemed to be whatever makes us immediately feel good about ourselves. Unconsciously, we absorb the message that life is all about us. Thus, even Christians approach worship seeking affirmation rather than seeking instruction in righteousness.

I am grieved to observe that such a self-centred message has become firmly entrenched among the churches that bear Christ’s Name. We erect temples exalting our own desires rather than glorifying the God of Heaven. Because we live in a fallen world, and because we ourselves are fallen creatures, we twist the message of life to become the means to secure personal comfort instead of providing deliverance from sin. Thus, we subtly shift the message from life in the Beloved Son to one focused on personal fulfilment.

It is nothing short of heresy to tell a woman that if she will just become a Christian she will have a happy home. It is a serious theological error to tell a man that believing in Jesus will help him straighten out his finances. So very often contemporary preachers will promise those who listen to their sermons, “Just come to Jesus and enjoy the blessing.” At best, this is a gross distortion of the Gospel; at worst, it will condemn those accepting it as truth. Jesus offered Himself, not to correct all our misfortune; Jesus presented Himself as a sacrifice to save us. In order to accomplish this divine purpose, He could not save Himself.

The Son of God presented Himself as a sacrifice for our sins when He gave His life on the cross. He conquered death, being raised from the tomb, to justify all who would believe. Now, life is the promise to all who are born from above and into the Kingdom of God. For this reason, we celebrate Easter; and this is the reason we declare the life that is freely offered in Christ Jesus the Lord.

The Apostle Paul prayed for the Christians living in the Province of Asia; his prayer is recorded in the Letter we have received as the Epistle to the Ephesians. In that letter he writes, “I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come” [EPHESIANS 1:16-21].

That is the issue precisely. Christ Jesus our Lord was “crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God” [2 CORINTHIANS 13:4]. Because He lives, we also may live, if we but receive His sacrifice and His reign over our lives. It is a decision that we must make individually, deliberately. This is the Word of God to all who will receive it. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” The Word of God declares that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

Believe this message this day and be saved. Amen.