

Ministers Message

Mission Department Newsletter

From the Mission Department

This edition of Ministers Message is arriving in your inbox a few weeks late. This is primarily due to the recent departure of our Mission Work assistant, Adeline Moll. Among Adeline's many duties were the layout, recording, and distribution of Ministers Message. Maria Frederickson has taken over many of Adeline's mission and pastoral work duties. It has taken us a few weeks however to determine the best place to assign Adeline's Ministers Message responsibilities. That has now been determined. Ministers Message will now be produced with assistance from the Communications Department. Annette Johnson will now do layout for Ministers Message and Shanna Pirness will assist with audio recording and editing for both Ministers Message and Evening Devotions. We know that you brothers, like us, greatly appreciated Adeline's work and support. We pray that God will bless her in her new endeavors as well. We're happy now to have the help of Maria, Annette, and Shanna. May God also bless their labors.

The Easter segment of the calendar continues for the 7 weeks following Easter and brings us to Ascension Day and then the threshold of Pentecost. During the 40 days from Easter to Ascension Day, Luke tells us that Jesus appeared to His disciples and showed that He was alive by "many infallible proofs" and spoke to them "of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). During this time Jesus strengthened the faith of His disciples, comforted them, taught them, and prepared them for His departure. Themes during the week following Easter thus focus on Jesus' resurrection and the witness of His disciples. After that the calendar turns to more pastoral themes which offer a message of comfort and hope. The themes include the Good Shepherd, the longing of God's children for home, their endeavor as citizens of heaven in this world, and prayer. The end of this calendar segment includes Jesus' Ascension and the preparation for Pentecost. May God help us to also strengthen the faith of His children and proclaim the message of comfort and hope during this period.

We had our largest ever new ministers' workshop in February 2024 with 14 participants. God richly blessed that 2-day event. We have also received word that both the Saskatchewan congregations and the Menahga congregation plan to pursue the employment of a full-time pastor. May God bless their endeavors. Looking down the road, we want to draw your attention to our next ministers' webinar. It will be held on May 30th at 8:00 CDT. Our intention is to focus on confession, the power of the keys, and soul care. We will review the main points of two presentations, one by Juhani Uljas and the other by Keijo Nissilä, that touch on these issues. We will translate and send you the presentations before the workshop.



Noteworthy

Upcoming Events

LLC Ministers Camp
April 5–7, 2024

LLC 2024 Ministers Webinar #2
Confession, the Power of the Keys,
and Soul Care
May 30, 2024
8:00 pm CDT

LLC Longview Summer Services
July 4–7, 2024

LLC 2024 Ministers Webinar #3
August 29, 2024
8:00 pm CDT

LLC Ministers & Wives Camp,
West Coast
September 20–22, 2024

LLC 2024 Ministers Webinar #4
November 7, 2024
8:00 pm CST

Jesus and the Thief on the Cross

Leo Väyrynen

Luke 23:39–43

It is a Good Friday that I will never forget. I spent it in the hospital at the deathbed of a dear loved one. The patient's pain was relieved with medication and the burning in her heart was calmed by the grace gospel. Why can a deathbed be so long in duration with such hard pain? I asked myself that question all that entire long Good Friday.

Considering the chosen Bible text I think: these three men, whose day of death is commemorated on Good Friday, had an even harder deathbed. Their deathbed was a gallows, a cross. The sufferings of the man hanging in the middle were the hardest of all. He carried in His body the punishment for the sins of the entire world. This included even God rejecting and cursing Him.

We are accustomed to calling the men hanging on either side of Jesus the thieves on the cross. What evil had they done? Luke does not tell us whether they were civil criminals or Jewish Zealots, guerillas who tried by armed means to free their land from the yoke of Rome. In the opinion of fanatical patriots, Zealots were heroes, freedom fighters. On the other hand, Roman occupiers considered them to be dangerous terrorists, who deserved a painful death, invented by the Persians, a cruel execution on the cross.

One would have thought that the hard deathbed would have softened even the most hardened criminal. This did not happen to of one of the thieves. The hard deathbed caused him to curse God and Jesus. "If thou be Christ, save thyself and us," the man shouted. A hard deathbed can still embitter a person, even though that is not God's intention. In hospitals and nursing homes we may meet people who have been overtaken by bitterness: "Why do we need to suffer so much? If God exists, why doesn't He help?" On the other hand, the deathbed softened the other thief, he received the grace of repentance on the cross. Did he truly? The man only rebuked his partner in crime, and asked Jesus if he could go with Him into His kingdom.

Repentance proceeds from this, that a person, influenced by God, feels his sins and is penitent over them. The thief's confession of sin was clothed as a rebuke to his partner in

JESUS CONVERSES

Jesus met many people during His life. Several of them wanted to converse with Him. Jesus' teaching gave birth to questions in some listeners. They wanted to hear more since His teachings deviated from the teachings of the scribes of that time. Several people approached Jesus because of their difficulties and problems. Jesus also used to talk on His own initiative with people He encountered in various situations.

Several discussions which Jesus had with various people are recorded in the Bible. This year we will publish a series of writings in this paper by Leo Väyrynen on some of these discussions. Although around two thousand years have passed since these discussions, their topics and issues are still timely. We notice this in this series of writings.

crime, "Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss." Asking for forgiveness for one's sins also belongs to repentance. The thief showed that he was begging for forgiveness from Jesus by saying, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom."

True repentance is God's work, not man's work. The repentance of the thief on the cross was also such. The thief could not through his own will and strength see Jesus as God's Son, who saves. God opened his understanding to see this. The natural eye truly did not see Christ nailed to the cross as anything divine. In Jesus, a man bloodied by flogging, tormented by flies, and panting in the agony of death, it was difficult to even recognize a human being.

Further, repentance also includes this that one hears the absolution and believes it. Did Jesus forgive? Jesus forgave and in a way that touches each one of us.

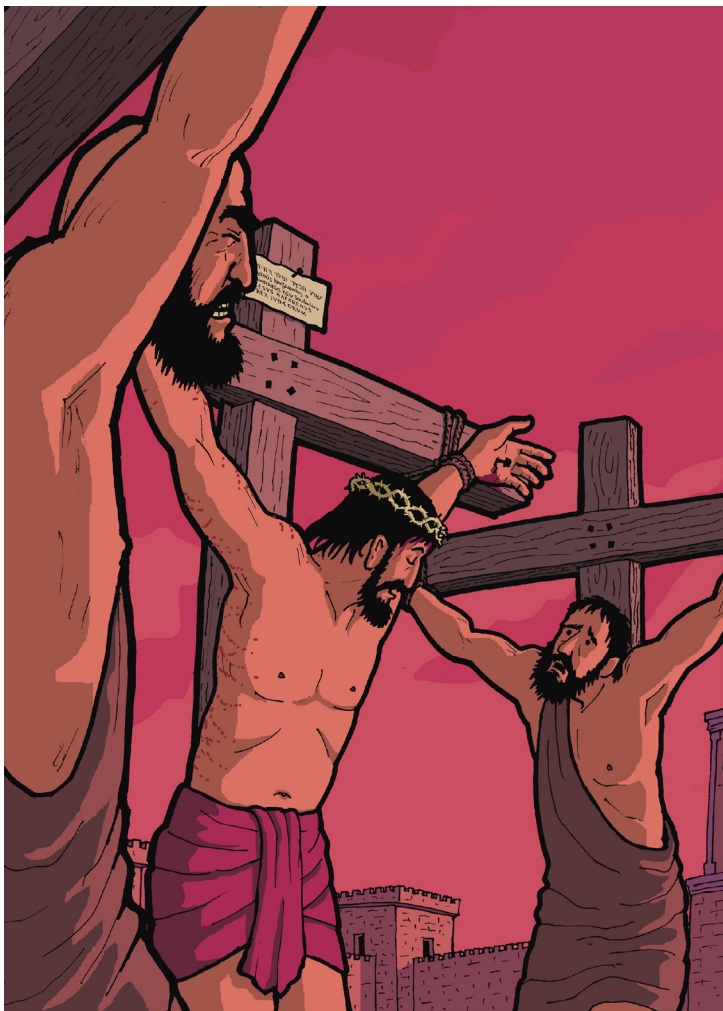
Jesus did not say, "Do you understand that I don't now have the strength to discuss matters with you. You should have opened your mouth earlier and asked for forgiveness, now it is too late." Neither did Jesus say, "Your plea for mercy is too vague. You have many sins. List all of your sins. Then we will see, if mercy will prevail over justice, if you receive forgiveness?"

Jesus Converses

We are touched by this that Jesus forgave the man all of his sins unconditionally. Jesus' forgiveness was contained in the words, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise."

Is Gods mercy that great? It is that great. On the hard deathbed of the cross wonderful services were held. The thief who had received mercy thought: This suffering of mine will last only for a moment, soon I will be taken from this hard deathbed to God's paradise. This thief on the cross was perhaps the first New Testament Christian, who justified by faith was able to go from under the cross to under the crown.

The same mercy was also happened to my dear loved one whose struggle with death I witnessed that long Good Friday and even after that. Her suffering continued until Easter Monday morning, then liberation came. She was able to close her eyes to this world with the faith and hope that she would also be able to go from this world of sin and pain to paradise.



ARTWORK: RAIMO ÖSTERBERG

My loved one did not receive the grace of repentance at the moment of death like the thief on the cross did. She had endeavored in God's kingdom for tens of years. Had her life been wasted as a child of God, if the mercy that the thief received can still be obtained at the moment of death? Not at all. Although God can send messengers of the Word from His kingdom to preach the gospel to one who is dying, it isn't always certain that God will give a person such a time of grace and that the heart is ready to accept it.

There are many dying people who have the hardened heart of the other thief on the cross. They do not want to believe their sins forgiven. That is why it is important that a person repent in the time of grace, at that time that God calls him to repentance in His kingdom.

Each one of us needs the thief's grace in this sense that the forgiveness which we receive is complete and immeasurable. We have nothing to bring before God, not even the successful endeavor of tens of years. We have nothing but sin.

Even our confession of sin and our begging for forgiveness are lacking on our own part as was the case of the thief on the cross. Jesus and God nonetheless understand these words and God's children do too. They unconditionally proclaim all of our sins forgiven on Jesus' behalf and according to His command. Without God's complete mercy, not one of us would get to paradise.

In the message of Good Friday what touches us is that Jesus' redemption work extends to all people. Even to the soldiers and the government officials and the people who stood mocking at the foot of the cross, whom Jesus would have also wanted to save. He said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

Jesus suffered the hard death on the cross so that we sinful people could own forgiveness in our time of grace and each one of us from our own deathbed would be able to enter eternal life. For a child of God, it is secure yet to rest on the deathbed. Even then in the gospel of God's kingdom the sun of Easter shines into the heart. The knowledge that this suffering is only temporal and light, and its pains will not be remembered anymore then when we have made it to paradise in heaven, brings comfort.

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Ahti Riihimäki

PASSION SUNDAY

Contemporaries did not understand Jesus' identity or duty. They could not understand that they with their own eyes were looking at the living bread that could quench hunger forever. Jesus desired to gather all of the scattered children of God to this living bread.

John the Baptist had introduced Jesus amid throngs of people. To the Jews gathered on the shore of the Jordan, He preached: Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. Now they were living on the very threshold of fulfillment!

Jesus' sacrificial death helped believers of the Word to become partakers of the blood of reconciliation. Receiving forgiveness joined them to the fellowship of God's people and strengthened their hope to obtain the life of the world to come. The gospel contained the message of peace, which cleared away the obstacles on the road to fulfillment.

1 Peter 2:4-10

BE STRENGTHENED IN THE GRACE OF GOD

Peter wrote his letter to the elect saints. They lived scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Bithynia and the province of Asia. Peter, taught by personal experience, encouraged his brothers in faith. He especially instructed them to take comfort in the food of newborns. The gospel of forgiveness had helped them from unbelief to become Christ's own.

JESUS IS THE CORNERSTONE

The apostle from experience knew to say that the Jews had rejected Jesus. They even asked if anything good ever comes from Nazareth or have any of the rulers believed in Him? The Old Testament prophesies were realized in Jesus. He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief from whom all hid their faces. He did not have the form or beauty that we would have desired (Isaiah 53). In the work of the gospel, the early congregation had to attest early on that not all men have faith. The apostles also asked their brothers in faith for prayers that the preaching of the Word would succeed.

Both Jews and Gentiles had rejected Jesus. God, however, had chosen Jesus and called Him into His work. Peter remembered the experiences on the Mount of Transfiguration. The apostles had seen how a cloud had enshrouded the Old Testament saints, Moses and Elias who were with Him. Also, a voice was heard from heaven, This is my beloved Son: hear him.

Jesus is still the cornerstone. Everyone must take a stand concerning Him. Rejecting Jesus always means giving up God's saving grace. By believing in Him one can avoid falling into shame. Jesus is precious to all of God's chosen, but to the unbelievers the message of the Savior of sinners seems to be offensive and insulting. The recipients of the letter naturally had never seen Jesus nor could they have thus personally rejected Him. But now the question is of the acceptance and rejection of the message of Christ. This became the basis which divided people into those who reject the word and those who believe it.

THE BELIEVER'S DUTY IN THE WORLD

Peter encouraged the recipients of the letter with many assurances. They were God's chosen generation, a holy priesthood, and a holy nation. Peter wanted to join these newly born Christians together with the former saints. Could the sender have had the former prophets in mind, now he numbered the brothers in faith with them!

In his letter, the apostle encourages the recipients to, "shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." The New Covenant Israel, God's people, were obliged to tell of God's power and works. Everyone is at least able to tell what God has done to him. God has called one through His Word and life's fates. He has awakened penitence and shown that one has been travelling the road leading to condemnation. In His kingdom He has opened understanding through the living word and given the strength to believe all sins forgiven in Jesus' blood. Above all, He has given my heart a marvelous peace.

In his letter, Peter reminded the recipients that they themselves had not long ago been pagans. Now they had become partakers of the gospel of mercy. "But now you have obtained mercy." They had received authority and power to do the work of the gospel. They now were able to work as stewards of God's mysteries and share God's inexhaustible treasure.