How the New Birth Happens: The Example of the Thief on the Cross

We have been reading about longsuffering, and I am going to read a verse about longsuffering from Luke as well. The question was asked: Why must we be longsuffering? I even gave the answer that we must be, because the Lord Jesus was longsuffering too. God is longsuffering.

That is an answer, but it is not a complete answer; we will see more. Let us read from Luke 21, verses 16 to 19: "*And ye shall be betrayed both by parents, and brethren, and kinsfolks, and friends; and some of you shall they cause to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake. But there shall not an hair of your head perish. In your patience possess ye your souls.*" Amen.

He that endures to the end, as we read, shall be saved. Patience must have her perfect work, so that we may be perfect. And here, in verse 19, it tells us that in our patience we shall possess our souls. In many places in the Word of God we find that salvation is obtained by faith, by grace, without works. And here it says that by our patience, not by God's patience, we shall possess our souls. So we too have a part that we must fulfil.

Why must we be longsuffering? Let us think for a moment about why we have to come to that point. It is written in 1 Corinthians 13 that charity suffereth long. And we must have not just patience, but longsuffering. It is hard to define what it means to be longsuffering. What might it mean for us to be longsuffering? Could we say without limit, or up to a certain limit?

What is God like when He tells us He is longsuffering? Is He longsuffering with all people? God has no pleasure in the death of the sinner.

And I come back again to the question: why must we be longsuffering? Let us think about our everyday lives. Is it a beautiful thing to be longsuffering in the family, or isn't it? Our relationships with those around us are beautiful when we are patient.

Has it ever happened to you that you were doing something rather difficult and you lost your patience? The work is with ourselves. God wants to work in us so that we grow to a high stature in which inner peace reigns, that is, rest for the soul.

Imagine that we are in the Kingdom of God, in eternity, and He gives us a very difficult task to do, and we lose our patience. What do you say, could that happen? The testing is now. God is testing us to see whether we lose our patience or not. Those who lose their patience will not possess their souls.

We must be tested, because there, all those who will be in the Kingdom of God are longsuffering. That is why we must be longsuffering, because everyone there will be. In the Kingdom of God no one will fall into the error of losing their patience.

And the test here, in Luke 21, is the ultimate test: "you will be betrayed by parents, brethren, kinsfolk and friends, and some of you they will put to death." What? Can't we call 911 to save us? Or the police, or, if we have a subscription with a security company, can't we call them?

I don't know whether you know this, you probably all do, but I want to tell you anyway. These security companies have rapid response teams. When you see their cars parked here and there, you might think they are advertising in certain spots. But they are positioned there because in the contracts they sign with their clients, they guarantee that within two minutes, or one minute, they will be at our gate. You know that thieves are coming, or someone who wants to harm you, and you simply call the emergency number, and in two minutes the response team arrives and you are safe. Do you realise what kind of security that is?

What does it tell us here? Are you entitled to call on something like that? "*Ye shall be betrayed both by parents, and brethren, and kinsfolks, and friends.*" And they will put many of us to death. We will be hated by all for the sake of the name of the Lord Jesus.

No, we don't much like being hated, you know. Yesterday I called someone I had talked to last week and to whom I had given some booklets, to ask whether he had read them or not. And he told me, "I started reading, but after the first three pages I wanted to throw it away."

How do you think I felt in my heart? Did I feel good, or not? "*Ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake.*" Don't tell them anything negative. Only tell them positive things. "*You said negative things about us in there.*" And we don't like those things. And if they don't like them, they will hate us.

And we don't like being hated. We would rather they said to us: "Oh, how wonderful, how beautifully you spoke!" That's what we like, isn't it? But in our patience we shall possess our souls. How many have to go through this test?

I was reflecting on the marking scheme that is required of us in order to enter the Kingdom of God. I was wondering whether all of us are obliged to meet this standard.

In the secular world, especially in education, great effort goes into making exams as objective and fair as possible, achieving the highest possible degree of precision in grading.

I remember my experience at my university entrance exam, when I didn't know there was such a thing as a marking scheme. At first I thought the teacher simply looked over the exercises you had done and gave you a grade.

In reality it is a points system, from 1 to 10 points for each exercise, and partial points are given, for example 0.2 or 0.3 points for each correct element included in the answer. In the end these points are added up to determine the final grade.

When I sat the exam, I solved the exercise well and was convinced my result was perfect, and I expected the top mark. Yet, contrary to my expectations, I got only a seven or an eight. The problem was not that the teacher was unfair to me, but that I had not worked according to their

marking scheme.

This makes me think: is there a similar marking scheme for entering the Kingdom? Is God partial in assessing us spiritually, or does He follow an objective system of evaluation, like the one in the education system?

Think about the driving test. In the theory exam there is a predefined list of multiple-choice questions. When the exam is marked, an answer template is laid over the answers, and any wrong answer means failure.

It is the same with God's standard. To be accepted into His school, we must answer every question correctly. God's standard leaves no room for ambiguity or shortcuts, even though He is good, merciful, compassionate and longsuffering with us. That is why He helps us grow so that we reach this perfect standard of the Kingdom.

We often ask ourselves whether we have been born again or not. This doubt comes from not knowing the requirements God sets for a person to be born again. Yet these requirements are very clearly defined and perfect, and we can know them.

One requirement for a person to experience the new birth is to weep over his sins, but that is only one among many others that must be met.

Another requirement we find in the Acts of the Apostles, where it is written that they were pricked in their heart. It was the same with the apostle Paul when he met the Lord Jesus. And the same with the jailer in Philippi. So we too must be pricked in our hearts. But that is not enough. After he was pricked in his heart, the jailer asked a question: "What must I do to be saved?"

In the past, when I thought about salvation, I had in mind a few verses you probably know. Scripture speaks of being saved "*so as by fire*", a simpler kind of salvation where we do nothing and everything we have burns up like stubble. It is a rather pitiful situation: we are saved, but "*so as by fire*." It seems like a miraculous and mysterious way that God offers us.

To illustrate this idea, let us read from Luke 23, starting at verse 35, where the people and the rulers were mocking the Lord Jesus: *"He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God. And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him, and offering him vinegar, and saying, If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself. And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, 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. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise."*

You have probably thought about this thief too: how he entered the Kingdom of God, how easily he got in. A few words were enough. And if he managed it, then there must be a similar way for me.

Think about medical school. You probably know how hard it is to get in. When we think about the admission standard for medicine, who would imagine there are two ways in, **an easier one** and **a harder one?** The harder one is for those who study diligently and seriously.

On the other hand, for the less ambitious, who show no particular interest, there is also a way of admission for them. And this doesn't only happen in medicine but in many fields, even for the driving licence.

We like to think how nice it would be if it were so. Those who haven't prepared at all come to the exam knowing nothing, and they are told: "All right, you won't go into the exam room, because we've prepared a much easier method for you. You have just one question: a traffic light has three colours, green, red and amber. When do you drive through? On green or on red?"

Whoever says green has passed the exam.

The exam is simplified for them because they didn't know any more, just as this thief didn't know any more. So God doesn't put him through all the difficult procedures that so many face who strive for thirty or forty years to enter the Kingdom of God and don't make it.

What is going on with God? Is He partial with the standard He is supposed to apply to all people? What will happen when we meet this thief in the Kingdom and he doesn't have longsuffering as his fruit?

How could he have the fruit of the Spirit? Can it be said of this thief that he went through all the procedures laid down in the Word of God, or did he get in through the back door of the Kingdom?

If that is so, then it seems God is not consistent. In one place He tells us how hard it is to enter, what we must do to enter, but then He shows that there are other, much easier ways.

For us there is only the narrow way and the strait gate, and for another, privileged category there is a way with no requirements. Can that be? Let us think about God, who is perfect. He does not lie, He is not partial, and He applies the same standard to all people, including the thief.

Let us look at this standard, starting with entry into the Kingdom through the new birth and continuing to the end of our lives, because we often confuse the two. Let us think: when does the fruit of the Spirit appear? At the end, or at the beginning? When we have only just been born again, do we already have the fruit of the Spirit?

Have you ever come across a plant that, as soon as you put its seed in the soil, immediately produces ripe fruit? Is there anything like that in nature? Or is a certain time needed between planting and the ripening of the fruit? Isn't this the way God created all plants? Didn't He do the same with man? Have you ever met a newborn baby who speaks five foreign languages and

knows mathematics and chemistry from the moment of birth?

Then how do things work in the Kingdom of God? Is it a similar process? Or would God create disorder in His Kingdom, with no natural growth, with no fruit of the Spirit? That would mean God creates chaos.

What parent gives birth to a child and then doesn't look after it? Have you ever seen a responsible parent do such a thing? No, he raises his children with love, doesn't he? He doesn't bring them into the world only to abandon them. Would God act that way? Doesn't He lead each one of us through the teachings of Christ? Let us think about this and examine the case of the thief.

If he was accepted into the Kingdom of God, then I will want to get in too, even if I am the last, like the thief. If the thief benefited from a special, one-off opportunity, then others can be accepted too, because we could say, "Lord, if You received the thief like that, then I too will say a few words."

Have you ever heard of people doing this? I have come across cases of people in the Orthodox faith who, on their deathbed, were visited by the priest for confession. Confession means acknowledging all your sins and making peace with everyone you have offended throughout your life. With a lit candle by their head, aware that they have only two or three weeks left, maybe a month, people call the priest to their home to set things in order before leaving this world. But do they succeed? They do certain things, perhaps even more than that thief did. The thief had no opportunity to make peace with the people he had robbed.

God does not play favourites, least of all with a thief who deserved nothing but punishment. He has a perfect standard that He does not change for anyone, and there is nothing subjective in it. There is an exam grid we must all pass through. All those who meet these conditions have the right to the new birth.

Let us turn to the Gospel of John, chapter 1, and read verses 11 to 13: "*He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*" Amen.

The Lord Jesus, that is, the Word, came unto His own, and His own received Him not. So another of the conditions is that we receive the Word. If someone does not want to receive the whole Word, God does not cause him to be born again, because he does not meet the conditions for life to spring up. It is like the marking grid laid over any exam. As long as you fit the grid, you pass; if not, you wait and sit the exam again next year, and so on, until at some point you fit.

So we see that for the new birth it is also necessary to receive the whole Word. But that is not enough. King Herod heard John the Baptist gladly. We could say he had received the Word, but is it enough just to receive it with joy?

If I go into a pub and preach the Word, and the people there are glad and receive it, but then they go about their business and keep drinking, and tomorrow they drink again, do they meet the conditions of the new birth?

Scripture says that to all who received Christ, He gave the power to become children of God.

Let us take the example of the thief as our reference point. Did the thief receive the Word of Christ? If he did not, how could he enter the Kingdom of God? We must start from the premise that God has only one standard, and see whether the thief too received the Word. Let us examine his words to see whether he had this experience.

We read in Luke 23, from verse 42: "He said unto Jesus, 'Lord'," or Master, "'remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom'." When you say "Lord", it can sound casual, like "Mr Smith" or "Mr Jones", but when you say "Master" you submit yourself like a slave; you accept your master's words. So did the thief make himself a willing slave, or not?

Romans 6 tells us: "now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life." We see that this thief too submitted himself, calling Him "Master."

The translations we use today are rather limited, because we no longer fully grasp the meaning of the word "Lord." In English, when you say "King," the meaning is clear and strong. But in our everyday language the word "Lord" seems to have lost its weight.

I have noticed that whether we say "the Lord Jesus" or simply "Jesus" doesn't seem to make much difference to people. This is because the Son of God is not seen as a Lord, but rather as a friend, as something… vague. The question is: did the thief recognise Him as Master, or not?

Why does he say, "remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom"? The Lord Jesus had done no wrong, no evil. He was condemned as a criminal. All who saw Him, including the Pharisees and the scribes, judged Him as a criminal. So how did the thief know that "this man hath done nothing amiss"? Did he have the discernment to tell good from evil? Clearly he did. If the Lord Jesus had done no wrong, that means He had never lied. So did the thief know what the Kingdom of God looks like? Is that why he said, "Remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom"?

Let us also think about the disciples of the Lord Jesus and the other people. Did they really know much about the kingdom of the Lord Jesus? They all wanted to make Him king, to be their earthly ruler, a king or a prime minister, and they wanted to be part of His government. Peter, for example, had a sword with him just the day before, and he even used it. But was Peter truly part of the Kingdom of God? Did he understand what this kingdom meant? It seemed they all had their eyes closed, not seeing or understanding the true nature of the Kingdom. And yet this man, the thief, recognised it.

Why does he say, "Remember me"? What does he mean by those words? The thief is aware that his death is imminent and his life is drawing to a close. But what did the disciples not know?

What were the two disciples doing on the road to Emmaus? Did they have the hope of the resurrection? Did the other disciples still hold on to that hope? And why did the thief have this hope of the resurrection? It seems he understood more.

I ask: did the thief accept the Lord Jesus, the Word, or not? Does a slave need to know all of his master's words?

When Joseph was taken as a slave into Potiphar's house, did he know everything he would do there? Did Potiphar say to him, "Let me explain what you will do for me once I take you as my slave"? No. When you tell a slave to do something, what must he do? Obey. The slave knows what he has to do. "Behold, thy servant heareth." That is what a slave does.

And the thief knew this. Let us think carefully about God's criteria. God does not change the criteria for any one person. In driving tests we know no one will ever change the criteria for a single person. Maybe you pay a bribe to falsify the papers, but that is something else. But is there any way, here in Romania, for someone to pass the driving test without the marking grid? There isn't. And isn't it the same with God?

Where does perfection come from? This objective way of thinking, where does it come from? Just laws, where do they come from? Are they from Satan or from God? When the criminal code, the civil code and other laws are applied, how are they framed? Are they just or not? A lawyer or a judge may corrupt justice, but people go to court because they know they are in the right and want their right to prevail.

In Luke 23:40 we find another condition the thief met, a condition we too must meet. The thief asks: "*Dost not thou fear God*?" He knew what it means to fear God, as he confronted the one who was mocking the Lord Jesus.

We must fear God in order to be born again. To the humble and to those who fear Him, the Lord shows the way they must follow, as we see in the example of Cornelius in Acts 10.

So the thief fitted into this category too. There is one more thing we must do for the new birth to take place. Think again of the people in the pub. Do they fear the Lord? No, they don't seem to. They carry on drinking, and so on. If we do not enter into a covenant with the Lord, God will not enter into a covenant with us either.

Because the new birth involves a covenant, that is, a decision to do and to obey. Did this thief make that decision, or not?

"Remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." Why did the Lord Jesus need to remember him? Didn't the thief know about the coming judgment the Lord Jesus had spoken of? "When will He come?" What was the Lord Jesus to do with this man? He asked Him to remember. What does it mean to remember? "When you get out of prison," Joseph said to the butler, "remember me and speak well of me to Pharaoh."

The butler had to remember Joseph so that Joseph could get out of there. Did Joseph get out when the butler remembered? Yes. So why did the Lord Jesus need to remember this thief? To send him to hell? Was that what the thief wanted when he said, "remember me"?

He wanted to be in the presence of the Judge. "You, Lord Jesus, remember me and stand by me, so that I do not go into eternal punishment." Because the other thief had said, "Save thyself and us." What does "save thyself" mean? Isn't eternal life salvation? Salvation means being rescued. What did the thief say? "Save thyself and us." Was it about being rescued? Did he want to be saved? Certainly, from the wrath to come. He was interested in eternal life.

And what else has to happen, if we take the example of this thief? What did we read earlier? "*In your patience possess ye your souls.*" How long was the Lord Jesus on the cross? About six hours. Let us think about the martyrs. They were broken on the wheel, their bones broken and their fingers crushed. Did they suffer as on the cross? Was it a six-hour martyrdom? What does martyrdom mean? Suffering?

Let us think about ourselves. Suppose I am martyred tomorrow and suffer six terrible hours, and I don't endure. What happens to me? Do I possess my soul or not? Must I endure too? The thief endured and possessed his soul through his six hours of patience.

Let us think: have you ever been tormented by toothache? How long do we hold out? When you have a terrible headache and can't stand it, you quickly take a pill to make the pain go away, because you can't bear it. And what about having a fingernail torn out? With no one to help you. That is how it was on the cross. And the thief endured. It doesn't say that he protested. It would have been written here, wouldn't it?

When the Lord Jesus tells him, "*To day shalt thou be with me in paradise*" (Luke 23:43), He enrolled him in His school. What He begins, He brings to completion. He is able to. Only six hours? So little, my friend! And look, I've been struggling for forty years. Many would say: better forty years of life as it comes than six hours on a cross or broken on the wheel. Because there it is at its most extreme. There you might lose your soul. Many lose their souls in suffering, because they don't hold out. They don't have the strength to endure.

There were Anabaptists who were martyred; some fell away, but then returned to the faith and passed the test. How hard this exam is. The thief sat this exam. It is as if someone among us heard the Word of God today, and tomorrow was crucified or martyred for it, but overcame. Where will that person go? Won't it be into the Kingdom of God?

God puts us through every test. God knows how to work. The problem, why it takes so long, lies with us, not with God. God probably has six hours available for everyone. In six hours He can make a person perfect. He is longsuffering with us. And yet we say, "He found a loophole for the thief and slipped him in through the back door, while we are tormented for forty years."

He could have brought the Jewish people from Egypt to the promised land in eleven days, but it took the people two years to reach the borders of the land, and there they were afraid to go in. They could have done it in eleven days, but even the two years did not help them, because in the

end they did not enter the promised land because of their unbelief.

May the Lord help us understand that He is perfect. He is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him. We must work out our salvation to the end with fear and trembling. Amen.

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