
Between Two Thieves

*“At that time two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and one on the left. . . .
The robbers who had been crucified with Him were also insulting Him with the same words”
(Matthew 27:38, 44).*

As Luke depicted the crucifixion of our Lord, he said, “When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left” (Luke 23:33). In choosing to execute three prisoners on that Friday, Pilate did not realize that he was fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy concerning the Messiah. Isaiah 53 prophesied, “His grave was assigned with wicked men” (v. 9a).

In the early moments of the crucifixion, both thieves joined in the ridicule of the Savior. As the chief priests, elders, soldiers, and passersby mocked Christ, “those who were crucified with Him were also insulting Him” (Mark 15:32). As the moments of suffering dragged on, one of the thieves observed the conduct, words, and demeanor of Christ and became a believer in Him. According to Luke, the other criminal continued to hurl abuse at Him, saying, “Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!” (Luke 23:39). The thief who had begun to believe in Christ rebuked him and defended Jesus. He said, “Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong” (Luke 23:40, 41). He had seen the flawless character of Christ manifested in this ordeal of the crucifixion. Motivated by Jesus’ righteousness, he had looked at himself more honestly, recognizing his sinfulness and the justness of his crucifixion. He could not refute the perfection of the One hanging beside him. The repentance and introspection

engendered by what this man had seen in Jesus became evident in his conversation with the other thief.

Shortly after the exchange with the other thief, the penitent man perhaps turned his head toward Christ and said repeatedly, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” (Luke 23:42). Jesus responded to him with a wonderful promise of hope. He said, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). We know nothing about the background of this man. He may have been a Jew who had believed in the coming of the Messiah but had gone astray from his faith. He could have devoted himself to trying to set up his own earthly kingdom. Some cause had led him to commit robbery and murder; he had been arrested for revolutionary activities and eventually condemned to crucifixion.

We know almost nothing about these two criminals except what the divine record tells us about them. Tradition says that one of the thieves was named Dysmas and the other was named Gestas. Matthew and Mark called them “robbers” (Matthew 27:38; Mark 15:27). Luke called them “criminals” (Luke 23:32), and John just referred to them as “the first man and . . . the other who was crucified with Him” (John 19:32). Both of them outlived Jesus on their crosses; but as evening approached, since it was the day of preparation for the Passover, their legs were broken to hasten their deaths. John wrote, “So the soldiers came, and broke the legs of the first man and of the other who was crucified with Him; but coming to Jesus,

when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs" (John 19:32, 33).

This aspect of the cross, of Jesus' being crucified between two criminals, reveals in a unique way the message of salvation.

We see, first, that salvation, although the gift of God's grace, requires some response on the part of man. One of the men crucified with Jesus received a promise of salvation from Jesus, while the other did not. Why? The answer is obvious. Only one of the men accepted Jesus' offer of mercy. Salvation comes by grace through obedient faith, not by grace through *nothing* on man's part. Both men could have been saved, but only one responded to God's grace with faith.

Second, we see that the greatest opportunity of all time can be thrown away. Even though he was on a cross, the robber who spurned salvation had his greatest opportunity to receive it as he hung beside Jesus. Just a few feet away from Him was God the Son, the second member of the Godhead, who had come to the earth to offer Himself up as the atonement for our sins. No one has ever been closer to salvation than this man. He could have appealed to Jesus as the other robber did, and Jesus would have saved him—but he did not. Many times it has been said, "If I could have heard Him preach, if I could have talked to Him in the flesh, I would have believed!" This robber had those opportunities, but he threw them away.

Third, we note that Jesus' mercy is extended to us right up until the last moment of life. Apparently, the penitent criminal who was crucified that day appealed to Jesus over and over to remember him when He came to His kingdom. Jesus must have turned His head to look upon him as He said, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Jesus had told a parable about workers going into the vineyard at the eleventh hour (or five o'clock, one hour before the workday ended). These workers, He said, received the same wages as those who had arrived earlier and worked all day (Matthew 20:14). At the cross, Jesus practiced what He had taught.

This man may have been the first one Jesus ushered into Paradise. He had been a criminal up to the last few hours of his life. His salvation illustrates the great breadth and depth of Jesus'

divine mercy. The conditions of his salvation were exceptional, not typical, however. At Pentecost, the Gospel Age arrived. The apostles taught that people must obey the gospel to be saved. In this last age of human history, people are saved by obedience to the gospel. We cannot look upon Jesus in the flesh and ask Him to save us, as this criminal did. Still, the robber reminds us that Jesus will receive any genuine soul who appeals to Him on the terms of His gospel, even at the last hour of his life.

Fourth, let us be reminded by this scene that our darkest hour can be our brightest moment. Crucifixion was a terrible way to die. No one could argue that hanging on the cross would be the darkest conclusion to life that a human being could experience. It would be filled with the depths of humiliation, physical agonies, and mental tortures, all of which were experienced before the gawking eyes of the public. However, if this criminal had not been crucified when he was—if he had not been executed beside Jesus—would he have been saved? His horrid hour brought him side by side with Jesus, the Son of God. In Paradise, he must have fallen at Jesus' feet and declared, "My darkest night was my brightest day because You were beside me!" Let us all understand that we can turn our worst days into our best days if we put our eyes on Jesus, begin to trust fully in Him, and follow Him with obedience and perseverance.

Eddie Cloer



It has been said that at Calvary one died in sin, one died to sin, and One died for sin. Thank God today that you have died to sin, and live each moment in the One who has died for your sin.

*There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins,
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood
Lose all their guilty stains.*

*The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day;
And there have I, as vile as he,
Washed all my sins away.¹*

¹William Cowper, "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood" (www.ctsfw.edu/etext/hymnals/tlh/fountain.tlh; Internet, accessed 20 September 2007).