
The Criminal Who Died a Criminal

"One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, 'Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!'" (Luke 23:39).

In fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 53:9a, "His grave was assigned with wicked men," Jesus was crucified between two criminals. Matthew said, "At that time two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and one on the left" (Matthew 27:38).

According to renderings of the ASV, NASB, and NIV, these men were "robbers" (Matthew 27:38; Mark 15:27). The KJV has "thieves." The Holy Spirit used the Greek word *lestes* (λησταις) to describe them. This word depicts one who robs by force and violence. Jesus used the same word to describe the robbers in His parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30). Luke called them *kakourgous* (κακουργους), which the NASB translates "criminals" and the KJV and ASV translate "malefactors" (Luke 23:32). This is a term for violent wrongdoers. These two may have been revolutionaries who had set out to overthrow Rome. If so, their aggression against the state had led them into robbery, pillage, and murder. They had been "justly" arrested and sentenced to death, the penitent outlaw said (Luke 23:41).

It could be that Pilate added the two men to the schedule of executions for that day for the sake of convenience. Perhaps He had been holding them for crucifixion, and he was just waiting for an opportune time to put them to death. It is also possible that He chose to crucify them with Jesus to add to the degradation of the setting. That is, by executing their King between two notorious bandits, he was getting back at the Jews for the trouble they had caused him. On the other hand, it could be that these two

men were already slated to die with Barabbas on this Friday. Three crosses had been prepared for them and were ready for use. However, when asked, the Passover crowd had chosen Barabbas, the worst of the three, to be released, and Jesus was put on his cross.

In the furor that arose over the trial of Jesus, it must be that these two men were put into the death procession without the scourging that usually preceded crucifixion. They were made to carry their cross beams on their shoulders as they were led to Calvary. There, they were nailed to crosses that were erected on each side of Jesus.

As they entered the dark corridor of agony that stretched from the erection of their crosses to their dying upon them, they apparently began their journey by mocking Jesus. Both of them joined the crowd and the Jewish leaders in hurling insults at Him. Matthew said, "The robbers who had been crucified with Him were also insulting Him with the same words" that were spoken by the passersby and the chief priests (Matthew 27:44).

After some time had passed, one of the criminals underwent a change of mind about Jesus. He went from being a wrongdoer to becoming a disciple, from having the heart of a robber to having that of a believer. He had watched Jesus, observed His reaction to the people and to the crucifixion, and heard His prayers. What he had seen and heard had convinced him that Jesus was indeed the Christ and would soon be entering into His kingdom. Consequently, when the other robber continued his insults against

Jesus, this man—the one who was making his way into salvation—answered him with a fitting rebuke. Luke wrote, “But the other answered, and rebuking him 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).

The Holy Spirit chose to give us a small but heart-rending picture of the malefactor who died in sin. He told us what the man said, what kind of attitude he had, and how he died. He was so close to Jesus and yet so far away from Him! He stood at the open door of salvation but chose not to walk through it. He entered into the presence of Jesus as a loser and left His presence in the same condition. What mistakes did he make? What went wrong?

Here is a man who did not take notice of where he was. He was in the presence of Jesus, but he did not recognize it. He saw everyone at the cross but Jesus. It is common for us to say, “If I were able to see Jesus—if I could actually hear Him and look upon His face—then I would believe.” However, this man had such an opportunity and still failed to grasp the significance of his situation.

We must remember that our most unusual predicaments may offer our best moments of opportunity. Only a few people in the history of the world have had the privilege of seeing Jesus close up. Only two were hanging next to Him as He died. This man had a great opportunity, but he never saw the glory of it. He gave in to the pain and to the crowd and missed this supreme experience of the ages—that of dying beside Jesus!

He listened to the crowd rather than to Jesus. Those nearby were taunting Jesus. “And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads and saying, ‘You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross’” (Matthew 27:39, 40). The chief priests, scribes, and elders were uttering similar taunts. Hearing these people, he thoughtlessly joined them and cast the same insults at Him. He turned to Jesus, having imbibed the spirit of those around the cross, and said, “Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and

us!” (Luke 23:39). He did not listen to Jesus’ prayers or study His conduct. He allowed the senseless people beneath the cross to tell him what to say and think.

He did not honestly weigh the evidence that he had. God gave this man sufficient evidence. Not much is revealed about him, but we can see that what teaching God gave him was enough. The other thief took what he was given, accepted it, believed, and was taken into Paradise. This thief could have done the same. For someone who is willing to believe, who wants the truth, God provides all the evidence that is needed. For one who refuses to believe, even the finest evidence—such as Jesus’ hanging on His cross—is not convincing enough.

He did not seize the moment he was given. At the end of his life, the thief was given a brief time with Jesus—only about six hours. It may be that most of his life, prior to his crucifixion, had been filled with mistakes. He had traveled down a road that had eventually brought him to this cross. However, in that span of time that included walking to the cross and six hours of hanging on it, he was given sufficient time to turn to Jesus as the other robber did. God did not let him, as evil as he was, go out of this world without bringing him face to face with Jesus. The final moments of his preparation for eternity were spent beside the Son of God. His eternal destination was decided as he chose the influence of mockers at the foot of the cross over that of Jesus, who, just a few feet away, was dying for him and all the sinners of the world. He spurned this golden moment before he slipped forever away from the land of the living.

God can take the worst day and turn it into the best day if we put ourselves into His hands. Can you picture a more horrible scene than that of being crucified? For this man, it was an especially great tragedy. He had given his life to revolution, crime, and destruction. He had been captured, convicted, and sentenced to a terrible death. This man’s biography is lined with sin, filled with pain, and wrapped in failure. His life seems to have been void of hope. Even though he was unaware of it, his life was to be displayed before the world in the holy Scriptures until the end of time. His story would have been very different if he had

looked at Jesus, believed on Him, and turned to God. He could have accepted the evidence presented to Him and asked Jesus to save him, as the other thief did. Jesus would have received him gladly, even at this late stage in his life, and escorted him into Paradise. His sad story might have become one of the most beautiful stories ever told, one of the most amazing illustrations of God's grace recorded in the Bible.

His opportunity came, but he chose not to take it. He was suspended on a cross beside Jesus, but he went through those terrible hours without asking Jesus to make him part of His kingdom. He may have told himself many times in his life, "If I just had one good opportunity, I would take it and live. If life would just give me one shining moment, one special hour, I would seize it and make someone out of myself." God gave him that great moment. He opened before him the door to eternal life, but the robber failed to see that opportunity or to seize it.

Soon the soldiers came and broke his legs. John said, "So the soldiers . . . broke the legs of the first man and of the other who was crucified with Him" (John 19:32). As they crushed his legs, he no doubt yelled out in pain with his final ounces of energy. With his legs now unable to support his body, he sank down, hanging upon the nails in his hands. He gasped for his breath

but could not inhale and exhale properly. After a brief, frantic struggle to prolong his life, he suffocated; he went to meet the God who loved him and had tried to save him. He went into eternity to spend its ceaseless ages thinking of what might have been.

When is a robber not a robber? When is a murderer not a murderer? Once a person steals or kills, is he always a robber or a murderer? The good news of the gospel is this: When Jesus, through His precious blood, forgives a man, then in God's eyes he is no longer what he *was*. Two wrongdoers were crucified beside Jesus, one on the right and the other on the left. One died a wrongdoer, but the other—through God's glorious grace—died a saint.

Eddie Cloer



"Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:9b-11).