

**The Gospel of Luke (#106);
The Crucifixion of Christ (2)**

Last Lord's Day we began to consider Luke's record of our Lord's way to the place of His crucifixion. We read of Simon, whom the Romans compelled to carry the cross of Jesus. The Romans had pressed upon Simon this task due to the weakened condition of Jesus from the abuse under which He had been unjustly regarded and treated. And when many women of Jerusalem followed Him, mourning as to what He was about to suffer upon His cross, Jesus exhorted them to consider the horrific judgment that would come upon them and their children. The wrath of God would fall upon the people of Israel for having refused to receive Him as their promised Lord and Savior.

Before us today we read of our Lord's arrival to the place of His crucifixion. Luke recorded that He was crucified between two criminals. From His cross the first words of Jesus spoken were a prayer to His Father to forgive them who had perpetrated this injustice upon Him. Luke then wrote of the hard hearts of the Roman soldiers, who were indifferent, even cruel, in their regard and treatment of Jesus on His cross. But then we read of a wonderful happening, in that one of the criminals, who was crucified beside Jesus, showed forth a spirit of repentance and expressed faith in the Lord Jesus. Here, therefore, we read of one of the greatest displays of the mercy and grace of God in saving a sinner even at the end of his life, just as he was to enter eternity. Here is Luke 23:32 through 43:

There were also two others, criminals, led with Him to be put to death. ³³And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left. ³⁴Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."

And they divided His garments and cast lots. ³⁵And the people stood looking on. But even the rulers with them sneered, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God."

³⁶The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself."

³⁸And an inscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew:

THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

³⁹Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us."

⁴⁰But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." ⁴²Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

⁴³And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

We may consider our passage in four divisions. First, we read of our Lord's crucifixion and His prayer for sinners (23:32-34a). Secondly, Luke shows forth the hardness of hearts of the Roman soldiers who crucified Jesus (23:34b-36). Third, we read of the inscription hung on the cross above the head of Jesus (23:38). Lastly, Luke recorded the coming to salvation of a guilty, condemned sinner at the time of his death (23:39-43).

I. Our Lord's crucifixion and His prayer for sinners (23:32-34a)

We first read of our Lord's arrival to the place of His crucifixion in **verses 32 and 33**.

There were also two others, criminals, led with Him to be put to death. ³³And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left.

Our Lord was brought to the place of His crucifixion along with two criminals. In some translations, these criminals are referred to by the old English term, malefactors. A malefactor is a troublemaker, a scoundrel, a lawbreaker, an outlaw. It is possible that they were thieves, who perhaps used violence toward their victim(s), so as to incur the penalty of death. It is possible they had been cohorts in the same crime. Both were caught, tried, and condemned. When the Romans crucified these three men, they placed Jesus in the center, between the two men. Perhaps they intended to convey that Jesus was as guilty and deserving of condemnation as these other two men, in that they died together. Perhaps having hung Jesus in the middle, it displayed Him to be the worst of the three.

That Jesus was crucified along with two thieves was itself an Old Testament prophecy regarding the coming, suffering Messiah. Over 700 years before this crucifixion, Isaiah the prophet wrote of the Messiah,

Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great,
And He shall divide the spoil with the strong,
Because He poured out His soul unto death,
And He was numbered with the transgressors,
And He bore the sin of many. (Isa. 53:12)

The crucifixion occurred at “the place called Calvary”, according to the New King James Version (& the KJV). The Greek word translated “Calvary” is *κρανίον* (*cranium*), from which we derive our English word, cranium. This is why this verse in the ESV is translated as “the place that is called The Skull.” This is the way that the NIV and the NASV also translates the word. Interestingly, the only place in the Bible the word, “Calvary”, is used, is here in Luke 23:33 in the NKJV. The word, Calvary, is not found in the ESV, the NIV, or the NASV. The other Gospels, rather than employing the Greek word translated Calvary, refer to the place Jesus was crucified as Golgotha, which is the Hebrew word for “the place of the skull.”¹

The first words recorded of Jesus from His cross were the voiced prayer to His Father on behalf of those who had maltreated and crucified Him. We read in **verse 34**, “***Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.’***” This is also a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. It is set forth in the same verse as we read above.

Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great,
And He shall divide the spoil with the strong,
Because He poured out His soul unto death,
And He was numbered with the transgressors,
And He bore the sin of many,
And made intercession for the transgressors. (Isa. 53:12)

Here in our Savior’s prayer from His cross, we see the love of Christ for sinners displayed to a superlative degree.

How striking is this passage! While they are actually nailing Jesus to the cross, He seems to feel the injury they did to their own souls more than the wounds they gave Him and, as it were, to forget His own anguish out of a concern for their own salvation. And how eminently was His prayer heard it procured forgiveness for all that were impertinent and a suspension of vengeance even for the impenitent.” (John Wesley)

Our Lord had taught His disciples, “But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:44f). Here Jesus shows forth that He is indeed the Son of the Father in that He loved and prayed for His enemies. He was grieved and concerned for the sins of them that had hung Him to His cross. Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of the sins of His enemies.

¹¹ Cf. Mark 15:22; Matthew 27:33; John 19:17.

We read that Jesus appealed to His Father to forgive them. In **verse 34a** we read, “*Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.’*” It is not clear if Jesus was praying specifically for the Roman soldiers before Him, for they were indeed ignorant, for they were but following orders to crucify this “criminal”, or if Jesus was also praying that the Father would forgive the Jewish leaders that had persecuted Him, had secured false witnesses, and had insisted on sentencing Him although they knew He was innocent. It might be said that these Jewish leaders knew what they were doing, therefore, Jesus’ prayer may not have been directed to the Father on their behalf. It is hard to say. **Albert Barnes** (1798-1870) put the matter forward in this way.

The prayer was offered for those who were guilty of putting Him to death. It is not quite certain whether He referred to the *Jews* or to the *Roman soldiers*. Perhaps He referred to both. The Romans knew not what they did, as they were really ignorant that He was the Son of God, and as they were merely obeying the command of their rulers. The Jews knew, indeed, that He was *innocent*, and they had evidence, if they would have looked at it, that He was the Messiah; but they did not know what would be the effect of their guilt; they did not know what judgments and calamities they were bringing down upon their country. It may be added, also, that, though they had abundant evidence, if they would look at it, that He was the Messiah, and enough to leave them without excuse, yet they did not, *in fact*, believe that He was the Saviour promised by the prophets, and had not, *in fact*, any proper sense of His rank and dignity as “the Lord of glory.” If they had, they would not have crucified Him, as we can suppose that they would knowingly put to death their own Messiah, the hope of the nation, and Him who had so long been promised to the fathers.

Jesus asked His Father to forgive them for they were ignorant. Now ignorance in no way excuses their sin. But they did not sin with the knowledge of the depth and wretchedness of their desires and actions. It has been written,

We must not imagine that ignorance is a sufficient excuse for sin: for the very petition in the text intimates that, notwithstanding the murderers of Christ knew not what they did, they contracted guilt, and needed forgiveness. (Charles Simeon, 1759-1836)

And also, “Ignorance does not excuse altogether a crime if the ignorance be willful, but it diminishes its guilt.”² Nevertheless, our Lord did make His appeal for His Father to forgive them by reason of their ignorance. This is in contrast with how most would have responded to their tormentors and executioners.

Justly might He have aggravated the guilt of His murderers, and said, “These are they among whom I have wrought all My miracles; and multitudes of them have experienced My power to heal: yet this is the way in which the requite (retaliate) all My kindness: I desire therefore, O My Father, that Thou wouldest vindicate My cause, and execute upon them some signal vengeance as Thou hast on others, whose guilt was infinitely less than theirs. Let the earth open up and swallow them up, or lightning descend from heaven to consume them, or fire and brimstone be rained down upon them, or an angel slay hundreds of thousands of them in an instant.” He might at least have said, as the martyr Zachariah did in similar circumstances, “The Lord look upon it and requite (retaliate) it.” But instead of this, He prayed that they might be forgiven: He sought out the only extenuating circumstance that could be thought of, and urged it as a plea on their behalf. This was a conduct truly astonishing, and worthy of an incarnate God. (Charles Simeon)

They did not know what they were doing. They did not see the gravity of their sin. But this is the common condition of people in their sin—Commonly people do not know the seriousness and the extreme consequences of their sins. Why is this so? Why is it that people do not see and regard themselves as great sinners in need of a far greater Savior? There are a number of possible reasons.

² Albert Barnes, **Notes on the New Testament Explanatory and Practical; Luke and John**, ed. Robert Frew (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1954), 157.

First, people do not see the true nature and wretchedness of their sinful condition for they have a very limited view of their own feelings and purposes while they are sinning against God. They think that they have no evil intentions towards God. They do not see themselves as opposed to God or that God is opposed to them. In their sin they are simply doing what they themselves want to do with little or no thought or concern as to what God desires and requires of them.

Second, people do not see the true nature and wretchedness of their sinful condition because they have little understanding of the laws that God has established for His world and for which He will hold them accountable. "By the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20). But because they do not know the law of God, they have no true knowledge of their sin before God.

Third, people do not see the true nature and wretchedness of their sinful condition because they perceive that their condition is common for mankind and, therefore, they excuse themselves as merely weak or faulty, but not defiant or in rebellion to God. They think themselves as no better than others, but they also regard themselves as not any worse than anyone else. This dulls their awareness of their sinfulness before the one holy God.

Fourth, people do not see the true nature and wretchedness of their sinful condition because they think themselves to be generally better than they perceive many others in their words, attitudes, and behavior. They "conclude that their own sin is quite small."³

Fifth, people do not see the true nature and wretchedness of their sinful condition because sin does not appear exceedingly sinful at different times and in different stages of life. "Instead of looking into the mirror of God's law, they measure themselves by the standard which the sinful world has set up."

Sixth, people do not see the true nature and wretchedness of their sinful condition because in justifying themselves, they see sin as a minor failure rather than terrible evil.

Seventh, people do not see the true nature and wretchedness of their sinful condition because they feel satisfied that they have become much better than they were formerly. They are still wretched and sinful, but they believe that they have come quite far along in the things of God. They regard themselves by this standard: "But you should have seen how I used to be!", and so they have a false contentment in their present state. Their standard is their former condition, not the perfect holiness of God to which we are to aspire and strive. Jesus said to His disciples, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt. 5:48).

Eighth, people do not see the true nature and wretchedness of their sinful condition for they wrongly conclude from the delay of punishment that their sins must not be terribly evil.

But the greatest reason that people do not see the true nature and wretchedness of their sinful condition is because God has hardened their hearts so that they cannot perceive and cannot receive the truth regarding their sinful condition. For that one God has purposed to bring forth His judgment upon them for their sin. They are as most of the Jews during the days of the ministry of the Lord Jesus. We read in John's Gospel of God's dealings with them:

But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him,³⁸ that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke: "Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?"³⁹ Therefore they could not believe, because Isaiah said again:

⁴⁰"He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts,
Lest they should see with their eyes,
Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,
So that I should heal them." (John 12:37-40)

There is a judicial hardening that God may bring upon those sinners who continually resist the teaching of Holy Scripture, who disregard the promptings and convictions of conscience that the Holy Spirit brings to bear upon the soul, who refuse to respond to the merciful and gracious dealings of God in His patience and forbearance of them while they are sinning against Him.

³ Jabez Burns, **500 Sketches and Skeletons of Sermons** (Kregel Publications, 1952, 1981), 196.

Now sadly, these people standing at the foot of the cross were very ignorant of their great wickedness in crucifying the Son of God. They put Jesus to an open shame. They perceived no relevant application of His death for themselves and the well-being of their souls. But their ignorance of the true nature and great gravity of their sin did allow for God to deal with them in mercy and grace. The mercy of God can never be earned, expected, or demanded of God, for mercy is the sovereign act of God toward those He chooses to favor. He may show mercy, if He chooses to do so, but He also may withhold mercy, and He is just, if He does so. He declared, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion” (Rom. 9:15). But one can sin in such manner, that is, with significant understanding and intention, that he may forfeit the mercy of God. The apostle Paul had been one of the foremost persecutors of the church, but because he had done so in ignorance, He obtained the mercy of God. In other words, even though his attitude and actions toward the Lord Jesus and His people were so terribly wicked before the Lord had appeared to him on the road to Damascus, Paul had not forfeited the privilege of being a recipient of God’s mercy and grace toward Him in Christ. Paul wrote these words,

And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, ¹³although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. ¹⁴And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. (1 Tim. 1:12)

But if we truly knew ourselves, and were genuinely honest with ourselves, we would readily admit that we all commit sin in a measure of ignorance. We should all acknowledge it is only due to the sovereign grace of God that He purposed to have mercy on us and to reveal the Savior to us, incline our hearts to seek and to know Him, and to enable us by His grace to believe on Him for the saving of our souls.

Our Lord Jesus prayed to His Father to forgive those who had crucified Him. The world cries out for revenge, but Christians, if thinking rightly, follow the example of their Lord. They pray that God would pardon those who spitefully use them, even as they bear abuses and persecution patiently, even while they give the matter to the Lord to deal with in His own way and in His own time.

II. The hardness of hearts of the Roman soldiers who had crucified Jesus (23:34b-36).

Luke records the indifference, the absence of compassion, the total disregard for the suffering to which these soldiers had subjected Jesus. We read in **verses 34b through 36**,

And they divided His garments and cast lots. ³⁵And the people stood looking on. But even the rulers with them sneered, saying, “He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God.”

³⁶The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, “If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself.”

There were many Old Testament prophecies fulfilled through the death of Jesus Christ on His cross. In this statement that the soldiers had divided His garments, we have the fulfillment of Psalm 22:18, which reads, “They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture.” This psalm was penned by King David a thousand years before its fulfillment in the death of Christ.

But while the Roman soldiers sat down and gambled for His clothing, we read of the reactions of others present before the cross. The “people stood looking on” (23:35a). Perhaps they could be moved to sympathy for what they were witnessing. But then we read that the Jewish rulers “sneered” (23:35b). Perhaps the Jewish rulers were concerned about the people having had a measure of sympathy toward Jesus being crucified, so they took steps to prevent this. “Sneering” is a terrible weapon, which when engaged alienates people and cuts off any cause for sympathy or ability to view a matter objectively.

Be alert to what is happening when one in your presence derides another person or group of persons, attempting to discredit him or them in your eyes. To try and discredit someone before others, to attempt to destroy a man’s reputation or character is a transgression of the spirit of the seventh commandment, “Thou shalt

not bear false witness.” In destroying a man’s good name, it may diminish or discredit his positive influence of others.

What did these rulers say in their derision of Jesus? “He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God.” Ignorant themselves of the nature of the Messiah’s work, they appeal to the ignorance of those present. “Surely”, they must have thought, “if He *were* the Christ, He would save himself.” In their ignorance they chose their own destruction in their rejection of His rule over them.

But meanwhile the soldiers “mocked.” They said to Jesus, “If you are the king of the Jews, save Yourself.” They, too, assumed that if a man has the ability to deliver himself from suffering, then he will by all means employ it. He would be a fool to do otherwise. But for Jesus, to be self-seeking rather than self-denying is the essence of sin. Jesus never would or never could sin in such a manner. He would be obedient to His Father, even unto death, even the death by means of His cross.

When we repent of sin and turn to Christ for salvation this is essentially what we are doing. We are saying, “Lord, as You give me grace, I will no longer live for myself but rather, will do so in service to others, but supremely in service to You. Lord, do I purpose to order my life, I will choose to die rather than recant.” That is the essence of the Christian life without which one cannot legitimately claim to be Christian.

III. The inscription hung on the cross above the head of Jesus (23:38).

Verse 38 records, “*And an inscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.*” This sign was intended to be a further mockery. However, it is but another example of historic irony recorded in the Gospels. What was intended to be mockery was in actuality a statement of truth. He was indeed the king of the Jews! But the Jewish leaders and their people refused to submit to Him. They had crucified their Messiah, their promised King.

“This is the King of the Jews” was written in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. Greek was the societal language of the day; people conversed in Greek. Latin was the political language of the day, that of law. Hebrew was the religious language of the people of God, which was little used except among the religious leaders. All classes, all nationalities, all peoples rejected this Man as the king of the Jews, nevertheless, He was in fact the promised king of Israel, the Son of David, the Son of God.

IV. Luke recorded the coming to salvation of a guilty, condemned sinner at the time of his death (23:39-43).

It is at this point we come to this amazing conversation between these three dying men. Two thieves hung on crosses, one on each side of the Lord Jesus. *Two eternal destinies of mankind* are portrayed before the world in these two men hanging next to Jesus. Both men were facing impending death followed by their judgment before God. One of these men would be saved from his sin when judged by God. He was granted *the gift of eternal life* in the kingdom of God over which Jesus is Lord. Everlasting happiness was his destiny. He is now dwelling with all other believers in the presence of God. The other man’s destiny was equal in duration to that of the first man, but his fate is too frightful and terrible to fathom. He would not be saved from his sin before his Judge; rather, he would receive *his just condemnation*. One of these criminals is in *heaven* today with the Lord; the other criminal is in *hell* today, described in Scripture as a place of endless torment, suffering the just, eternal punishment, for sin against a holy, eternal God. And so, two destinies of mankind were displayed publicly for all to see, and the Determiner of their destiny hung on a cross between them. Would it not be vitally important for us to consider these two and what issues separate them so that we might assess which thief might represent us? Let us do so by first considering...

A. What these two criminals had in common

1. Both men were facing eternity immanently.

Each would soon die and stand before God. Both were criminals. Both had been tried. Both had been condemned. Both were now undergoing execution. And yet, one seemed to be unconcerned about his eternal destiny, while the other was quite concerned. They both revealed their perspective of themselves and their

standing before God in the way they related to the Lord Jesus hanging on His cross between them. Both these men were facing eternity. Both these men had need of salvation. But look how serious a matter the one viewed eternity and what little regard the other possessed!

The prospect of immanent death has different effects on different people. It will lead some to recognize the inevitable. They assess themselves and move “to put their house in order”, meaning settling affairs, paying off debts, fulfilling obligations, making needful provisions for those who will survive them. They reflect on God and eternity, and move to make peace with Him and obtain some measure of peace with others in the prospect of soon facing Him. This is how people should react to the news of certain death. But for others who know they will soon face death, they seem to harden themselves and give themselves over to even more riotous living. Their motto is “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” We should always consider our end. Our entire lives should be lived out in the prospect of life’s end and our standing before God in judgment. This is difficult to do, especially for younger people.

Sometimes God in His mercy will use a tragic and sudden death to awaken people to their mortality. When the Lord saved me from my sin and my sinful self, I was 19 years of age. Several events occurred within a few weeks that brought me to my knees before Him. One of these events was the sudden death of a good friend. We were out partying one night, he and I. The next day Randy Silvera went squirrel hunting with another friend of ours. As they were climbing a hill the friend slipped, hitting the butt of his 22 caliber rifle on the ground causing the gun to fire. The bullet went through Randy’s head, killing him. He was a very popular young man, a strong football star, and a friend to many, but he suddenly passed into eternity. It shook the entire town. All of the young people for the first time were confronted with the uncertainty of life and the certainty of eternity. Thankfully, the gospel was proclaimed among us. But for most, the effects of the event wore off with time, and life went on. The Lord during that time confronted me with the reality of not only death, but also my sin, and my certain judgment. I became fearful, even alarmed at the prospect of facing God. That fear became very acute until I trusted in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, which resulted in the assurance of God’s forgiveness and cleansing of sin.

Sudden death has the effect of awakening us to the matter of eternity. And I can say as a pastor, who has conducted many funeral services, mostly for non-Christian people, that I try and use the occasion to do just that, to remind people of the fact that there is no guarantee for life on earth tomorrow, therefore we are to order our lives today accordingly. One of the most commonly used passages of Scripture is that of **Psalm 90:12**. In reflecting upon death, we are to pray, *“Teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.”* It is a prayer of the psalmist that God would help him realize that his life is relatively brief when measured against eternity, even if it is 70 or 80 years in duration. The Psalmist sets before us the example that we are to ask the Lord to press upon us this reality, so that we order our lives wisely according to His laws, to live in faith and faithfulness unto the Lord Jesus Christ. And yet, there really are relatively few people who take this to heart, even when heard at a funeral sermon.

Some wait until the end of life, and then try and make peace with God. There is no assurance that God will be merciful then, if we reject His overtures now. In fact, the soul that purposely puts off coming to Christ to a possible future occasion, may guarantee he will never be saved. For our Lord taught in one of his parables that for one such as that, “the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 24:50f).

But thankfully, as in the case before us, there are occasions that God in His mercy will show Himself a magnanimous God in rescuing a soul from sin just before death occurs, even though that soul has foolishly squandered his life. There are many testimonies of people who died rather suddenly and unexpectedly, and then it is learned that the Lord had been wondrously gracious in revealing Himself recently to them in a manner that gave evidence they received salvation.

Now, not only were both men facing eternity immanently, but notice that in a sense,...

2. Both men had initially derided Jesus on His cross.

Luke alone among the four evangelists⁴ recorded the conversion of this one thief. The other Gospels simply record that two “robbers” were crucified with Jesus, but that they both had initially derided Jesus. Matthew 27:44 records, “And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.” And Mark recorded similarly, “Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him” (Mark 15:32). But between the time that these three men were hung on their crosses and what Luke records for us in Luke 23:39ff, something very remarkable had occurred. The mercy and grace of God brought one of these two thieves to faith in Jesus Christ unto eternal life, while the other was left to die in his sin.

But notice this rather peculiar detail, that...

3. Both men asked for “salvation.”

We read in Luke 23:42 that the one thief calls out in faith to the Lord Jesus, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” But the other thief asked also to be “saved” in a sense in 23:39: “If you are the Christ, save Yourself and us.” The first wanted salvation from his sin, the second wanted only to escape from the consequences of his sin. I fear that many so-called converts are like this second thief. They are sorry about the consequences that their sin has brought to them, but they are not sorry for the sin itself. They do not want to be saved from sin itself, for they still love sin. Christ Jesus is a Saviour from sin first and foremost. Only for the one that He saves from sin does He save from hell.

4. Both men deserved death and damnation.

Both were criminals, but one escaped his deserved fate, the other received his just due. Neither man deserved mercy; after all, the very nature of mercy is that God extends His mercy to the undeserving. Mercy is God not giving us what we deserve, even our damnation. But though both men deserved God’s condemnation, one, nevertheless, received mercy and is enjoying the fruit of God’s mercy today. He is in Paradise with His Lord. With but a Word from King Jesus, the seal of eternity was placed on him--salvation was his. And so, although both men deserved damnation, here we read that one thief was assured by Jesus of entrance into the kingdom of God, although he was on the brink of eternal ruin.

Now, this account has been a basis of hope for Christians who have unsaved loved ones soon facing death. They know that as long as a person is still living, there is opportunity for salvation. This account has also given hope directly to non-Christians who are soon facing death. There they lie, the fact of their squandered life is before their eyes, and yet there yet remains hope for them in a merciful and gracious God. How many dying people over the centuries and have despaired of hope that God would receive them when they, aware of their sins, are facing eternity? And then how many times has a Christian come to his side and opened the Scriptures to this place and read of this one thief who received mercy. The dying one is thereby encouraged to rest upon Jesus for salvation. This story has been a cause of great encouragement for sinners feeling the condemnation of sin upon themselves, nevertheless, the grace of God appears to them in Christ at the end of life to put away sin and receive the gift of eternal life.

And yet as much as this passage may bring hope, it has also been used to bring *false hope*. This story of the thief on the cross is cited to legitimize wrong things.

(1) Some will use this account to postpone turning from sin to Christ. “I have time. I may wait until the end of life and then give my heart to the Lord. I want to be saved but I want to be saved like the thief on the cross, after I have lived my life of fun and games.” God will likely be a stranger to that one in that day.

(2) Some will use this account to justify living in sin and yet being assured that they are saved. There are people who profess to be Christian, who believe that they don’t need to obey the Lord and yet they may still hope to be saved, “After all, the thief on the cross didn’t have to do anything and he yet was saved.” And so, sometimes people have abused this story which was intended to give hope of mercy for one who repents, to say that a person can be saved if he doesn’t repent. Others justify the notion that they can pick and choose the

⁴ A common term used for the writers of the four Gospels.

commandments of God to which they submit, setting aside some, and yet still think that they are true Christians, as long as they *only believe*.

A careful examination of this account will dispel these errors. And so, let us consider this redeemed thief and see just what kind of faith he had that resulted in Jesus' pronouncement, *"Today you will be with me in paradise."* We have considered what these two thieves had in common, let us now see...

B. What distinguished these two criminals from one another

1. One had a fear of God; the other did not (23:40)

We read in **verse 40** that after the one thief had derided our Lord, the other responded. *"But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation?'"* This thief knew something about the true nature of God. He knew that God was holy, righteous, and that God judged sin and sinners. He knew that he would have to render an account to God for his life. This man was aware of the fact that not only his actions, but also his words were to be assessed. The speech of this other thief shocked him. He feared for the other thief-- "How can you malign this One when you will so soon face God? Do you not know that you will have to answer for your words and deeds? What are you doing by deriding this man?"

As believers we should have such a fear of God, not terror, but reverence of God to such a degree that we should tremble over our careless and cruel words, words which deride others and seek to do them harm. This criminal, who is now in paradise, had a fear of God. Although he may never have had concern for these matters before, he was now concerned about his speech and his attitude toward others. But the other thief had no concern for the words that came out of his mouth.

2. One confessed that he deserved condemnation; the other did not (23:41a)

When the one thief rebuked the other for deriding Jesus, he said, *"We are being punished justly. We are getting what our deeds deserve."* Here is a unique man. He owned up to his sin and the judgment of God which it deserved. He was without excuse. He pled guilty. He owned up to his sin.

No one will ever be saved if he does not see that only on the merit of Jesus Christ can he be saved. This thief did not blame his mother or his wife. It was not society's fault. He was getting what his deeds deserve. He knew that he had violated the laws of God and was justly condemned. He owned his guilt, confessing it was so. You cannot drag a confession out of some people. But when a person comes to faith, he does so confessing his sin. When a believer in Christ is baptized, he is confessing his sinfulness. We often focus on the believer's identification with Jesus Christ in His death, burial and resurrection, but there is also the idea being conveyed in baptism: "My sins are a just cause of my death and I am going down into the baptismal waters to confess it is so."

If you are a non-Christian but you are hoping to become true believer, let me say this: you will never become a true Christian with the guarantee of forgiveness of sins and eternal life as long as you think little of your sins. If you refuse to see the gravity of your sin, if you make excuse for them, if you blame others as responsible for them, you will die in your sin. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He did not come to call the self-righteous, but sinners to repentance. The one who comes to Christ for salvation agrees with God's sentence as did this criminal who received God's pardon. The believer in effect says, "I am guilty. I deserve God's rebuke and condemnation for my sins. He has judged me rightly. I expect to receive my just reward, unless God saves me for Jesus' sake."

3. One had an awareness and concern respecting Jesus' innocence; the other did not (23:41b)

The believing criminal said to the other, *"We receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong."* When a person comes to Christ for salvation, not only must he be aware of his own guilt, but he must also be fully convinced of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. This thief obviously was limited in his ability to understand fully the nature of Jesus Christ. But He knew this: Jesus was innocent of any charges. "I may be guilty, but He is innocent." He knew Jesus was righteous before God and not deserving of death.

4. One believed that Jesus was the Messiah, Who would one day be manifested as King, the other, really did not (23:42).

Often times the dying thief who received salvation is set forward as a man who knew very little. People cite him to justify spiritual ignorance, or the notion that the content of what you believe is not important. But we see that this thief cannot be used to justify such things. This man really knew quite a lot. The few words of the thief recorded reveal a great measure of knowledge of God and the way of salvation through Jesus Christ.

- 1) He knew and believed that there was a life after death.
- 2) He knew that though they were all soon to die, he knew that Jesus would not abide in death. Death was not going to hold Jesus within its grip. How could it? For there was nothing about Jesus or His life that deserved death!
- 3) He knew that God was just and would not allow death to hold this One who was undeserving of death. God Himself would be unjust to allow Jesus to remain in death a fate that is reserved for those who transgress His laws. He knew that this Jesus who was dying would not abide in death, but that God the Father would raise Him from the dead.
- 4) He knew that indeed this Jesus was the promised Messiah, the One who would be king of the kingdom of God. He said, ***“Remember me when You come into your kingdom.”*** He knew that God the Father would upon raising Jesus from the dead, enthrone Him as Lord--as King, over the promised kingdom of God.

We see yet another contrast between these two:

5. One knew and believed that Jesus had the authority to forgive sinners, the other thief did not (23:42)

The thief who was saved from his sin said to Jesus, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” Though his sins were great, this thief knew that his sins were no barrier to his entrance into the kingdom, ***if the King but were to give a word.*** The dying thief who was granted a place in God’s kingdom did not know when the kingdom would be manifest, but he knew that it would come into existence and that he wanted a place in it. But how could he who was deserving of death and condemnation hope for such a thing? He had (been given) the faith to know that his sins could be pardoned freely by the King. And so he pleaded with King Jesus for His permission to enter into His kingdom.

This thief knew that He could be saved from his sin and granted eternal life through the grace of God alone through Jesus Christ alone. The Lord Jesus has the authority to pardon sin. He is able with a mere Word to pronounce salvation to the one furthest from God. How is He able to do this? Jesus Himself bore the penalty of sin when He died on the cross. When we speak of Jesus dying for sinners, we are saying that He died as their substitute. He bore in His own body the eternal wrath of God upon their sin. The justice of God is thereby satisfied with respect to any and all of His people. He is able to deliver them from the penalty of their sins, which is eternal damnation, because He bore their punishment when He died. Jesus has that kind of authority now. The most wretched hell-deserving sinner may plead for mercy, believe on Jesus Christ alone and only for his salvation, and the Lord will grant to him freely. The gospel is good news for guilty sinners.

6. One appealed to Jesus for mercy; the other did not.

This saved man knew it must be by God’s mercy that entrance was given to him (23:42). There was no time left in his life to make amends to pay back others for his past thievery. I have no doubt that he would have done so, if he could have done so, but he couldn’t.

Some teach that salvation is only given to those who deserve it. Through going to church and partaking of its sacraments, they grow more holy until the day that they are righteous in themselves and then God accepts

them. This thief could not be saved with that kind of gospel. Neither can anybody else for that matter. Indeed, if righteousness could have come through a law, God would have given it. Christ would not need to have died; “if righteousness comes by the law, then Christ is dead in vain” (Gal. 2:21). No sinner will be saved because he becomes righteous in and of himself. Sinners receive the gift of righteousness through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone (Rom. 5:17). This is the only kind of gospel that could save a man like this in his final hour on earth.

We read that the man pled for mercy and received it and even more. Not only would he be permitted entrance into paradise, but also, he would enter that existence that very day. Going into paradise alongside the Lord Jesus as He Himself entered. When a Christian dies, he or she passes into the presence of Jesus, a state of joy, peace, rest, and fellowship with the Saviour.

No response is recorded of this criminal. He was not delivered from his hard death, but I suspect that he endured his cross with hope in his heart. May every one of us have that same faith and hope that is in Jesus Christ alone.

A blessed Excerpt from
Let the Nations be Glad
By John Piper

“Charles Wesley gives us an example of how one might obey Hebrews 13:13 and go “outside the camp” and bear the abuse he endured. On July 18, 1738. Two months after his conversion, Charles Wesley did an amazing thing. He had spent the week witnessing to inmates at Newgate prison with a friend named “Bray” whom he described as “a poor ignorant mechanic.” One of the men they spoke to was “a black [slave that had robbed his master.” He was sick with a fever and was condemned to die.

On Tuesday Charles and Bray asked if they could be locked in overnight with the prisoners who were to be executed the next day[this is outside the camp!]. That night they spoke the gospel. They told the men that “One came down from heaven to save lost sinners.” They described the sufferings of the Son of God, His sorrows, agony and death.

The next day the men were loaded onto a cart and taken to Tyburn. Charles went with them. Ropes were fastened around their necks so that the cart could be driven off and leave them swinging in the air to choke to death.

The fruit of Wesley’s and Bray’s night-long labor was astonishing. Here is what Wesley wrote:

They were all cheerful; full of comfort, peace and triumph; assuredly persuaded that Christ had died for them, and waited to receive them into paradise....The black...saluted me with his looks. As often as his eyes met mine, he smiled with the most composed, delightful countenance I ever saw.

We left them going to meet their Lord, ready for the Bridegroom. When the cart drew off, not one stirred, or struggled for life, but meekly gave up their spirits. Exactly at twelve they were turned off. I spoke a few suitable words to the crowd; and returned full of peace and confidence in our friends’ happiness. That hour under the gallows was the most blessed hour of my life.
