

The Thief on the Cross

by Tricia Berg

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at Him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." And He said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." Luke 23:39-43

As a reminder, this took place during the crucifixion of Jesus:

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with Him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on His right and one on His left. Luke 23:32-33

Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if He desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way. Matthew 27:38-44

So at first they both mocked Him, but one of them turned (repented) from his unbelief. It might seem as though he took a bit of a shortcut in the way he received salvation when he received, in the last moments of his life, a promise from Jesus that he would be with Him that very day in Paradise. However, the point isn't how long he lived after his confession of faith, but that it was genuine. We all start out condemned to death and eternal punishment for our crimes (sins) like these thieves. What's

important is that we imitate the one who humbled himself and is now in heaven. His story shows how uncomplicated salvation really is.

Sadly, I feel the need, given the dangerous times we live in, to add at this point that if the thief had lived longer, he would have been expected to follow Jesus, not turn back to the world he once embraced. Empty words will not satisfy Jesus, who cannot be fooled. I do not recommend death bed confessions with the intent of living as we please up until that point. God is faithful to us and we won't miss out on anything of value if we are faithful to Him in return, starting now and continuing forever.

*So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you **abide** in my word, you are truly My **disciples**, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." John 8:31-32*

*"So therefore, any one of you who does not **renounce all that he has** cannot be My **disciple**. Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Luke 14:3-35*

*Jesus said to him, "**No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.**" Luke 9:62*

*But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. **Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.** For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and **count them as rubbish**, in order that I may gain Christ and **be found in Him**, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Philippians 3:7-11*

If we take a closer look, we can see that the thief took all of the same steps to salvation that we do today. First, he declared his belief in God and admitted that he was a sinner, deserving of the punishment of death.

*But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not **fear God**, since you are **under the same sentence of condemnation**? And **we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds**;" Luke 23:40-41a*

*For **the wages of sin is death**, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23*

*For **all have sinned** and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23*

***If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. **If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar**, and his word is not in us. 1 John 1:8-10*

Next, he recognized that Jesus was the Son of God, sinless and dying on the cross. Why do I say that? Because Jesus' only "crime" was claiming to be the Son of God, so when the thief proclaimed the innocence of Jesus, he recognized His deity. If He were not truly the Son of God, then He would have been guilty and deserving of death under the Jewish law.

*"but **this man has done nothing wrong.**" Luke 23:41b*

***Pilate went out again and said to them,** "See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that **I find no guilt in him.**" So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold the man!" When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him." **The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God."** John 19:4-7*

*So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. **For he said, 'I am the Son of God.'**" **And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.** Matthew 27:41-44*

*Jesus answered them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?" The Jews answered him, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but **for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God.**"*
36 *Do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, '**I am the Son of God**'?*
John 10:32-33, 36

*When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people gathered together, both chief priests and scribes. And they led him away to their council, and they said, "If you are the Christ, tell us." But he said to them, "If I tell you, you will not believe, and if I ask you, you will not answer. But from now on **the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God.**" So they all said, "**Are you the Son of God, then?**" And he said to them, "You say that I am." Then they said, "**What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips.**"* Luke 22:66-71

*Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you, behold, **I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing deserving death has been done by him.**"* Luke 23:13-15

Then, the thief showed that he understood Jesus is Lord and that he will rise from the dead by asking Him to remember him when He comes into His kingdom. Only a ruler has a kingdom, and needless to say, he must be alive to rule over it. So the thief had faith that Jesus would somehow live and reign over a kingdom. Even though I dislike speculation, it seems likely that the thief may have heard about Jesus' trial testimony, and he believed it. So both thieves had the same opportunity to repent and believe, but only one took advantage of it. Let's not pass up our chance. Today is the day! Jesus gave up His life a short time later, and the thieves' legs were broken to hasten their death in order that the bodies could be taken down before the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which was a High Sabbath.

And he said, "Jesus, remember me **when you come into your kingdom.**" Luke 23:42

Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'" And the high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" But Jesus remained silent. **And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."** Jesus said to him, "You have said so. **But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.**" Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his **blasphemy.** What is your judgment?" They answered, "**He deserves death.**" Matthew 26:59-66

Now the chief priests and the whole council were **seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree.** And some stood up and **bore false witness** against him, saying, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" Yet even about this their testimony did not agree. And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" But he remained silent and made no answer. Again the high priest asked him, "**Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?**" **And Jesus said, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."** And the high priest tore his garments and said, "What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his **blasphemy.** What is your decision?" And they all **condemned him as deserving death.** Mark 14:55-64

When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and **gave up his spirit.** Since it was the **day of Preparation,** and **so that the bodies would not remain on the cross**

on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their **legs might be broken** and that they might be taken away. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. 36 For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken." John 19:30-33, 36

The thief believed in his heart and confessed with his mouth. Jesus responded by assuring him that he was saved—the same assurance we have when we do the same. And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, **today you will be with me in Paradise.**" Luke 23:43

But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, **if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.** For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, "**Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.**" For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for **the same Lord is Lord of all,** bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For "**everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.**" Romans 10:8-13

"And I tell you, **everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God,** but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God." Luke 12:8-9

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that **Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,** and that **by believing you may have life in his name.** John 20:30-31

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. **For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin,** so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. Working together with Him, then, **we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.** For He says, "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation

*I have helped you." **Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.** 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2*

Of importance, when the high priest tore his robes, he disobeyed the Levitical law. Since the temple itself, everything in it, and the priesthood practices and garments foreshadowed salvation through Jesus, that was a serious offense.

*"**The priest who is chief among his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil is poured and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not let the hair of his head hang loose nor tear his clothes.**" Leviticus 21:10*

*Then **the high priest tore his robes** and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. Matthew 26:65*

*And **the high priest tore his garments** and said, "What further witnesses do we need? Mark 14:63*

In the Old Testament, there is another example of someone requesting that a ruler remember them when he receives what he was promised by God. It was when Abigail brought supplies to the anointed, but not yet crowned, King David. David kept his promise and sent for her after God struck her husband dead as punishment for his evil ways. She responded to the invitation by offering to wash the feet of David's servants. Who does that remind you of?

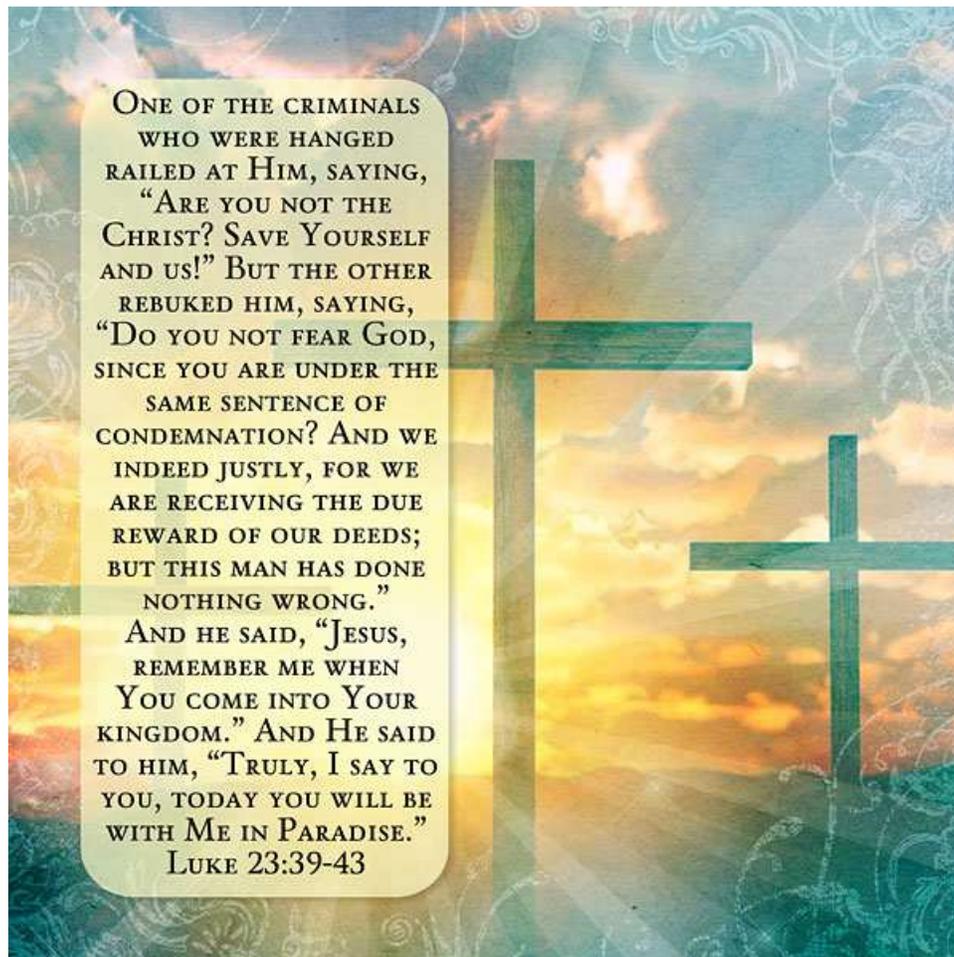
*And when **the LORD has done to my lord according to all the good that he has spoken concerning you and has appointed you prince over Israel, my lord shall have no cause of grief or pangs of conscience for having shed blood without cause or for my lord working salvation himself. And when the LORD has dealt well with my lord, then remember your servant.**" 1 Samuel 25:30-31*

*When the servants of David came to Abigail at Carmel, they said to her, "**David has sent us to you to take you to him as his wife.**" And she rose and bowed with her face to the ground and said, "Behold, **your handmaid is a servant to wash the feet of the servants of my lord.**" And Abigail hurried and rose and mounted a donkey, and her five*

young women attended her. She followed the messengers of David and became his wife. 1 Samuel 25:40-42

*When He had washed their feet and put on His outer garments and resumed His place, He said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. **If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.** For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. John 13:12-15*

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