

Remember Me: The Theology of a Thief

This may seem like more of a message that you'd hear on Good Friday or Easter, but since the very core of our faith is based on what happened on those two days, this is a topic for any season. This may be a return to "basic training" for some of you, but even an elite athlete needs to work on fundamentals from time to time. What I want to talk to you today is about the Gospel of Jesus Christ as experienced by one who had a front-row seat, so to say, at the crucifixion of our Savior.

We don't know much about either of the thieves that were executed next to Jesus; the New Testament accounts don't go into detail. We can infer a couple of things, however. First, they weren't Roman citizens. Crucifixion was such a horrible form of capital punishment that Rome reserved it only for non-citizens. Considering where this execution took place, just outside of the city of Jerusalem, it's highly likely that they were Jewish. We don't know that for sure, but it's a good probability. Second, they obviously did something to make Rome angry. Besides being a slow, painful way to die, crucifixion was also meant to send a definitive message: don't do what these people did! The condemned may have hung on a cross for days, death taking that long, with a sign of their crimes hung just above their heads, making a very visible threat of similar punishment to anyone who crossed whatever line they did. Finally, while both men had an up-close encounter with Jesus, only one of them was transformed by it. He's the one we're going to focus on in this message.

This is his account as found in the Gospel of Luke 23:39-43:

Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, [a]"If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us." But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

The main topic of this message is going to look at how some of the major components of the doctrine of salvation can be found in the exchange between our thief and Jesus. Three that we will look at are: 1) Admission of sin (acknowledgment of guilt before God) and repentance, 2) Belief in and confession of Christ, and 3) Receipt of grace or sin absolved. Let's dive in and look at the first component, admission of sin and repentance.

We're told in Romans 3:23, "*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" and in 1 John 1:9, "*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*". To acknowledge that we have sinned and are eternally separated from God, and then to truly repent, takes a paradigm shift, a 180 degree turn, of the heart, and this thief apparently had one. In the account of the crucifixion found in Matthew 27:44 we read, "Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing [insults]". In the Scriptural account from Luke that we read at the beginning, however, we see that his attitude had changed: "*Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, 'If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.' But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds.'*" So, he may have started out joining with the crowd and piling on the trash talk, but he didn't stay there. What caused the change? We'll talk about that in a minute.

Right now, I'd like to draw a comparison to another man that was caught in his sin and lies realized there was no hiding. In Psalm 51:1-4, after King David was confronted by the prophet Nathan about the adultery he committed with Bathsheba, and the subsequent murder of her husband to cover it up, he wrote, "*Have mercy upon me, O God, According to Your lovingkindness; According to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight—That You may be found just when You speak, And blameless when You judge.*" Repentance requires a

realization that nothing is hidden from God, that He sees you as you are and that He's the only one that can help you out. "Yep, Lord, this is me. I've messed up. I'm wrong and you are right."

Not too many people like to talk about the subject of sin these days, even, unfortunately, within the church. I mean, who wants to admit that they're "bad" or deficient in some way, right? Right and wrong, absolute truth, those are outdated concepts. Besides, if we want to pull people into the faith, we sure don't want to start with such a negative thought. Friends, know this: denying that you've sinned is an affront to God! When sin entered the world through Adam and Eve it caused a separation between God and man. It's a reality of our relationship with Him that can only be made whole again through Jesus Christ. Does God take it seriously? Just look at the cross and the suffering that our Savior went through, to get your answer. 1 John 1: 8,10 tells us, *"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us."* I sure don't want to tell God that He's a liar!

Many cultural ideologies do just that, however, as their proponents seek to make laws protecting sinful activities and normalize abhorrent behavior. Two extreme examples are abortion and transgenderism. Now that Roe v. Wade has been overturned, some states are seeking to codify into their own constitutions the right to abort a pregnancy for any reason at any time. Michigan is one of them. The expansion of Title IX (legislation that gave women and girls a more level playing field in school and sports) being pushed by the current administration would make the unquestioned acceptance of transgenderism the law of the land. Please check out the websites rtl.org and givehim15.com and take appropriate action. Many will say, "but God is love," and we should just accept everyone's ideas and don't judge. Well, God is also law, and the two ideas are not mutually exclusive. Explain the cross if you think otherwise.

The next component of the doctrine of salvation found in our main passage is the belief in, and confession of, Christ. Specifically, it's the belief that Jesus is Lord and that

He died for your sins and rose again. In John 3:16 it says, *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”* In Acts 16:31, when the Philippian prison guard asked what he must do to be saved, Paul and Silas told him, *“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.”* Furthermore, Romans 10:9-10 tells us pointedly, *“That if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”* This repentant thief did all that when he said to his fellow, crucified convict, *“but this Man has done nothing wrong.”* Then he said to Jesus, *“Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”* He declared that Jesus was sinless, that He was Lord, and that death wasn’t the final stop for Him!

What caused this death-bed conversion? I mean, look at the scenario. At face value, Jesus was suffering the same fate he was - death by crucifixion. I’m sure our thief had seen plenty of these scenes played out, and they never ended well for those on the cross. What would make him think that Jesus’ end would be any different. He may even at one point had considered Jesus to be just another wacky prophet, an over-hyped preacher that was sooner or later going to end up just like this. Something in the way that Jesus composed Himself, even during excruciating pain and abject humiliation, got this guy thinking, though. Maybe he heard of the miracles, or heard Jesus preach, or recalled prophetic Scriptures from his youth (assuming a Jewish upbringing), such as Psalm 22:1,14-18, which reads, *“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, and from the words of My groaning? I am poured out like water, and all My bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it has melted within Me. 15 My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and My tongue clings to My jaws; You have brought Me to the dust of death. For dogs have surrounded Me; the congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me. They pierced My hands and My feet; I can count all My bones. They look and stare at Me. They divide My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots.”* Or Isaiah 53:5, *“But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His*

stripes we are healed.” This thief was a first-hand witness to all of this! Whatever the case, he put it all together and recognized that Jesus was the King and that He wasn’t staying dead!

There’s an Important distinction that we need to make, however, and that it’s not just belief, but a saving knowledge that counts. A lot of people will say, “Oh, I believe in God,” but that belief doesn’t do anything to or for them, and it doesn’t change their behavior or thinking. James 2:19 says, “*You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!*” So, a non-transforming belief puts you on the same plain as demons. Yippy! Another scripture, though, that, to me, is the most terrifying in all the Bible is from Matthew 7:21-23 - “*Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’*” So, just going through the motions of “religious exercise” won’t cut it. What it comes down to is not whether you know Him, but does He know you? Or, to put it in a contemporary example, is Jesus really your friend, or just a “Facebook friend”? How many “friends” on social media will let you into their house?

The last component of the doctrine of salvation that we’ll consider regarding our thief, and the one on which we “hang our hats”, is the receipt of grace or the absolution of our sin. When we come to the Savior in faith, a sinful state is NOT where our merciful Father leaves us! Romans 8:1 tells us this wonderful truth, that “*that there is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.*” Why? Because of another truth bomb found in 2 Corinthians 5:21 – “*For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*” God no longer saw a thief, but His Son, and this man, who knew nothing about forgiveness, or mercy or grace, and otherwise had only a shame-filled, painful end of his earthly existence to occupy his mind, heard these marvelous words from the One hanging next to him, “*Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.*” Jesus took this raw

confession from an expiring criminal and granted unimaginable grace! Ephesians 2:8-9 tells us, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”* Our thief obviously exhibited great faith, and he was about to discover the facts behind Romans 6:23 – *“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* A life marked by darkness will end in the glorious light of an eternity with Christ!

Is it really that simple? I had a conversation with a co-worker about this, and told him that very thing: yes, it really is that simple. It’s funny, really, just how much of an anomaly to the Christian school of thought this thief is. He never had the opportunity to get baptized or take part in communion. There was no chance to receive, let alone use, any spiritual gifts. His hands may have been raised, but they weren’t necessarily in worship. (There was no opportunity to argue about the style of music or color of the carpet in the sanctuary). Nothing about this man’s experience would fit into any doctrinal box. I must wonder, though, if he isn’t the one laughing the loudest in Heaven?

To be honest, this thief represents all of us. We read in Hebrews 9:27 – *“And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment.”* We are all dying, headed to the same physical end, but not necessarily the same spiritual one. The plea of the thief is the same one we can all make to Jesus: Remember me! When failure seems to define our days, Jesus, remember me! When our relationships with our spouses, or children, or whoever is falling apart, Jesus, remember me! When our financial state is a mess, when work or school is beyond manageable, Jesus, remember me! When the doctor says we need to talk, Jesus, remember me! When we’re holding on by a thread and the thread is fraying, Jesus, remember me!

Here’s a spoiler alert: He always will remember you and NEVER will forget you! One final thought, 2 Corinthians 5:17 states, *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”* Let this be a reminder to you that, just like our thief, it’s not how you start, but how you finish!