

The Thief on the Cross

The Gospel of Matthew records that “two robbers were crucified with Jesus, one on His right and one on His left”. Mark also recorded this and said it was a fulfillment of prophecy from Isaiah 53:12. Both Matthew and Mark told us that in the beginning, both criminals were hurling abuse at Jesus challenging Him to exercise the power He claimed to have in order to get them off that cross. Only Luke recorded “the rest of the story” of the thief on the cross. Apparently after observing the character, humility, and love of Jesus even for His enemies, one of the crooks had a change of heart. This thief suddenly realized and believed that everything he had heard about Jesus was true. Jesus was the promised Messiah, the one sent into the world by God to set up The Kingdom. What did Jesus say and do to change this sinner’s mind?

First of all, Jesus was the most unique man and died the most unique death ever. Jesus had a series of trials which began before the sun came up and ended in front of Pilate. We can find at least six of these at different locations, and after each one they beat the c*# out of Him. After Pilate’s gang got through with Him He probably had very little skin left on His back and His face was not recognizable. I can imagine that He lost a considerable amount of blood and all of His nerve endings were exposed and crying out in excruciating pain. In spite of that pain, and with a long tortuous death awaiting Him, Jesus thought only of others. Look at Luke 23:28-43. Jesus looked at the women mourning Him and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children”. In other words, be concerned for your safety and make sure you are prepared for the judgment that is coming. The callous Roman guards whipped Him, nailed Him to the cross, and gambled for His clothes yet Jesus prayed out loud to His Father, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Jesus truly embodied His command in Matt.5:44 to “love your enemies”. Jesus was the only one in that whole crowd thinking of others. Can you imagine being in that kind of pain, facing that kind of death, and thinking only of others? Added to this, most of the crowd was yelling abuse at Jesus saying, if this is the Christ who can save others, let Him save Himself. Nevertheless, Jesus never insulted back or even tried to defend Himself. As the centurion would later say, “Certainly this man was innocent.”, or as he said in Matthew’s account, “Truly this was the Son of God!”(he probably said both).

Opposite Reactions

The polar opposite reactions of the two thieves crucified with Jesus make for a great contrast and study of two different reactions to the Gospel. One continued to be a mocker, only interested in getting off that cross, while the repentant thief admonished the other because he was not concerned with getting off the cross, but with getting into Heaven. Look at the reaction in Luke 23:40 of the repentant thief, “Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we are suffering justly, for we are getting what we deserve; but this man Jesus has done nothing wrong.”

That is a profound statement because without knowing it he is speaking for the entire human race that stands guilty before God, and only Jesus is without sin.

Could Jesus Actually Have Gotten Himself Off the Cross ?

The unrepentant thief, along with the crowd, challenged Jesus to exercise His supposed power and get them all down. Could Jesus have done this? Actually, no He could not have, not anymore than He could lie, cheat, or steal. Jesus was sent into the world for that purpose, to die on the cross. Jesus always did the will of the Father. Therefore it was not possible that Jesus would disobey and come down.

How Do We Know This was the Plan of God?

Jesus' death on the cross was the plan of God from the very beginning to redeem mankind. This is verifiable not only because the Scriptures say it (see Matt.26:52-54), but just look at the prophecies made 1000 years before by David in Psalm22:14-18. David described the crucifixion before it was even being used by Rome, or long before Rome even was an empire. Then David wrote in verse 18, "They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots." Now review the events of Jesus death over a 1000 years later in Luke 23:34, "and they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves." That was a pretty big risk on David's part, what if they had done rock, paper, scissors? Or what if they had flipped coins, or played Gin Rummy? I like what the prophet Daniel said when they asked him how he could make such predictions, "There is a God in Heaven who reveals mysteries".

Was Jesus immune to the fear, pain, and death? The answer is plain in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus, just prior to His arrest, agonized over the coming events and prayed to the Father in Luke 22:42-44, "Is there any other way we can do this? Can I possibly avoid the crucifixion, death, and separation from the Father? Surely there is a plan B? (my paraphrase). God answered His prayer by sending an angel to minister to Him, to comfort Him and strengthen Him. Clearly, this was the only way to redeem mankind. God's answer reveals how God usually answers desperate prayers to change circumstances. God will not remove the circumstances, but He will comfort us and give us peace in the circumstances so we can persevere.

The Gospel Within This Story of the Thief

The repentant thief acknowledged his sin and thus his great need for a Savior. The criminal also recognized Jesus as God's provision for that great need. The man recognized who Jesus was and that it was up to Jesus whether he went to Heaven or not. The thief surrendered himself to Jesus and entrusted his life to Him in Luke 23:42. Then Jesus guaranteed the man's salvation in verse 43, "today you shall be with Me in Paradise." One thief just wanted off the cross, while the other wanted off the earth. The second one was right. By all appearances, the Kingdom Jesus promised was finished,

even the closest disciples had given up hope, yet this criminal believed. He saw past the present shame to the coming glory.

Outrageously Unfair

Many critics have doubted this story, or the salvation of the thief on the cross because it seems so unfair that this guy could be a rat all of his life then suddenly before death be saved without doing anything to prove his worthiness. One guy told me, “You mean to tell me that I have worked hard all my life to do what is right, yet this guy who never did anything will be in Heaven with me?”

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

In Matt.20, Jesus taught an interesting parable that helps to explain the seeming inequity of the thief going to Heaven. In the parable, a landowner went out to hire laborers early in the morning. He agreed with the laborers on their pay for the day of one denarius. He continued to hire laborers later in the day, and even hired some with only one hour remaining to work. Amazingly, the owner paid the last guys who barely worked at all the same amount. Naturally, the guys who worked all day were shocked and complained. The owner said, “did you not agree to work for a denarius?” If I wish to give what is mine to this last man it is because I am generous. The first guy got exactly what he was promised, and the last guy got a gift that the owner had the right to give so there was no inequity. The owner correctly identified the first guy’s problem as envy. In the same way, is not the forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life that God graciously gives His generosity to all of us no matter whether we received it at the age of 5 or the day before we die? Should we limit our rewards to what we deserve? The truth is **GOD DISPENSES GIFTS, NOT WAGES**. None of us gets paid according to merit. In the realm of God’s grace, the word deserve does not apply.

Amazing Grace

In measuring up to God, we all fall way short. As Paul said in Romans 3:23, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Therefore we all need God’s grace. Somebody bluntly put it to me one time in a way I could understand. I had yelled out, “There is no justice!” The guy asked me if I wanted justice and I said yes. He then said, “Fine, then let’s start with you”. It was then that I realized I don’t want justice, I want mercy and grace. This is what makes Christianity unique. The notion of God’s love coming to us free of charge is offensive to organized religion. Others have the “eight fold path”, or the doctrine of karma, or the Jewish covenant of Law, or the “five pillars of faith”---all of which purport to earn approval by something we do.

The story of the thief on the cross is an extreme example that God’s grace does not depend on what we have done, but on what God has done for us.

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