

The Three Thieves

A few weeks ago I completed a paper called “Making a Case for Salvation.” In it I mentioned the thief on the cross whom Jesus took with Him to paradise, and how that event has so often been used to illustrate the “just in time” adequacy of coming to the faith, and for not necessarily having to provide evidence of faith through repentance obedience and works. As soon as I had finished that paper, it came to me that Scripture had something more to reveal to us if we would but examine the narrative regarding the thieves more carefully. What it was did not come to me until I prayed and pondered the matter for quite some time. What follows is the result.

There were really three thieves with which Jesus was involved during those last hours of His physical life. There were three crosses erected that fateful day. Jesus was in the middle cross and an unnamed thief was on each side of Jesus. In spite of the incredible agony they were suffering, they managed each to converse with one another right past our suffering Savior, with one of them also railing against Jesus. How strange it was that the other defended Jesus. Listen to the conversation as recorded in Chapter 23 verse 39-43 of Luke. *“And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on Him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.”*

Here we find in these few short words from the second thief:

1. A fear of God.
2. A recognition and confession of his sinful justly condemned life.
3. An admission that Jesus is God.

4. An acknowledgment of Jesus as Savior who had the ability to forgive sin, and of his own need for a Savior to deliver him from the eternal consequence of his sins.
5. An understanding that Jesus was innocent, that this was innocent blood being shed on the cross.
6. An acceptance of physical death along with recognition that there was another “life” to come.
7. A belief that even though this was God beside him, and, therefore, had the power to save His physical life as well as theirs if He chose to, He did not do so for reasons the thief may not have understood, but did not question or challenge, but accepted through faith.

All of these obviously heart-felt thoughts were converted into spoken words while the thief was dying in excruciating pain, worse than any of us can imagine. It was hardly a time when one would casually reminisce or engage in intellectual discussions or even think to connive. It was a time when only what is truly in the heart cries out.

Now let us examine what the other thief had to say, “If thou be the Christ save thyself and us.” The NIV translates his words to be “Aren’t you the Christ?” Save yourself and us.” Scripture says he was railing against Christ, but quotes only this part of the tirade. Why should he be railing against this other poor recipient of Roman justice? Clearly meanness rebellion and anger had not left his heart, and so he found it necessary to strike out at whom ever was nearby. There apparently was no hint of repentance or acknowledgment of guilt in him. All he wanted was to preserve his mortal life. There is no hint of any concern for his eternal life as there was in the words of the other thief. Did he believe that Jesus was the Messiah as He claimed? He probably had heard the same rumors about Jesus, as had the other thief. He may have even believed them. He spoke as if he did, but the difference was, that if he believed, it was all head belief, but he had no heart belief, or anything that could be called faith. Romans 10:9, 10 tells us “*that if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that*

God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."

The saved thief believed in his heart, and with his mouth he confessed that Jesus would be raised from the dead, and was thereby saved. The other thief seemed to express a belief with his mouth, but his heart was empty of any faith. How many who call themselves "Christians" are head believers, but not heart believers, believers who merely profess with their mouths but do not possess in the heart the saving Christian faith?

What about that third thief, the one who may have been scheduled to hang on that middle cross, that most fateful day ever to occur on earth? Most likely it was Barabbas. Scripture tells us that Barabbas was scheduled for execution and that it was by demand of the Jewish leadership that Pilate freed him instead of Jesus. Scripture also tells us that Barabbas was a murderer and an insurrectionist. Would he, therefore, not also have been a thief, at least in the sense that he took someone's life? How ironic it is that Pilate, for fear of Caesar, although he found Jesus innocent of any crime, condemned Him on the basis of His being an insurrectionist in that He called Himself the King, yet he released Barabbas, a genuine convicted insurrectionist, merely at the urging of the Jewish leaders. Is this evidence of the cunningly deceptive power of Satan, ruling the hearts of his own? Yet here, with this monumental and seemingly victorious decision from Satan's perspective, this was, in fact, a procedure exactly in accordance with God's plan regarding the means by which God would save man.

Try to imagine Barabbas' frame of mind when the jailer came for him that day. He had every reason to believe that he was about to be taken to Calvary to be nailed to a cross. Yet, when the chains that held him to the cell wall were removed, what did the jailer do? He simply handed him a small document and said "get out of here, you are free." Huh? Free? What do you mean free? You mean I can just go? No punishment? Perhaps the jailer even explained that someone else was to die in his place. Nevertheless, we can be sure that Barabbas wasted no time leaving that place. Scripture tells us nothing more about him or what became of him. Curiosity very likely caused him to seek a fuller explanation. Perhaps he even came to realize that his life was saved by God Himself who

died on the cross in his stead. Could he have realized that he was the only one in the history of the world, past, present and future, that was saved from earthly punishment by the substitutionary death of God Himself? Probably not! Although something must have stirred his heart if he thought about it at all, most likely having witnessed the three hours of daytime darkness, along with the earthquake, and heard that the “veil of the Temple was rent and torn from top to bottom.” (Matthew 27:51). Unless he took off to a far unknown place or died soon after, he must have heard stories about this Holy Substitute by whose death, he lived. He must have been aware that something extremely special had occurred of which he was the most fortunate beneficiary. Perhaps he even heard that among Jesus last words was “tetelesti” translated “it is finished” or more appropriately, “paid in full.” This may have triggered in him a most profound connection with Jesus as he reexamined that little document the jailor gave him as he left the prison. On it was stamped “tetelesti”, “paid in full” the evidence he would always carry with him to prove to the world that his debt to Caesar had been paid in full, and that he could never again be convicted or imprisoned of that same crime. But had he paid in full for his crime? Of course not, and he well knew it. It was Jesus who paid in full, just as our precious Substitute paid in full for all of the sins of those who believe on Him. Although those who believe, and through faith are saved to eternal life are eternally grateful, and live lives which demonstrates that gratitude, isn't it possible that the witnessing and partaking of this incredible event led Barabbas to a condition, whereby he too might have been saved eternally?

Scripture causes us to believe, such as through Matthew 7:22, 23, that many of us will be surprised on that fateful day of the Lord, surprised as to where we end up, as well as the fate of others whom we thought would have had eternal destinies different from what will then be revealed. I urge you to look with great concern to your own destiny, so that you will not be tragically surprised.