

## The Salvation of the Thief on the Cross

<sup>38</sup> And an inscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS <sup>39</sup> Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us." <sup>40</sup> But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? <sup>41</sup> And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." <sup>42</sup> Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." <sup>43</sup> And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." Luke 23:38–43 (NKJV)

At the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, one of the two criminals who was crucified next to Him was eternally saved. What does his story teach about salvation?

### Some Background

Luke is the only Gospel that records this story in full. Along with Matthew and Mark, Luke mentions that the two thieves taunted Jesus, but Luke is the only Gospel that mentions one of the thieves has a change of mind to which Jesus responds with a promise. Though they are usually called "thieves," the word Matthew uses (from *lēptēs*) can mean *robber, insurrectionist, or revolutionary*. Luke's word for them (from *kakourgos*) can mean *criminal or evildoer*, which suggests gross misdeeds. Regardless, these men were bad and they admitted they deserved punishment (Luke 23:40-41).

Before the repentant thief expresses his faith in Jesus Christ, the contexts of the three Gospels suggest that this criminal would have witnessed Jesus praying for His scoffing murderers: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34), and seen the placard on Jesus' cross that read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." The thief may have witnessed other supernatural phenomena, such as that which caused the Roman centurion and his cadre to declare, "Truly this was the Son of God" (Matt. 27:54). Luke records the centurion saying, "Certainly this was a righteous Man!" (Luke 23:47). Apparently, Christ's crucifixion changed the minds of a number of people.

### What the thief seems to know

Using Luke's account, it is reasonable to assume that the thief knows or comes to know these facts:

- He knows he is a sinner.
- He knows he deserves condemnation because of his sins.
- He recognizes he is not worthy of Jesus' mercy.
- He recognizes Jesus' innocence.
- He witnesses Jesus' forgiving spirit toward severe sinners.
- He acknowledges Jesus is the Lord, King of the Jews, and thus the Messiah.
- He believes the Messiah is dying on the cross as Savior and He will rise from the dead to rule.
- He believes Jesus can grant a secure eternity together with Him.

### What the thief does not do

- He expresses no moral claim to Jesus' favor.
- He does no good works that he could claim as merit before God.

# Grace Notes

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- He does not prove that he does or would turn from his sins.
- He has no good works to prove he would persevere in his new faith.
- He is not nor does he promise to be baptized.
- He does not indicate that he is making Jesus Master of all of his life.
- He does not make the commitments of discipleship.
- He shows no growth in sanctification.
- He does not ask for temporal deliverance from crucifixion.
- He does not express his faith verbally in a way we would expect.

### What the thief does

- He changes his mind from being a scoffer towards Jesus to acknowledging Him as Lord.
- He expresses his change of mind by a request of faith in what Jesus could do for him.
- He believes in who Jesus is as the Messiah-King and asks for a future with Him in His kingdom.

### What we learn about salvation

- God's grace saves the worst of sinners.
- God's grace will be given to anyone who asks for it through faith in Jesus Christ as Savior.
- Grace is essentially unfair. The promise of an eternal future with Christ is as valid for the thief in his last moments as it is for those who lived a longer moral life (egs., Nicodemus, the apostle Paul, Cornelius).
- Grace gives us more than we deserve or expect. Though deserving eternal condemnation, Jesus grants this thief eternal life and a personal relationship with Him. The promise of a future in Paradise with Jesus refers to an immediate transfer to the place of the dead, which at that time was divided into Hades and Paradise (see Luke 16:19-26).
- Grace helps the helpless. At this point, the thief is unable to do anything at all to save himself.
- Jesus came to save sinners like this criminal, not the righteous (i.e., self-righteous, Luke 5:32).

### Conclusion

Ultimately, we do not know why the condemned thief changed his mind about Jesus. The other thief who is being crucified mockingly raises the issue of whether Jesus is the Christ (Luke 23:39). While that thief obviously *rejects* Jesus as the Messiah, the thief who gets saved *accepts* Jesus as the Messiah. Besides the events this thief witnesses from his own cross, something about Jesus' crucifixion may have helped change his mind. In John 12:32-33, Jesus indicates that His death on the cross would be a moral influence, an attraction, that will draw people to Himself: "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself." This He said, signifying by what death He would die" (see *GraceNotes* no. 75, "How God Draws People to Salvation."). We learn from the thief's deathbed request that simple faith in who Jesus is and what He can deliver brings salvation, even in one's final moments of life. We also learn that no one is beyond the reach of God's love, grace, and forgiveness.