

The Two Thieves

Luke 23:32-43

Online Sermon: http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page_id=3567

**“Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”
Hebrews 11:1**

Should not those whom have God’s holy Word and His Spirit living inside of them have such a great faith that nothing is impossible for them to do (Matthew 17:20)? One would think so, but one can’t help but be influenced by the sifting sands of culture that is constantly bombarding God’s children with the message that truth is relative to the individual and self-seeking pleasure is the goal of living a fulfilled life! We study our Bible and try to emulate the example Christ gave us (John 13:15) but our faith is weak because we see so few Christians able to fulfill God’s commands to keep their ways pure and holy (Psalms 119 9-16; 1 Peter 1:16). If only we could find someone with the faith of Abraham whom was willing to sacrifice his own son or David whom stood before Goliath or Daniel whom in the face of the lion’s den refused to stop worshipping God or Peter and John whom in the face of death refused to stop speaking about Christ; then maybe we might become inspired to believe God can do anything, even remove our mountains of unbelief! Are we doomed then to give up in despair and chose the easy path of mediocrity and lukewarmness? And if we as Christians can’t find examples of holiness then how are we to be “living witnesses” of faith in God to the lost of this world? The following sermon is going to examine the testimony of the two thieves on the cross to illustrate first that even though God has given many over to their reprobate minds (Romans 1:26-28) no one or is beyond redemption; and second that faith is not to be dependent on circumstances but on belief that God is sovereign and can do the impossible!

The Failure of Human Wisdom



Before we can truly understand the responses of either thief to the crucifixion of Christ, we need to understand how badly humanity failed our Savior. Before the creation of this world God knew we must send His Son Jesus to take away the sins of this world (Ephesians 1:4; Revelation 13:10). When the appointed time arrived Jesus, whom shared in the very nature and was equal to God (Philippians 2:7),¹ chose to take on the

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Philippians*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Peabody, MA: Baker Books, 2011), 68.

nature of the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. Born both of God and man (Matthew 1:18) Jesus came to earth with the glorious message that entrance into the kingdom of God was not based on genealogy, nationalism, temple or Torah but on belief in His atoning sacrifice. The moment Christ announced God's sovereignty those in positions of power and authority began to oppose Him. Despite His endless miracles (John 21:25) that clearly demonstrated His rule over the physical and spiritual world (Colossians 1:16), our courts unjustly sentenced Him to be crucified. The Jewish courts charged Him with blasphemy for calling God His Father and therefore equal to Him (John 5:16; Matthew 26:57-68) and the Roman courts while finding Him innocent gave into the public pressure and had Him crucified.² Truly human wisdom is foolishness in the sight of God (1 Corinthians 1:25)!

The Mocking Thief

Based on merely human wisdom it is easy to understand why one of the thieves mocked Jesus. Surely someone whom fed five thousand with just a few loaves and fish (Mark 6:31-44), casted out demons from two possessed men (Matthew 8:28-34), healed the leper and paralytic



(Mark 1:40-45, 2:1-12), raised both Jairus' daughter and Lazarus from the dead (Mark 5:21-24, John 11:1-46) and commanded the winds and sea to obey Him (Mark 4:35-41, 6:45-52); would be more than capable of saving Himself and them! The thief probably thought to himself are the Jews correct in rejecting Jesus as the Messiah, after all how could one claim to have defeated Rome when one is experiencing their "most cruel and horrifying method of execution?"³ Furthermore, why would God's own Son ever allow humanity to beat and mock Him when He could easily have called more than twelve legions of angels to

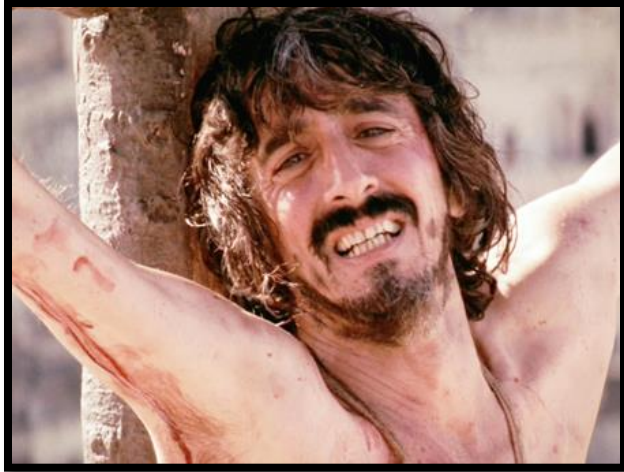
fight for Him or with a single word eradicated them all (Matthew 26:53-54)? Nothing in Christ's appearance that day attracted this thief's soul to believe (Isaiah 53:2-3) so he joined the people and rulers and mocked Christ (Luke 23:36) by asking Him to prove He was the Messiah by saving Himself and them as well (verse 39).

² James Montgomery Boice, [*The Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 1495-1496.

³ James Montgomery Boice, [*The Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 1496.

The Believing Thief

Despite having witnessed the same events the second thief was miraculously able to see what not even God's people saw, the Messiah! While he too was guilty of the same crimes as the other thief and initially mocked Christ, he had a change of heart.⁴ While one thief saw the beatings, mocking's and crucifixion as signs of illegitimacy the other came to realize them as



signs that the Suffering Servant was present and able to grant him eternity in paradise. How he came to understand the Person and work of Christ we simply do not know.⁵ He might have seen the humiliation and agony of the cross as the fulfilment of the prophecy in Isaiah that the Messiah would be “despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain” (verse 3). Maybe he read the Gospel out of the lips of Christ's enemies who testified He had saved others?⁶ Maybe in the face of Christ he saw not a pretender but the incarnate Son of God, a face shining with goodness, kindness and unrivalled

tenderness⁷ to not leave His lost sheep without hope (Luke 15:1-7) but to take the punishment of their sins upon Himself so that through His wounds they might be healed and have the means to be reconciled unto God (Isaiah 53:5)! Whatever the reasons makes no difference for the faith of this thief was so great that he rebuked the other criminal for mocking the sinless Lamb of God and then asked Jesus to show favor to him when His kingdom was realized⁸ and He was pronounced King of the living and the dead!”

The moment the crucified man trusted in a crucified Christ he was saved!⁹ Since many people question the validity of “eleventh hour conversions”¹⁰ lets take a moment and review the evidence of his salvation. One thief only wanted Jesus to eliminate his suffering and as a result had no “spirit of brokenness, or guilt, or penitence, or humility”¹¹ but the other thief despite his bleak circumstances feared God, and acknowledged his sin, Christ's righteousness and future

⁴ Craig A. Evans, *Luke*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1990), 338.

⁵ Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 346.

⁶ C. H. Spurgeon, “[The Dying Thief in a New Light](#),” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 32 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1886), 53.

⁷ C. H. Spurgeon, 54.

⁸ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 870.

⁹ C. H. Spurgeon, “[The Dying Thief in a New Light](#),” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 32 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1886), 55.

¹⁰ C. H. Spurgeon, 49.

¹¹ John Piper, *Sermons from John Piper (1980–1989)* (Minneapolis, MN: Desiring God, 2007).



rule over all of creation.¹² To the church of Rome Apostle Paul told them how they could be saved:

⁹ “If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.” (10:9-10)

In rebuking the other thief for not fearing God but seeing himself as His superior¹³ was this not an acknowledgment of his reverence for and desire to obey God? And in “anticipation of the restoration and resurrection” and casting his eternal destiny on “Jesus’ mercy and saving power”¹⁴ did not his heart ultimately declare Jesus as Lord?¹⁵ And to be granted a place in paradise with Christ is this not irrevocable proof that his conversion request was genuine and granted? The thief’s testimony in the face of seeing Jesus being mocked and crucified is truly one of the most profound declarations of faith and conversion found in all of God’s word!¹⁶

Faith Today



Those who have God’s holy Word and the Spirit of God living inside of them have all they need to live holy lives amidst the fallen of this world. Our faith is weak not because we cannot find great men and women of faith to emulate but due to our desire to put our goals and dreams above God’s plan for our lives. Christians are not doomed to live a life of despair, mediocrity and lukewarmness but one that is vibrant, passionate and always pointing to He who can do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

¹² John Piper, *Sermons from John Piper (1980–1989)* (Minneapolis, MN: Desiring God, 2007).

¹³ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 596.

¹⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), Lk 23:26.

¹⁵ C. H. Spurgeon, “[The Dying Thief in a New Light.](#)” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 32 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1886), 54.

¹⁶ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), Lk 23:26.

Even though there was no hope of getting off the cross the thief had faith in Jesus and as a result that very day went to be with Him in Paradise! Faith is not dependent on our circumstances but on our belief that God is sovereign (Colossians 1:16) and as such can mold, shape and enable us to follow the example Christ gave us (John 13:15)! Do you have that kind of faith?

I want to finish this sermon with an invitation. If you are the first thief and truly do not know Jesus as your personal Savior, please understand that despite your circumstances this very day you can be saved! There is no sin that cannot be washed away by the blood of Christ and NO ONE is beyond redemption. Just because this might be your eleventh hour and you can feel



time slipping away does not mean you are without hope. Jesus died once and for all so that those who believe in Him might be saved. He died for you with an undying love and right now has his arms are open wide ready to welcome you, His lost sheep home! While this is not a difficult step, for no one earn their salvation (Ephesians 2:8), it is one that requires you to confess your sins and make Jesus Christ the Lord of your life (Romans 10:9-10). So, my question to those whom right now have Christ knocking one the door of their hearts (Revelation 3:20) will you not let Him in? To those whom are already saved

remember your first love and serve God like you did when you first said YES to Jesus (Revelation 2:4-5). Christ died for you (John 3:16) and as His ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20) and royal priests (1 Peter 2:9) you have what you need to be holy as God is holy (1 Peter 1:16). If your walk with Jesus has become somewhat lukewarm then I implore you on Christ's behalf draw nearer to God and He will draw nearer to you (James 4:8)!