

The Great Sayings in the Gospels
163 - The Crucifixion and Death of Jesus Christ
The Repentant Thief
Matt 27:38-44; Luke 23:39-44

Matt 27:38-44

- 38 Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left.
- 39 And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads,
- 40 And saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.
- 41 Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said,
- 42 He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him.
- 43 He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God.
- 44 The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth.

Luke 23:39-44

- 39 And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.
- 40 But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?
- 41 And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.
- 42 And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.
- 43 And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.
- 44 And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour.

Introduction:

All four of the gospel writers mention that Jesus was crucified with two other men. Mark only mentions it briefly and John does not mention them until the discussion about taking all three of them down from their crosses. Matthew and Luke, however, elaborate a bit more, giving us one of the most remarkable stories from that day.

These men were called ‘robbers’ which identified them as highwaymen, roving bandits who preyed upon travelers in the countryside when they were vulnerable. They were identical to the ‘outlaws’ of our own Wild West. It is the same word that was used to describe Barabbus, who was called ‘a notable prisoner,’ or ‘notorious.’ Generally it has been believed that he was the leader of a band of criminals, very famous, and that these men were a part of his group. Interestingly, Jesus used this word in reference to false teachers in John 10.

John 10:1

1 Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber.

John 10:7-8

7 Then said Jesus unto them again, Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep.

8 All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers: but the sheep did not hear them.

They were also called, by Luke, ‘malefactors,’ which in the Greek is a compound word simply meaning ‘evil-doers.’

So, these were men who had made their living by stealing from others, often by force. This means that they were hard-hearted and cruel men who had little regard for the welfare of others, even their fellow Jews. Their cruelty is demonstrated in a remarkable way in Matthew’s account in which they, even though they were being crucified themselves, and even though it was quite painful to talk, were hurling insults at Jesus. This is quite extraordinary when you think about it, men who were in incredible pain and dying themselves using the energy to mock a fellow prisoner. One would really need to be filled with bitterness, anger, and quite a bit of rage to behave in this way. This makes the sudden change of one of them all the more startling.

It seems quite obvious that there was a series of thoughts processed by one of these men and not by the other.

He observed that he was the same kind of criminal as the other with nothing much to distinguish them so far as their criminal history was concerned.

Luke 23:40-41

40 But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?

41 And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds...

“We are under the same condemnation, and that justly, because we have actually done the things of which we are accused.” In other words, “there is no difference between us, both guilty of the same crimes and both duly and justly punished.”

This man has done nothing to particularly distinguish himself even from other criminals. Maybe he was a follower like so man and had followed his friends into crime. He had even followed his friend, the soldiers, and the Jews into the crime of mocking Jesus.

Mark 15:31-32

31 Likewise also the chief priests mocking said among themselves with the scribes, He saved others; himself he cannot save.

32 Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe. And they that were crucified with him reviled him. KJV

Matt 27:41-44

- 41 Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said,
42 He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now
come down from the cross, and we will believe him.
43 He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am
the Son of God.
44 The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth.

But, *something* startled him into real clarity and pulled together in his mind whatever theology he knew. Some might assume that he knew very little but even the few words that we have recorded in scripture say otherwise. Even the one who did not repent demonstrated that he knew of the Christ and that He had power to save.

Luke 23:39

- 39 And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.

The one who believed knew, for example, that he and Jesus were not going to cease to exist that day, that there was a world beyond this life, that Jesus had a kingdom there, and that it would be most advantageous to this thief if Jesus would think on him with mercy in that Other World to which they were going. We see also that he knew of the sinlessness of Jesus and that this meant that He was, indeed, the true Messiah of Israel, the One for Whom they all had been looking. He also knew that in this Kingdom to which Jesus was going He was King there for the thief called Jesus, Lord.

Luke 23:42

- 42 And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.

In addition to all this, there was obviously in his mind the idea that God is incredibly merciful to sinners, even those who have done awful things, such as himself. Otherwise, why would he cry out to Him?

It is fairly obvious that no one was holding a bible study there at Golgotha that day so all of this information was already in the head of this thief, even as he was following his friend in mocking Jesus.

But, something happened. There was, beyond doubt, this “hey, wait a minute” moment that came upon him. All of a sudden everything he knew became very real and very clear.

“I am dying.”

“I am dying because I have been wicked.”

“It is just and right for me to be in this place.”

“What is going to become of me in the life after this one?”

“That man there is the Messiah of Israel that I have been hearing about in synagogue since I was a child.”

“He has done no evil and is not even doing evil now... look how He prayed for those soldiers.”

Sudden and profound change happened to this man.

Suddenly, the one who had possibly been following others to wickedness all of his life, cried out in defense of the One Who was being mocked by everyone. “He has done nothing wrong,” the thief yelled out.

Now, you know what happens in such situations. He suddenly, without doubt, became the object of the very same kinds of insults and hatred that had been directed against Jesus. It was just before noon and he was going to hang there until nearly sundown before being killed in an even more brutal way than he had been treated to this point.

But the information in his mind had been transmuted by the Power of God into Saving Faith. What had just a few moments ago been a firmly held opinion now became Transcendent Reality in which he had supernatural confidence. Even as his body was dying God was granting life to his soul. How do I know that?

John 3:3

3 Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Luke 23:43

43 And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.

If he was going to be with Jesus in Paradise that very day, then God had brought life begetting power into his soul. One cannot go there without having been born in this way.

This was a change so profound that if Pilate had determined to take these two thieves down from the cross and release them, and had they recovered, the one would have returned to this wicked way of life and the other would have been baptized and joined himself to the disciples of Jesus. And the reason I know that is because what this man had was Saving Faith, declared to be so by the words of the Lord Jesus. It was the Faith that saves.

The Story of the Thief grants us some real insight into the whole process of coming to Christ and how that process works.

A. Fear God.

Even a lost man can and should fear God. When this element of humanity becomes lost, All Is Lost and there is no hope until it is recovered. This is a fundamental building block of the Conviction of Sin that eventually leads one to Repentance, without which no one can be saved.

As Paul worked his way through the list of proofs that man is indeed a sinner, the capstone that he placed on that entire list was the Fear of God.

Rom 3:10-18

10 As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one:

- 11 There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.
12 They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.
13 Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips:
14 Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness:
15 Their feet are swift to shed blood:
16 Destruction and misery are in their ways:
17 And the way of peace have they not known:
18 *There is no fear of God before their eyes.*

I know that in our day the whole concept of fearing God has become a joke. Even many preachers and churches scoff at the idea. So, **should a person fear God?** Isn't that all out of whack with the picture of Him as the God of Love? Doesn't the scripture say that "God is Love?"

Of course He is the God of Love but Love is only one facet of the Divine Being, one of the many attributes of Himself that He has seen fit to reveal to us.

Consider others:

Deut 4:23-24

- 23 Take heed unto yourselves, lest ye forget the covenant of the LORD your God, which he made with you, and make you a graven image, or the likeness of any thing, which the LORD thy God hath forbidden thee.
24 For ***the LORD thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God.***

Heb 12:28-29

- 28 Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear:
29 For ***our God is a consuming fire.***

2 Thess 1:3-10

- 3 We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth;
4 So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure:
5 Which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer:
6 Seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you;
7 And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels,
8 ***In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not***

the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ:

- 9 Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power;
- 10 When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day.

So, should a man fear God? ***Only if he is sane!***

Do you remember what Jesus said?

Matt 10:25-28

- 25 It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household?
- 26 Fear them not therefore: for there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known.
- 27 What I tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light: and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops.
- 28 And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather ***fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.***

I know that, normally, when we talk about fearing God the negatives are emphasized, but have you ever considered this?

Ps 25:14

- 14 The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant.

Ps 33:18

- 18 Behold, the eye of the LORD is upon them that fear him, upon them that hope in his mercy;

Ps 34:7

- 7 The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them.

Ps 85:9

- 9 Surely his salvation is nigh them that fear him; that glory may dwell in our land.

Ps 103:11

- 11 For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him.

Ps 145:19

- 19 He will fulfil the desire of them that fear him: he also will hear their cry, and will save them.

Should a person fear God? If he has any concerning about his own well being, Yes!

When you think about it, the question that the converted thief asked the other is quite telling.

Luke 23:39-40

39 And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.

40 But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?

As we have already noted, the unbelieving thief, painful as it was to say anything, was using his breath to mock the Lord Jesus.

- A man who had any fear of God and who was soon to be dead, would be busying himself with making peace with God.... one would think.
- Only a man totally oblivious would be acting like this.
- Even his friend could see that. This was a great deal of the difference between them.

One wonders, had he always feared God and dreaded the Day of Reckoning while his comrades acted as if God did not exist and there would never be a Judgment? What a life he must have lived if that were so...doing wickedly and fearing all the while God's Judgment Day.

Whenever he came to it, though, he feared God on this day so much that he marveled that his friend did not.

This fear of God was the driving force behind his actions.

B. And, he came to a proper evaluation of himself.

This is one of the scariest situations in which a sinner may find himself, honestly facing his sins while, at the same time, properly fearing God.

I know that there are those who pretend that they can face God with their sins but this attitude only shows that they do not truly Fear Him, The One Who can destroy them and then keep on destroying them forever.

This situation, when truly faced honestly, will unravel the bravest of souls.

He, the thief, saw himself for who he was, a rebel against God and man, justly tried and properly sentenced. He was dying under man's judgment but he was also aware that another judgment awaited him beyond the door of death.

While it is a scary place, this place of an honest assessment of one's self, it is absolutely necessary for the one who desires to be saved.

Some people seem to treat this issue like some do their clothes. We see them on the street and wonder, "did you look in the mirror before you left home and think that this was OK?" We think that they probably did look but we also wonder what could possibly be wrong with their eyes or

their mind that they thought this looked good.

So many are like that concerning their sins. They, as it were, look in the mirror and think that they are OK, that everything is fine, that their sins are not that bad. But, they are so sadly wrong. Listen to how Jesus treated a similar situation.

Matt 23:25-28

- 25 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess.
- 26 Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also.
- 27 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.
- 28 Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

These were people who looked in the moral 'mirror' and believed that all was well but sin had so affected their sense of right and wrong that they could not see what was actually true. They paraded around as if they were the 'end all and be all' of religion and morality but when Jesus saw them He saw decorated jars full of rotten flesh and all manner of filth.

That old thief had been granted by God what every person need...The Integrity of Soul that allows a person to see with clarity what he really looks like to God.

C. *Having done so, He accepted God's Justice as right and appropriate.*

No person who has ever been giving eyes to see himself rightly ever argues with God about Hell. He knows and believes that it is a proper place and that he, himself, deserves it without question.

The thief was convinced that his sentence was just.

Luke 23:40-41

- 40 But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?
- 41 And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds:...

D. *And He saw something in Jesus that gave him hope.*

Somewhere in this process, God did a work of astounding proportions. It is impossible to pinpoint just the moment, as it always is with those who come from death to life and faith. Jesus said as much to Nicodemus.

John 3:6-8

- 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

- 7 Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.
8 The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.

But at some point this man who had been spiritually dead came alive by God's Power. He looked at Jesus and saw the remedy for his situation, his lost and doomed condition.

Aside: We spoke earlier of those who look in the mirror and think all is well when it is not. Think of this man who was looking at a man seemingly worse off than himself, apparently dying just like him, and was a Savior, Someone to ask for help at life's worst and ending moment. What kind of vision does that take?

But his heart had been changed, his eyes had been opened and he had been brought to life from the dead. God had done His Great Work of Regeneration.

E. Having his eyes changed so as to be able to see in Jesus His Savior, the thief reached out to Him in Repentance and Faith.

Never do we believe that one comes to Spiritual Life without the twin graces of Repentance and Faith. They travel together, always, and are always associated with the New Birth. One can no more imagine a convert to Jesus who remains in unbelief and sin as we can imagine a newborn coming into this world and living without breathing or his heart beating. These are the signals that life has come.

We live in a world in which many who call themselves Christian proclaim a salvation that changes nothing, that leaves the sinner in his sins and makes the Lordship of Jesus Christ an optional thing. But such a 'gospel' is no gospel at all but rather a travesty of everything that Jesus and the apostles preached and taught.

The man, under conviction of his sins, cried out for mercy and did so in real and genuine faith.

F. And, finally, the thief was heard and granted a guarantee that few have ever heard.

Luke 23:43

43 ...Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.

If human life ends with death.... this could not be so,
If the soul sleeps with the body until the resurrection....this could not be so,
If the human soul merges with the Universe at death....this could not be so,
If the believing dead must go to purgatory for a while...this could not be so.

The only way that this statement can be actually and literally true is if what we actually believe is true, the body dies and the soul is whisked away either to be with the Lord, or, in the case of the other thief, to the place of torment to away the Great Day of God's Judgment.

Have you ever been truly converted?

Have you ever seen yourself as a lost and condemned sinner before God?

Do you fear Him?

Has He granted you grace to reach out to Him in repentance and faith?

Has He spoken peace and assurance to your soul?

This is not complicated, just difficult.

Repent of your sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

G.