

FOUR LESSONS YOU CAN LEARN FROM THE THIEF

By Earl K. Oldham

“And when they were come to the place which is called Calvary, there they crucified him and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.” (Luke 23:33)

This is a familiar passage of Scripture. It involves the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It takes us in spirit to the one spot on all the earth that is perhaps preeminent above all others. It takes us in thought to 1900 plus years ago...to a lonely hill just outside the Jerusalem wall.

There, being ushered by a crude, blood-thirsty multitude we see three crosses standing against the skyline. The central cross seems to stand out...above the other two. When we see pictures of these three crosses, the center one seems to be larger than the others. I do not know if that be true or not. But as you look at the central cross, the person is different. He is dying differently than the other two. He is dying as a Savior and a Redeemer. You recall that this man, whom we know as Jesus, has had three and one-half years of public ministry. He spake as no other man spoke. He was the greatest physician that ever lived. He went about doing good. He put the morticians out of business. When the judge had handed down his sentence, he said, “I find no fault in him ...” He came to bear the burdens of the weary. He came to dry the tears of the sorrowful. He came to relieve the grief of those who were overcome with disappointment. He came to comfort broken hearts. He came to minister to the poor. He came “to seek and to save that which was lost.”

We look at His death...never one like it. This is more than an execution of a common criminal. He is God manifest in human flesh. He is God’s only begotten Son. He is Emmanuel. He is the Rose of Sharon, the Lily of the Valley, the Bright and Morning Star. He is the fairest of ten thousand...the one who is altogether lovely. He is the One who upholds all things by the Word of His power. He is the One who spoke and the sea was calm. He is the One who looked into the hearts of men and knew their thoughts and their intents. He is pouring out His life. He is giving His soul a ransom for many. He is creating a fountain filled with blood...so that sinners can plunge beneath that flood and lose their guilty stain.

Along with this One...the God-man...were two thieves. One of those thieves railed at Him and challenged His deity. The other thief bowed his head and cried out, “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.” We know the story. Jesus said to this thief, “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.” He who had all power and could have called ten legions of angels...looked in mercy to the thief...saved him for time and for eternity. We learn some lessons from this thief:

I. The Dying Thief Proves That Good Works Have No Part in Salvation.

This man never took a step for the Lord. His feet are now nailed to a cross. His hands are now nailed to a cross. He can do NOTHING for Christ, nor for himself. He cannot give anything to the Lord, for he has nothing, even stripped of the clothes that were upon his body. He cannot preach for his tongue is swollen. He can’t do anything. That is why the Bible declares to us that “by grace are ye saved through faith.” That is why we read in the Word of God “But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted to him for righteousness.” That is why we read, “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy, he hath saved us.” We learn that works have no part in the salvation of a soul.

“Saved by the blood of the crucified one...Now ransomed from sin and a new work begun...Sing praise to the Father and praise to the Son, Saved by the blood of the crucified one.

II. The Dying Thief Proves That Salvation Is Instantaneous.

How long does it take God to do a thing? How long did it take God to create? The Bible says, “In the beginning God created....” God said, “Let there be light, and there was light.” In fact, as you read through the Word of God you are conscious that it doesn’t require time for God to do anything. God does things after the counsel of His own will. At the cross, God in the person of His Son, took a man who was a “candidate for hell” and translated him into the kingdom of God’s dear Son. And this was done in a moment...in the twinkling of an eye. This was done when Christ said, “Today....” Miracle of all miracles is the salvation of a soul. I read of the miracles of the Bible, and my imagination runs wild as I read of God with one angel slaying 185,000 in one night, or I read of God leading a nation of three and one-half million out of bondage, or many other miracles, but the greatest of all is the salvation of a soul. The miracle of taking a poor, miserable, hell-bound sinner, and in a second of time, saving him so that he is able to walk the streets of glory. One moment the thief was drinking the vinegar and gall, and the next he was drinking from the fountain that flows from the Throne of God.

III. The Dying Thief Proves That God Loves Lost Sinners.

When the Spirit of the Lord went through the gates of Paradise He took with Him as His first trophy of redemption...not some crowned monarch from an earthly throne...

Not some man that was rich in this world’s goods...

But a nameless, penniless, friendless thief...washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb. I am glad that I can look in the face of every human being under the stars of heaven and tell them that God loves them and that Jesus died for them. I can go to the rich man. I can go to the beggar, for “whosoever will, let him come and take of the water of life freely.” If it were left to us, we might choose different types of people to go to heaven, but God loves sinners. God loves you and me. Sinners, regardless of what kind, can come to Jesus Christ and be saved. No wonder the song writer said:

“The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day, And there may I, though vile as he, wash all my sins away.”

IV. The Dying Thief Proves That When a Christian Dies, He Goes to Be with the Lord.

In our generation, as in every generation, there are those who teach that the soul “sleeps”. What they mean is that when a person dies, the body, soul and spirit go to the grave, and stay there until the time of resurrection. They do not believe that a person who dies is immediately conscious in eternity. However, the thief on the cross went from the cross to Glory. He was translated immediately in the presence of God. His body went to a pauper’s grave, no doubt. But his soul went into Paradise. He was conscious that he was in the presence of deity. He knew that he had passed into the eternal regions of the saved. That is what Paul meant when he said, “To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.” That is why Paul had “a desire to depart and be with Christ.” He knew that the moment his head was severed from his body by the Roman executioner’s axe that his soul would be in the presence of Christ. He was ready for that change.

Sinner, if you are not ready to meet Jesus face to face, like the dying thief, you can cry out, “Lord be merciful to me a sinner,” and He will save you to the uttermost. You will become a child of God, an heir of God and a joint-heir with Jesus Christ.

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