

Two Thieves of Calvary

(A Biblical Illustration of Salvation)

Luke 23:32-43

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PRAYER PREPARATION

Jesus Himself tells us in **John 8:31-32**:

31 "... **If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine;**
32 **and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.** " NAS

In **John 15:7**, He also tells us:

"If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you. NAS

Let's take a moment to quietly confess our sins to God, so that we are in fellowship with Him and led by the Holy Spirit when we study God's word. **1 John 1:9** promises us, that if we name our known sins to God, He always forgives us and cleanses us from all unrighteousness, even from the unknown sins we forgot or didn't even realize we committed. Let's pray.

Thank you, Father, for always restoring your children when we admit our sins to you. May your Holy Spirit teach us your word as we study it now. We ask these things in Jesus Name. Amen

TWO THIEVES AT CALVARY: A Biblical Illustration Of Salvation

The greatest Biblical example that proves salvation is simply by faith alone in Christ alone, is the illustration of the criminal crucified next to Jesus, who placed his faith in Christ and was saved. This can be found on the second page of the outline I handed out.

Whenever we picture the crucifixion on the hill at Golgotha, we have that image of three crosses, with Jesus in the center and the two criminals on either side.

Luke 23:32 "And two others also, who were criminals, were being led away to be put to death with Him." (NAS)

Initially, both thieves mocked Jesus along with the chief priest, scribes, and elders. This tells us that both thieves were unbelievers when they were crucified. This is important to remember, because it means that the "good thief" did nothing by which he was saved BEFORE his crucifixion. He was crucified an unsaved person. He had not previously repented nor been baptized. His salvation occurred totally on the cross.

Matt 27:41-44

41 **In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking {Him,} and saying,**
42 **"He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we shall believe in Him.**
43 **"He trusts in God; let Him deliver {Him} now, if He takes pleasure in Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'"**
44 **And the robbers also who had been crucified with Him were casting the same insult at Him. (NAS)**

So initially, both thieves were unsaved, and both insulted Jesus. However, perhaps as he heard Jesus ask the Father to forgive the mockers, the heart of one of the thieves softens. He makes the free will decision to believe in Jesus, to put his faith in him. The other thief could have done the same, but doesn't.

Luke 23:39-42

39 **And one of the criminals who were hanged {there} was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!"**
40 **But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?**
41 **"And we indeed justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong."**
42 **And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" (NAS)**

Notice what Jesus does not do. Jesus Christ Himself does not say:

- "Whoa buddy! No way!!! You think you're going to live your whole life in sin and then get into heaven at the last minute?!?!"
- "Sorry, you've never been baptized. You can't be saved."
- "It's too late now! You still need to make restitution to all the people you robbed!"
- "You don't look or sound sorry enough for your past sins!"
- "I haven't seen any fruit in your life. You're not really saved!"
- "You still need to make me Lord of your life. It's not enough to simply believe in me!"
- "I'm sorry. You're not really saved until you speak in tongues!"

Instead, Jesus rewards the man's simple act of faith with the promise of salvation.

Luke 23:43 And He said to him, **"Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."** (NAS)

The "good thief" lived his life as a criminal, a life that was so bad that he was finally being sentenced to death for it. In the end, he made an "easy death-bed" confession of faith, doing nothing more than believing in Jesus:

- **He didn't** walk an aisle to "publicly proclaim his decision" or to "seal his commitment";
- **He was never** baptized, despite the fact that water baptism had already been instituted by John;

- **He never** made restitution for what he had done;
- **He never** showed fruit or a changed life, or any other "evidence" of repentance;
- **He never** spoke in tongues, despite the fact that some emotional believers say this is proof of salvation;
- **He didn't** "make Jesus Lord", as a popular preacher has led many people astray into believing;
- **He didn't** "invite Jesus into his heart", a popular gospel appeal of today's pop Christian culture, but with no Biblical foundation;
- **He didn't** recite the "sinner's prayer";
- **He never** joined or became active in a church;
- **He never** received "the second blessing" nor was he ever "slain in the spirit", two religious concepts not in the Bible.
- **He never** "shed tears of repentance".

True Biblical repentance is based upon a change of mind, with or without any emotions that may result from such a change.

- **He never** sang "Do Lord", threw a twig on a fire, or committed his life to full-time service (which, by the way, ALL believers are in as priests);
- **God didn't** heal him, rescue him, or bless him with material assets or good health;
- **And worse of all**, he never tithed, made a pledge, "planted a seed", or gave one penny of his money to a church.

The "good thief" simply placed his faith totally in Jesus Christ. He believed in Christ in a situation where he had "nothing to lose" by doing so, on a "death-bed" when it couldn't have been more "convenient", where it didn't cost him a thing. Today's "**fruit inspectors**" would have this man burning in hell at this very moment had Jesus not told us different.

In fact, such legalistic people who add works to the gospel are in danger of hell-fire themselves, because they may not have fully trusted in the work of Jesus Christ for their own salvation. If you add your own works to salvation, then you are not putting your faith solely in the work of Jesus Christ. One day, these religious types who work to make Jesus their "Lord" (when, in fact, He already is Lord) may hear those dreaded words, "I never knew you", from Jesus Himself on Judgment Day. Only a person who places his faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ is saved.

The example of the saved thief on the cross disproves every theological argument that tries to add anything to simple faith in Christ for salvation. The saved thief did nothing but believe in Jesus Christ as Savior. So when people try to add human works to salvation, don't argue with them. Be nice, but simply say, "The thief on the cross didn't do that to be saved!" For example:

- You have to be baptized to be saved! "The thief on the cross didn't do that!"
- You need to speak in tongues as a sign! "The thief on the cross didn't do that!"
- You need to make Jesus Lord of your life. "The thief on the cross didn't do that!"

In all likelihood, such people won't listen to you when shown such clear and simple Biblical proof. Understand that these people are in spiritual reversionism. **Their "faith" is based largely upon their own experiences, emotions, and biases, and not primarily upon the Bible.** In fact, they are more like the unsaved thief on the cross, who chose not to put his simple faith in Jesus Christ to be saved. They freely choose not to place their faith in the ultimate authority of God's word, as the unsaved thief freely chose not to place his faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ. They are in reversionism by a deliberate, negative act of their own free will.

The saved thief proves that salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone, period! Had Jesus not spoken out loud the promise that the thief would be in Paradise that very day, many Christians today would believe and teach that the thief was not saved by his simple act of faith. **But Jesus did say it, and God had Luke record it for us in [Luke 23:43](#).**

Salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone.

Salvation = faith + nothing!

Have YOU personally believed in Jesus Christ? Have you trusted that His suffering and death on the cross paid for your sins and purchased your salvation? Do you understand that there is nothing you can add to Jesus wonderful gift, that you can do nothing to earn or deserve salvation?

IN CONCLUSION

In conclusion, because it is the Holy Spirit who makes the gospel message understandable to those who are spiritually dead, many people get saved regardless of the mistakes that a pastor, evangelist, or other believer makes in presenting the gospel to a lost world. This does not mean that Biblical accuracy in understanding the gospel is unimportant. The Bible commands us to **"study to show thyself approved"** so that we are always **"rightly dividing the word of truth"**.

But we can also have joy and hope at the realization that no pastor, evangelist, nor you or I, can keep any person out of heaven by the mistakes we might make in sharing the gospel. Any unbeliever who expresses positive choice at the moment of God consciousness, will hear the message of the gospel, and will have it made understandable to them by the Holy Spirit.

Part of the essence of God is that He is perfect justice. Consistent with God's essence is the fact that God will not allow any person to go to hell who God knows in His perfect omniscience would believe had they heard. In other words, God would not be fair if He allowed anyone to go to hell just because some believers are negative toward the correct study and teaching of the Bible.

The two thieves crucified with Jesus illustrate the issue for the entire human race. On

one side are the people who will continue to mock Jesus despite the wonderful sacrifice He made for them. They will keep seeing themselves as good enough to somehow make it to heaven on their own. On the other side are people who choose to put their faith in the work that Jesus Christ has done for us, who realize that He undeservedly took the punishment for the sins we've committed. It's only a matter of each person's free will that determines which side of the cross they are on, and where they will spend eternity.

This man who Christians often call the "good thief" simply believed in Christ as Savior, and asked Jesus to **"remember me when you enter your kingdom"**. Jesus responded by promising him that he would be in Paradise that very day (**Luke 23:32-33, 39-43**). Had Jesus not responded verbally to the thief's request, many Christians today would tell you that there is "no way" that man was saved.

The Bible shows us that no person ever did less to be saved than the "good thief" on the cross. But in fact, the Bible also tells us that no person ever did more to be saved either.

Let's pray.

Father, we pray that you can help us understand the gospel correctly, and never add our own works to it. We ask for opportunities to share Jesus Christ with others, and that your Holy Spirit will help us to tell others about Christ boldly but correctly. We ask these things in your Son's name, amen.

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