

# I admit I am stunned by this – an unlikely lesson in faith



*Most people don't use imagination when writing a piece. This writer, Lisa Loraine Baker, has the talent of putting the reader in the picture and I read this thorough whilst being side tracked from something completely different.*

*I reproduce it in full.*

Can you imagine what it felt like to face a Roman death penalty in the early first century? The Romans, masters of cruelty, didn't give a prisoner a choice of how they wished to face their demise. Criminals either had their heads taken off, were thrown from a great elevation, strangled, killed by a beast, drowned, buried alive, impaled, or crucified. All were brutal, and only beheading was quick.

Imagine again what it would have been like to have been the thief on the cross, crucified alongside Jesus Christ, hearing the large crowd of mockers spewing venom at Him, and seeing Him die, knowing your death is soon to come.

## Who Was the Thief on the Cross?

For the purpose of this article, we will refer to the thief who repented.

The Bible does not give us a name or any other details about the thief – only that he was a criminal (or robber, depending on the version you read).

Luke 23:33 states, "And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified Him, and the criminals,

one on his right and one on his left." Matthew 27:38 and Mark 15:27 state the same. John 19:18 calls them "two others."

## **What Did the Thief Experience?**

The thief, himself being crucified (and therefore suffering a slow and painful death from asphyxiation), would have had a hard time breathing. Every inhalation came in anguish as he pushed himself up in order to gain a breath. Body weight pulled the thief down and made breathing extremely difficult. His heart and lungs would lose their functions due to blood loss from the wounds (from the flogging and pierced hands and feet). When killed this way, death was expected within twenty-four hours.

Once the legs faltered, the arms would bear their weight, and soon their shoulders would detach from their sockets. Yet, "Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water" (John 19:31-34).

We know the thief died a few feet from Jesus and woke that day knowing it was his last day on earth (implied).

What could the thief do but agonize, observe, and listen?

He:

– Witnessed and heard the mocking crowds.

– Would have heard Jesus speak to His disciple, John (John 19:25-27).

- Would have heard Jesus speak to His Father (Matthew 27:46, Luke 23:34, 46, John 19:28).
- Experienced the earthquake.
- Faced the darkness from the sixth to the ninth hour.

He also would have listened to the centurion and his cohorts say, "Truly this was the Son of God" (Matthew 27:54). Luke's record states, "Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, 'Certainly this man was innocent'" (Luke 23:47)!

Mark 15:32b tells us, "Those who were crucified with him also reviled Him." Matthew 27:44 also records their actions, "And the robbers who were crucified with Him also reviled Him in the same way." From this record we see both thieves insulted Jesus.

## **How Does the Other Thief Being Crucified Respond to Jesus?**

Luke 23:39-43 shares the conversations between Jesus and the two thieves. The one we learn is the unrepentant thief mimics what he obviously heard from the mocking crowd. Verse 39 says he "railed" at Jesus. He said, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" (Luke 23:39). We can infer from what he said he was not sincere in his retort, for the word used for His remark to Jesus (railed) means he hurled abuse at Him.

## **What Did the Thief Do?**

The one we learn is the *repentant thief* admonished the other. We, on this side of Calvary, can surmise the thief took all the mocking of Jesus to heart. No matter their intent, the thief *heard* the crowd remind Jesus that He said He would "destroy the temple and raise it again in three days" (Matthew

27:40). He also overheard them say “if You are the Son of God...” (Matthew 27:40). The crowds also proclaimed He saved others (John 19: 42). And the mockers acknowledged He called Himself “the Son of God” (John 19:43). He heard *about* Jesus from the mockers. In essence, he heard the Gospel preached by them.

The thief, though, also heard precious prayers from Jesus to His Father. Jesus did not throw insults back at His revilers. Instead, He prayed, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

Luke 23:46 records this: “Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this He breathed His last.”

With all of this probably in mind, he said to the other thief, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong” (Luke 23:41).

He then said to Jesus, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus replied, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

## **Why Does Jesus Say the Thief Will be With Him in Paradise?**

This is the gist of the whole interaction between Jesus and the thief. We must remember Jesus knows the hearts of men (Luke 9:47). The thief recognized his own wretched condition, as we read in Luke 23:41. Recognizing our sinful state is part of how God draws us to Him.

The penitent thief also asked the other thief if he feared God, knowing he too was condemned. We can infer from this the thief who spoke understood his consequence and feared God.

And then the thief displayed belief (faith) in and surrender to Jesus when he asked Him to remember him when He came into His kingdom.

Jesus' reply to the thief was one of veracity and compassion. Veracity because Jesus said, "Truly." Compassion because Jesus told the man that day he would be with Him in paradise. He gave the thief hope that He forgives a broken and contrite heart and this life is not all there is. The best is yet to come, for paradise is "the realm of the righteous dead awaiting the resurrection of the body."

## **What Does This Mean for Us?**

Entering paradise is not a matter of works; it is a matter of faith and repentance, two things we see in how the thief responded to what he saw and heard. He told the other thief they both deserved their penalty and, like them, we, too, deserve the death the other thief died.

*But God.*

Romans 5:8 reads, "but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." That penitent thief lived in the very moment Christ died for us. He, in effect, is eyewitness to Romans 5:8!

Burk Parsons said, "Jesus promised paradise to the thief on the cross (Luke 23:43) and He has promised it to us, too (Revelation 2:7).

## **What Does This Instance Teach Us about Faith?**

God numbers our days, not us. Therefore, when we wake each morning, we don't know if it's our last day on earth. That thief did, and so did the Lord Jesus. But knowing Jesus

and having surrendered our lives to Him in contrition and belief, we trust His sovereignty over our lives. The thief did not work for his salvation. He repented and believed. He had faith.

Faith is like a receptacle we hold in anticipation of what only God can do to fill it. The thief didn't see paradise, but He trusted the One who would take him there. Hebrews chapter 11 is rightly called the "Hall of Faith." The portrayals are those who looked forward to something they had yet to see and had assurance it would be all for which they hoped.

Acts 16:31 relates how Paul told the jailer he would be saved by believing in the Lord Jesus. Belief is trusting. Trust is faith.

Romans 10:17 states, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ."

The thief could do nothing *but* listen. He listened to Jesus and to the mockers. And he heard enough to verify who Jesus is, God.

We have but to read this account of the thief on the cross to understand repentance and faith. Jesus would not have welcomed that man into paradise with Him if the thief had not humbled himself by admitting he was a sinner in need of Jesus. Admit you're a sinner, repent, and have faith. Jesus was the thief's only hope, and He's our only hope, too, for in Him is life.

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