

A TALE OF TWO THIEVES

Which Thief Describes You?

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THE TWO THIEVES

One of the most moving stories in world history isn't about powerful miracles, beautiful gardens, or mighty kings. It's about two thieves being executed. However, it is not really about their execution. Rather, it is about how the Christ of Calvary came to the eternal aid of one of them.

This is a message of hope for the seemingly hopeless.

What is recorded in this booklet is not a tale but rather a true account of what transpired in the lives of two thieves almost two millennia ago.

In the final moments of their lives, these thieves had no hope. What awaited them was a place where there was nothing but pain, agony, and torment, along with wailing and gnashing of teeth.

What unfolds as the story progresses is the truth that the best of sinners or even the worst of sinners can find peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ and His amazing grace.

The fact that Christ died for the sins of all men and rose from the dead means that there is a genuine hope for their eternal future for everyone who, at a point in time, places their complete confidence in Christ and His payment for their sins.

Please understand that the term "hope" is not being used like the average person in our culture would—hoping, for example, that it won't rain on the weekend. Instead, "hope" in the Bible is the absolute assurance of something in the future that is guaranteed based on the promise of God.

Everyone who is alive today has either perfect peace and is basking in the hope of eternal life which God

promised in Christ (Titus 1:2) or is resting in something else for their soul that does not have a guarantee with it, which makes it a false hope.

Make no mistake, the Bible says there are those who have hope in Christ and there are those who have no hope because they have not placed their trust in Christ alone as their Savior.

The good news is that perfect hope can be yours and can be received in a moment of time. Christ came to give mankind a perfect hope, even to those who are seemingly hopeless.

Let's observe the account of two individuals who in the waning moments of their lives were facing an eternity without Christ and, therefore, were without hope.

Their story is recorded for us in the Gospel of Luke. It is about two men who were crucified on each side of the Savior on what is commonly referred to as Good Friday. Both of these men had no hope in themselves of salvation. They had no chance of escaping the horrors of an eternity separated from God and His love. They were condemned criminals.

The text is found in Luke 23:32-43:

There were also two others, criminals, led with Him to be put to death. And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."

And they divided His garments and cast lots. And the people stood looking on. But even the rulers with them sneered, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God."

The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine, and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself."

And an inscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us."

But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

Please note first of all that Christ was crucified between two thieves.

While crucifixion was a relatively common occurrence within the Roman Empire, Christ's crucifixion had a profound effect on both of these thieves.

What do we know about these men?

As to their physical condition: both of these men were dying; both were being put to death for crimes they committed against society; and both wanted to escape death.

Luke says they were criminals. Matthew says they were robbers.

In the Greek language the word translated *criminal* means "one who commits gross misdeeds and serious crimes."

The word *robbers* referred to “a bandit; one who uses violence to rob openly,” in contrast to a typical thief who secretly enters a house and steals.

Minimally we can conclude that these two men were thieves; and it is quite likely that they were guilty even of armed robbery involving murder.

As to their actions on the cross: both of these men spoke to Jesus; both hurled blasphemous insults at the Savior.

This is recorded for us in Matthew’s Gospel:

Then two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left.

And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, “You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”

Likewise the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and elders, said, “He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. “He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”

Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing. (Matthew 27:38-44)

The verb used to describe the chief priests’ taunts is the Greek word “*blasphēmeō*,” which means “to speak against in a disrespectful way that demeans, denigrates, or maligns.”

The thieves were no better than the chief priests as they “reviled” the Savior in like fashion.

What does that say about these men?

They were the basest of men. Since they were in the same ugly circumstances as Christ, one would expect that they would be sympathetic enough to at least keep their mouths closed. But they didn't. They repeatedly ridiculed Jesus.

One would expect that such circumstances would have brought these three together. It is not uncommon that a tragedy shared usually creates a level of understanding and fellowship that doesn't exist during the normal, day to day experiences of life.

People placed in a common predicament usually come through the difficulty knowing and respecting each other to a greater degree than ever before. But not in this case. Here we have three people who were enduring one of the most inhumane, humiliating experiences ever devised by man and two of them took the opportunity to pick on the third.

Though they were guilty of their crimes and deserving of death as one of them will later admit, they were joining in with the crowd. *"Hey, miracle worker, how about getting us down?" "Hey, king, how do you like your new throne? It's not very comfortable, but it has a good view!"*

The hardness of their hearts is astounding. They were hurling insults and blasphemies and hatred and antagonism toward the One who was giving His life for them!

This illustrates a profound truth. When it comes to Christ, there is no neutral ground—either you hate Him or you love Him. At this point in the story, they both hate Him.

THE LOVE OF CHRIST

What did Jesus do in response to their insults? Nothing! He took it. He showed his true character by asking His

Heavenly Father to forgive them. Never did he tell them to be quiet. Never did he sink to their level and say under His breath, "Someday you will get yours." No, He genuinely loved them.

What an image of strength and self-control. Christ had the ability to call twelve legions of angels to crush these two criminals and all involved in His crucifixion. But in love, He chose not to because that is not why He came.

You see Christ did not come to execute judgment upon guilty man—He came to save:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. (John 3:16-17)

For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost. (Luke 19:10)

And though these men are worthy of receiving God's wrath, God had a different plan at this dark moment in history. His desire was to save.

Second Peter 3:9 tells us that God is willing that none should perish; and here in the hour of His greatest suffering Christ was working out His gracious plan to save a thief who was deserving of eternal condemnation—one who had no hope.

It is important to note that both of these criminals had equal access to the Savior. Both had adequate information as to who He was and both had a choice to make in response to Him.

However from this point on in the story, the situation of these men begins to change. The one thief (Thief 1) imitated the mockery of the religious leaders and

asked Jesus to rescue him from the cross. The other thief (Thief 2) had a different goal. His goal was not to escape physical death but to escape eternal death.

The thieves' impending deaths bring to the forefront the reality that what you think of Jesus Christ will determine where you spend eternity.

As we shall see, each thief reveals a different, opposite response and conclusion about Jesus Christ.

Let's consider the spiritual condition of these two men.

THESE TWO THIEVES WERE ON THE SAME SPIRITUAL ROAD

They were on the same road to eternal misery. Surprisingly, however, it is not because they were criminals. They were on that road, not because they were criminals in particular, but because they were sinners like you and me.

You see, there are multitudes on this same road today who have not in any way, shape, or form committed the same crimes that these two had; yet, their destiny is no different.

We are told by the Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 7 the reality of this road:

Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. "Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)

There are multitudes on a human level that would be considered by society at large to be respectable, decent, and moral; yet, they are on the same spiritual road as these two thieves.

While most moral and respectable folks would not keep company with these thieves and would perhaps take every measure to avoid them, they are nevertheless on the same road to destruction.

You see God's perspective on all of mankind is unified: There is no difference! There is no difference between the worst sinner and the nicest sinner on the planet.

We are all on the same road, because all are sinners. We are all on the same road, for we have all fallen short of God's standard. This is the one thing that each one of us has in common with these thieves.

While we may want to differentiate between types of sinners—as you may feel that it is inappropriate that you should be lumped into the same category as these two individuals—the bottom line is that God doesn't differentiate between sinners:

For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:22b-23)

This is why the account of the two thieves on the cross is a message for all of us. This means you don't have to be a criminal to end up in hell. None of us has made the grade.

There is a difference in their sins on a human level but not on a spiritual level. The difference on a human level is that the sins of these two men are grave. These thieves were the basest of sinners.

In fact, it is likely that the average person would not hesitate to agree with the authorities that these men had done deeds worthy of their punishment.

However, it is possible, and perhaps likely, that the same folks who would consent to the death of these two criminals would not see themselves in the same predicament.

A relative comparison of their behavior to the deeds of these two robbers, would cause one to conclude that he is not in the same dire straits that they are in spiritually—and yet he is. Like the two criminals, we all stand condemned before a holy God:

There is none righteous, no, not one. (Romans 3:10)

So while it is obvious that these men are in deep trouble before God, the reality is that so are we in our sins. Both of these men are facing an imminent death and therefore are staring their eternal future in the face. Yet that does not make anyone else any different. James tells us that our life is tenuous:

Whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. (James 4:14)

Though you may think all is well and that you have many good years ahead of you, the reality is that you could be dead before the day is done.

The issue here is not whether you are a criminal because regardless of any human good or evil you may have done, you, like all, have sinned and come short of God's glory.

Like each thief, all are worthy of God's wrath. So the issue before you *is not*, "How good or bad of a person am I?" The real issue is, "What do I think of Christ and what He accomplished for me upon the cross?"

It is likely that those who were witnessing this crucifixion were thinking that they would certainly go into the kingdom of God before these three.

And yet when Christ looked at the Pharisees, who were the most self-righteous people of the day, He stated that the ones whom they deemed as society's lower rung would go to heaven before them:

Jesus said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you." (Matthew 21:31)

Why does Christ utter this? Because the openly rebellious are in a more favorable position to see they fall short of God's standard and are in need of a Savior than those who think they are righteous.

What else can we observe here? Both of them were *oppositely affected* by the passion of Christ.

TWO RESPONSES TO CHRIST'S PASSION

We will see that there was a positive change of heart with one thief but not the other. This tells us that the crucifixion of Christ affects people. When you are presented with the Gospel of Christ you cannot remain neutral.

The suffering of Christ had one impact on one thief and the opposite impact on the other.

Thief 1: Blasphemed Christ

Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us." (Luke 23:39)

The passion of Jesus Christ increased his hardness toward the Savior, and therefore hatred for Christ came out of his mouth with greater intensity than before.

The effect of the crucifixion of the righteous man, Jesus Christ, intensified the first thief's rejection of the very One that he so desperately needed to save his soul from destruction.

Thief 2: Received Christ

The other criminal displayed an altogether different response to the person and work of Christ.

This thief was taking notice that there was something unique about this man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

He therefore rebukes his fellow thief:

But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation?" (Luke 23:40)

Notice the words: "Do you not even fear God?"!

What a shocking transformation. Just moments earlier he railed on Jesus Christ just like the rest. Now he begins to rebuke the other thief.

There has been a profound change of heart, and God was using the event surrounding the passion of Christ to do it.

What is it that the Holy Spirit used to produce such a change in the heart of this man—to go from blaspheming Him to defending Him?

Undoubtedly, part of it was the actions of Christ.

Because Christ was between the two thieves they could hear Christ repeatedly utter, "Father, forgive them."

This thief was indeed impressed with the One who forgives His enemies and prays that God would be merciful to the cruelest of sinners. No doubt, when the robbers were having nails driven into their bodies they were cursing these Romans.

He may have wondered internally, "Why isn't this man, who has been treated much worse than us, not denouncing these soldiers but praying for them instead?"

He concluded what everyone must conclude in order to be saved: that Jesus Christ indeed is who He claimed to be—the Son of God.

Both thieves realized what was being claimed regarding Jesus:

- He saved others
- His words and works declared Him to be the Christ
- He was the Messiah, the chosen of God
- He was the promised King of the Jews and was able to save

In salvation one must realize that Jesus is God. He is God who also became a man to act as a mediator between God and man by paying for man's sins.

Thief 2 also acknowledged that he was guilty before God while Christ was innocent:

But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." (Luke 23:40-41)

This thief acknowledged the fact that he was guilty and what was being done to him on that cross was just. He also recognized something about Christ that is crucial—that He was innocent.

There are a myriad of things that set Christ apart from each and every other man that ever walked this earth. But the most profound thing that sets Jesus Christ apart is His sinlessness. This thief recognized what all must recognize if they are to be saved—that Christ has done nothing wrong.

Christ was God who became a man. As God, Christ was not capable of sinning, but He lovingly chose to take the guilt of our sins though He was sinless:

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

As perfect God and perfect man, Christ offered Himself as the Lamb of God, the perfect sacrifice to pay the perfect price—not for His sins, for He had none, but for yours and mine. This was done to satisfy the justice that a holy God demanded.

This thief did what is necessary for anyone to get saved. He acknowledged his guilt before God. He acknowledged that he deserved to pay the penalty that God associates with sin, which is death or eternal separation from God in the lake of fire.

This thief admitted he was guilty. Have you? You say, “Well I haven’t ripped anybody off.” Oh? Have you ever taken anything that doesn’t belong to you? Have you ever taken credit for something you didn’t do? The bottom line is we are guilty before God. God gave the Ten Commandments to show us our guilt before Him.

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. (Romans 3:19)

This thief, through the aid of the Holy Spirit, came to see himself for who he was and to see Jesus Christ for who He is.

This thief knew he was dying. He knew that the grave was not the end of it all. He knew that there was life after death. In the waning moments of his life he put his faith in Christ to save Him.

He did this even though everyone around Him thought Christ was a failure. He believed that Christ was the Lord and that He was making payment for his sins and he trusted Christ as his Savior.

That is how one receives salvation. By placing his complete trust in Christ alone:

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.
(Acts 16:31)

How many today, instead of looking at the Savior and seeing what He accomplished for them at the cross, look around to see what everyone else is doing and thinking?

Please note that the thief didn't raise a hand; he didn't walk an aisle; and he didn't promise God he would turn over a new leaf. He wasn't baptized or confirmed; he didn't receive last rites or Holy Communion; and he certainly wasn't trying to earn his salvation through his good works since he was a condemned criminal.

He didn't do any of those things because none of those things can save a soul. He simply trusted Christ as His Savior. This is salvation by grace.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Now at this point in our story Thief 1 says nothing in response to the second thief's rebuke and question, confirming once again the hardness of his heart.

Thief 2, having trusted Christ as his Savior now prays and makes a request from the Lord:

Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." (Luke 23:42)

You see, he evaluated the evidence and saw that Christ was a King and Christ would rise from the dead and set up His kingdom. And so in humility he had a simple request, "Remember me when You come into Your kingdom." He did not ask for something special. He simply asked, as it were, to receive the crumbs that fall from the table. This is all he wanted.

Notice he didn't pray to get off the cross like the other mocking thief. He didn't pray to get relief from his pain, as crucifixion is one of the most painful ways to die ever invented from the cruel heart of man. He knew he deserved to die and did not want to escape what he deserved in this life.

He was thinking like all must—about the eternal state. He said in essence, “You are a king and one day You will receive Your kingdom—and I simply want You to remember me—You know, the wretch that was crucified beside You.”

THE RESPONSE OF CHRIST

Christ exceeded his expectations:

And Jesus said to him, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43)

A minimum request is answered with a maximum blessing. He said, “Assuredly”! Christ didn't say, “Well, maybe.” He said, “Assuredly.”

True Christianity offers a “know so” salvation, not a “hope so” salvation. The assurance of salvation that this man died with is the same assurance that each person dies with when they simply trust in Christ alone:

And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:11-13)

This man died while still being viewed as a criminal in the eyes of other people, and yet he was totally forgiven in the eyes of God.

How did Christ exceed the thief's expectations?

He said, "Today"! Not, "When I set up my kingdom." But, "Today [and forever more] you will be with me in Paradise."

He also said, "With Me"! Christ offers a *personal* salvation with Him!

Finally, He said, "in Paradise"! This means that not only will you be a part of His kingdom, but you will be with Him in Paradise! God's salvation is a glorious salvation. It is Paradise. It is being with the God of the universe forever.

Do you have the assurance that when you die you will be with Christ? This what God designed and this is what Christ offers because of the payment He made on the cross for your sins.

This criminal (Thief 2), a thief of the worst kind, died that day with all his sins forgiven. Three days later Christ arose again and now lives forever more. Therefore, He is able to guarantee not only on the promise made to the dying thief but every other promise He has made for His children to enjoy.

Did you know that this story, or the essence of it, really bothers some people? Think about it for a minute. Here's this guy who, up to a few minutes before, was joining the others who mocked Jesus. Then he has a change of mind about Christ. He trusts Jesus as His Savior and then has the unmitigated gall to ask Jesus for a favor?

Some would object that this man was never baptized, never took communion, never endured a church service, never went to Sunday School, never put a dime in the collection plate, and yet Jesus gives him a promise of eternal life.

This man had nothing to offer. He would never be able to share the good news with his friends and family. He would never be able to express the results of his faith to others. He couldn't do anything for the Lord or His coming Kingdom and yet, Jesus, with hands and feet nailed to the cross, still comes to this man and welcomes him as His own.

There is someone out there who thinks in his heart of hearts that this just isn't fair. There are some who say to themselves, "I have done all these works and tried my best and haven't done evil. This guy has lived a life of evil and he gets salvation for free? It isn't fair!"

Do you know what? It isn't fair! Salvation is by grace! Grace is undeserved kindness. And that is the only basis on which Christ saves anybody. If you could earn it or deserve it (and you can't), then your works would count for something before God—but they don't.

If you could get to heaven by your good works, then the question must be asked, "Why did Christ have to endure death for you? For what purpose did He die in your place? The Bible is clear that Christ died *for your sins* (1 Corinthians 15:3). He paid the price of your sins that you could never pay through your works.

This way God gets the glory. What every soul can rejoice in is the fact that God loves everyone the same as both of these thieves. He offers the same salvation that He offers to these thieves. Whenever people recognize that they are just as undeserving of salvation as the two thieves who were crucified with Christ, then they are in a position to humble themselves before God and trust Christ alone as their Savior and have the very same assurance that the second thief had.

Christ offered both of these men salvation for free—for that is the only kind He offers.

Both thieves were nailed to a cross. They were not good men. By man's standards they were hopeless to receive salvation.

The second thief, however, recognized that the Savior crucified next to him was the One who was able to save him by what He was doing, rather than what he himself might do for God; and so he trusted in Him. Though seemingly hopeless, this thief died with a perfect hope in Christ.

The other thief had the same information about Christ and the same opportunity to trust Him as Savior. However, he rejected Christ and is forever condemned before God and will suffer for all eternity.

It is rejection of Christ that condemns one to the lake of fire:

He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.
(John 3:18)

The good news of the Gospel is that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

He didn't come into the world to save righteous people because there really aren't any, at least compared to God who is the only standard of comparison that counts. But many people think they are righteous enough and can get to heaven through their own efforts. They think they'll get there on their own ticket. They think they'll get there based on their own human goodness. They think they'll get there on their own religion, and therefore they don't see any need for themselves to be saved or for someone else to save them.

But Christ didn't come to save such people. Of course, He's willing to save them if they're willing to let Him.

But many of them are not willing to let Him, so do you know what He does?

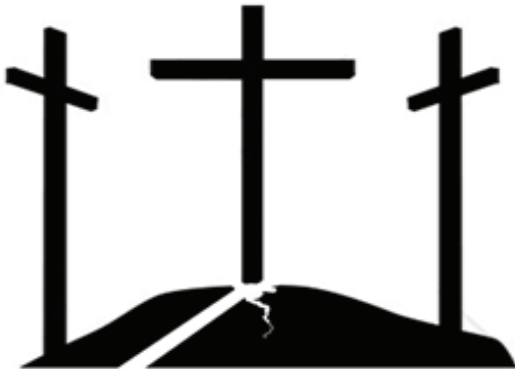
He goes to the greatest sinners. He goes to the down-and-outers. He goes to the ones who feel that they're beyond hope, that God couldn't do anything with them, who feel that even if He cleansed them, they're still useless. Jesus Christ goes to them!

That's the wonder of the gospel, isn't it? That "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—sinful people such as murderers, adulterers, pornographers, abusers, wife-beaters, terrorists, alcoholics, drug-abusers, prostitutes, you name it—the whole lot! But He also came to save thieves like you and me. Christ came to save us! Isn't that amazing? Even you and me!

Do you have the same assurance that the second thief had? Have you believed the same promise that he was offered? Have you placed your trust solely in the Christ of Calvary?

Do you know you have eternal life?

WHICH THIEF REPRESENTS YOU?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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