

“THE THIEF: SAVED BY THE CROSS”

The Impact of the Cross - Part 4

Luke 23:33, 39-44

According to *Charisma* magazine, Sherri Felts responded to the invitation at the close of a church service the last Sunday morning in January. The following Friday night, Sheri Felts, age 55, a very popular high school teacher, died in her sleep with no apparent cause.

Now let me ask you this morning a rather old question. If that had been you, would you be in heaven or hell right now? Now I know that sounds like a question that a hellfire and brimstone preacher would ask, but it really is the most important question in life. Because when all of life is over what is going to matter most is where you spend eternity. Now I'm sure that most of us would probably answer, "Well, if I died tonight I sure *hope* that I would be in heaven." But how do you know? What assurance do you have? And is it possible to be confident?

USA Today recently surveyed rich Americans, asking what they would pay the most for. The wealthiest 1% of families in America said that their number one desire was not beauty, intellect, power, or even love. Their number one desire was a place in heaven. The article said the rich would pay on the average of \$640,000 for the assurance of a place in heaven.

The late Billy Graham, not long before he died, was asked, "Over the nearly five decades that you have ministered to American presidents, which of the presidents did you see the most?" And his answer surprised me. Billy Graham said that the one president he saw more than any other was Lyndon Johnson. "Because," he added, "Johnson was afraid of death."

Well, this morning I want us to look at the cross from the perspective of the penitent thief. Here is the story that tells us how to be assured of heaven. And the good news is that it is absolutely free! You don't have to pay \$640,000.00 for it. It is free for the rich, as well as for the poor. And if this account is believed and accepted, you can walk away from this building today no longer in bondage to the fear of death—free to live each day to the fullest.

Look at Luke chapter 23, beginning with verse 33: *"When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left."*

Now skip down to verse 39: *"One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!' But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Jesus answered him, 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.'" (vv.39-44a).*

Now the Bible doesn't tell us a lot about this man, only about a half dozen verses. But there is enough about him that we can learn some important truths about the assurance of salvation in Jesus Christ. I want us to see five facts that help us trace this man's final hours that led him to being saved by the cross.

I. HE WAS A DISHONEST MAN. (Matthew 27:38)

Notice first that he was a *dishonest* man.

Matthew's Gospel identifies him as a "robber." Evidently he had committed a really serious crime. Because Exodus 22 teaches that the Jewish people did not incarcerate nonviolent criminals. If you were caught stealing you had to make restitution up to 4 and 5 times what you had stolen. And if you couldn't repay then you would be sold as a slave to pay your debt to society. But this man was sentenced to die by crucifixion by the Romans, so he must have been a repeat offender, or he must have killed somebody in an armed robbery, or he did something grossly wrong to merit the death penalty. Because he admits that whatever he got, he deserved. He said, "We're getting what our crime deserves."

Now there is a sense in which we are all dishonest people. A fifth grade school teacher asked her class, "If you found a briefcase full of \$500,000.00 in cash, what would you do?" There was a pause, and then one little boy said, "Well, if it belonged to a poor family, I'd return it!" Now we like to think that we're honest, but we find clever ways to hedge a little. The Bible says, "*There is no one righteous, not even one...*" (Romans 3:10). In fact, I'm going to ask you to raise your hand in just a minute if you have never stolen in your life, if you've never been a thief. I mean, you've never taken a dime out of your mother's purse, not a candy bar out of a vending machine, not an answer off somebody else's test, not a towel out of a motel room, not a dollar extra from your expense account, you've never taken anything from the IRS. I want you to raise your hand if you cannot remember ever stealing anything. Go ahead, raise your hand. **(pause)** You guys are spiritual! I only see one hand, and that's mine!

We've all broken this sixth commandment: "*Thou shalt not steal*" (Exodus 20:15). That's why Romans 3 says, "*There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (vv. 22-23). There's a sense in which we are all thieves, we're all sinners. So from God's perspective we are not deserving of heaven, because heaven is a place of holiness and perfection. And none of us measure up.

Now before I go on to the next point, I feel it necessary to add a footnote here. The Bible says that we are all sinners, but it does make a distinction between an honest man and a dishonest man.

I was watching a psychologist on one of those television talk shows several days ago, and he was supposed to be an expert in human behavior. And he was talking about the fact

that politicians don't tell the truth. "But," he said, "we all lie. We lie all the time. Some get caught and some admit it. But after all, we're all liars," he said. And the inference was that none of us should get upset with any leader who doesn't tell the truth, because after all, nobody does. But the Bible makes a distinction between an honest man and a dishonest man. There is a person of character and a person of corruption. It has to do with a consistent pattern of behavior.

For example, Noah was said in the Bible to be a righteous man when he lived in the midst of a people who were immoral continually. Or 1 Kings 11:6 says, "*Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord; he did not follow the Lord completely, as David his father had done.*" Now David wasn't perfect. He fell into sin with Bathsheba. But he regretted that and repented of that. That wasn't a habit, the consistent pattern of his life.

So just because you stole a dime out of your mother's purse does not make you a thief. You may be a sinner, but not a dishonest person. If I had two bananas, and one was so rotten it was black, and the other just had a little brown spot on it, you would say both bananas are decaying. But one is edible and the other is not. All people are sinners. But there are people who are moral and those who are not.

And this man who was crucified was a notorious thief. He was so bad that he was sentenced to die for his crime. And he said, "I'm getting what I deserve."

II. HE WAS A SUFFERING MAN. (Luke 23:33)

But I want you to see, secondly, that he was a *suffering* man.

Like Jesus, he was going through this horrible physical agony of crucifixion. His hands and feet were painfully nailed to a cross. His lungs were screaming with pain—he struggled for every breath. His legs were knotting with cramps, and his lips were cracked and swollen. And there was no relief, no way out. He just waited to die.

I know that some of you here today are suffering. There are a lot of things about being a preacher that I really like, but one of the things I don't like is that I have to deal with tragedy far too often. With dozens of people and their extended families, there are many deeply hurting experiences that I deal with. Almost every month it seems like there's something. So many tragedies. People dying prematurely. Couples experiencing a miscarriage. Couples learning that a child has some incurable disease. A spouse stunning their mate of many years by announcing that he or she wants a divorce. Those are just a few of the things I've had to deal with in recent years.

I know that a lot of you hurt. Some of you live with physical pain every day. Someone here today may be dealing with terminal illnesses. Some of you are hurting emotionally.

Some of you are grief-stricken and heartsick. Some of you are living with the consequences of sin, and you can't recover from the financial loss, or the disease, or the alienated relationships. Job said, "*Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward*" (5:7).

III. HE WAS A BITTER MAN. (Matt. 27:44)

But since this man was suffering so much, he was a *bitter* man.

Matthew 27, verse 44, reads, "*In the same way the robbers* (plural) *who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.*" At first both of these thieves taunted Jesus when He was executed.

Rick Druitts, who is on the staff of *Prison Fellowship*, was asked, "Is it common for convicts in the penitentiary to harass a newly admitted prisoner?" And he said, "Oh definitely. Especially if the prisoner is well-known, or he's young, or especially if the prisoner is a person of faith. Because the other prisoners regard that as a sign of weakness." And Rick said it's very common for all the prisoners to spew out all their cynicism on the new guy.

And both of these thieves poured out their bitterness against Jesus. The Bible says they taunted Him. He was young. He was well known. And He appeared to have a special relationship with the Father. Obviously they'd heard about Jesus' miracles of walking on the water and raising the dead. And they said, "If you can save other people then it should be a minor matter to save us! If you're really the Messiah, come down from the cross and take us with you!"

Now we often talk about the fact that suffering can deepen your character, or it can make you more sympathetic to people who hurt. And that's true. But suffering can make people bitter if they're not careful. It hardens some hearts to the point that they don't want anything to do with God. And they say, "Don't talk to me about Christianity! My child was born with Downs Syndrome." Or "I've prayed for years that I would get married, and yet I'm still single." Or "I was baptized, and two weeks later my wife dies in the middle of her sleep." After Job's ten children were killed instantly, after he lost all of his wealth and his health broke, in Job 7:11 he said, "*I will not keep silent; I will speak out in the anguish of my spirit, I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.*"

One angry woman, so bitter about the injustice of God, said, "God, if this is the way you treat your friends, then it's no wonder you don't have many!" You know, sometimes our thinking gets distorted when we're in pain. And even though this crucified thief taunted Jesus, Jesus did not lash back at him. And do you know why? Because Jesus understood. He was hurting, too. And He knew that sometimes people in pain can get bitter.

Maybe you're hurt and frustrated right now. And you think God doesn't understand. But you look at that cross. There is no loneliness, there is no physical pain, there is no emotional stress that you undergo that He didn't experience.

Hebrews 4:15 says, *"We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses [our infirmities], but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin."*

IV. HE BECAME A REPENTANT MAN.

But something happened to cause this thief to become a *repentant* man.

Sometime between 9:00 o'clock in the morning, when Jesus was crucified, and noon, when the earth became black, this thief completely changed his attitude about Jesus. Now what motivated this transformation in his thinking? Well, there's only one reason. He had watched Jesus closely for 3 hours under stress and he became convinced that this was no ordinary person, but that His claims were true.

You know, you can tell a lot about a person when they're dying. He had watched Jesus and been impressed that he had prayed for forgiveness for His enemies. He had been impressed that Jesus suffered physical pain without profanity, taunting without retaliating, being spit on without spitting back. This thief had heard at an arm's distance what Peter had heard from afar, and later wrote about, *"When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate..."* (1 Peter 2:23). Jesus' death was so distinctive that this dying thief realized His claims were true.

I want you to see four indications of genuine repentance.

Number one is a respect for God's *authority*.

This dying thief heard his brother-in-crime taunt Jesus, and he asked Him, *"Don't you fear God, since we're under the same sentence?"* (v. 40). "Isn't it stupid," he said, "to curse God and to eliminate any chance you have for life beyond, when you know you're dying?!"

There's an old saying, "There are no atheists in foxholes!" But you know what, that's not entirely true. Some people get so hardened that they remain unbelievers right up to the very end. A friend of mine tried to talk to his mother about the Lord when she was on her deathbed. And she snapped, "That's a private matter!" Now you would think that somebody who knew she was dying would want to reach out to any kind of hope. The Bible says, *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom..."* (Proverbs 9:10). People say, "Well I don't think we ought to try to teach anybody to fear God! We ought to teach people to love God." But respect is the foundation of love. You know the second stanza of the song *Amazing Grace*

says, “’Twas grace that taught my heart to...”. To what? “...to fear. And grace my fears relieved.”

So the first step in repentance is to respect God, to fear God, to understand that you can’t conquer death on your own. You can’t forgive your own sins. Someday you’re going to stand before a holy God and give an account for your life. And that brings about fear.

The second indication of his repentance was that he *admitted* his sin.

He said, “I’m being punished justly.” He didn’t gloss it over, he didn’t excuse it, he simply admitted, “I am a sinner and deserve to die.”

Professional basketball player Latrell Sprewell, accused of choking his coach in a fit of rage a number of seasons ago, insisted he really wasn’t choking his coach and that he didn’t need anger counseling before he could be reinstated in the NBA. “After all,” he said, “the coach could breathe. And I wasn’t trying to kill him.”

In the same season, Stanford University guard Arthur Lee made a choke sign to a Road Island guard who missed three free throws in a row. And he said, “If I was in my right mind, there’s no way that that would have happened. He’s a great player, and what I did was definitely wrong.” And he wrote his opponent a letter of apology.

Boy, what a difference! Here’s one player rationalizing his behavior, and the other player repenting of it. Isaiah 66:2 says, “*This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and who trembles at my word.*” As long as we see ourselves as good and moral, we don’t see ourselves as God sees us. He sees us as sinners in need of repentance.

The third indication of repentance was that he believed *rightly* about Jesus.

He said, “*This man has done nothing wrong*” (v. 41).

In the Greek, the word for “repentance” is *metanoia*. *Meta* means “change”—such as metamorphosis. And the Greek word *nous* means “the mind.” So, to repent is to “change the mind.” “I once believed that Jesus was a phony,” he says, “and now I believe He’s done nothing wrong. He is the Son of God.” Jesus said in John 11:25, “*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies...*”.

And the fourth indication of repentance is a *humble trust* in Jesus.

He turned to Jesus and said, “*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*”

Now isn't it interesting that nobody else at Golgotha, except in mockery, had addressed Jesus as a King. But the dying thief saw more clearly than anyone else the nature of Jesus' kingdom. He somehow then believed, "Death is not going to end all for this man." He believed that Jesus was going to establish a spiritual kingdom. And he humbled himself and he made what seemed like an absurd request to the other thief, "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*" (v. 42).

So genuine repentance is still marked the same way today—respect for God, truthfulness about our sin, conviction about Jesus as the Son of God, and putting our faith in Jesus' death on the cross.

Acts 3:19 says, "*Repent and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.*"

V. HE BECAME A SAVED MAN. (Luke 23:43)

So the dying thief, then, became a *saved* man.

Jesus answered him, "*I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise*" (Luke 23:43).

He was saved *from* hell.

When we talk about saving somebody, we usually say we're saved from disaster. "Thank you! You saved me from financial ruin." "You've saved me from drowning!" "You saved me from being the goat of the game!" And this dying thief was saved from going to hell.

Now that's not a pleasant subject, but it is the biblical truth. In Luke 12 Jesus said, "*Don't be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has the power to throw you into hell*" (vv.4, 5).

The worst thing that can happen to you in life is not to die. The worst thing that can happen to you is to die and to be lost forever in hell. Hell is described in the Bible as being a place of eternal fire, outer darkness, utter despair, constant weeping, and gnashing of teeth. And this thief dying on the cross was one heartbeat from hell, and Jesus saved him.

He was saved from hell, and **he was saved *for* heaven.**

"*Today,*" Jesus said, "*you will be with me in paradise*" (v. 43). What a contrast.

Just recently Fox News Health ran a story about Landon Whitley. In 1997, when Landon was just 9 years old, Landon and his family were in a horrible automobile accident while

driving home from church one Sunday morning. Landon's dad was killed instantly. And Landon was injured so badly that he was taken by helicopter to the hospital, and three times on that trip they had to revive him. He then had to have brain surgery and was in a coma for several weeks. When he started coming out of the coma Landon's mother dreaded telling him that his dad had died in the accident, because Landon was so very close to his father. But before she could tell him, Little Landon said, "Mom, I've been to heaven three times! And the first time I saw angels, and they were singing and clapping for me. And mom, the second time I went I saw dad, and he was with Jesus. And I wanted to stay with dad, but Jesus hugged me and told me I had to come back to tell people what I saw." And he said, "Mom, I also saw your two other children!" And his mother's breath was taken away, because she had had two miscarriages and she'd never told her son about them.

Now I don't know how to explain that other than the way that Paul explains it in 2 Corinthians 12, verse 2. He said, *"I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man ... was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell"* (vv. 2-4).

Folks, when you die that doesn't end all. Your spirit leaves your body—just like a hand is removed from the glove, the form of the hand is still there, but that which animated it is taken out—and the spirit goes directly, immediately, into the presence of God. Second Corinthians 5:8 says, *"To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord."* So there is no temporary place of purging of your sins. Since Jesus paid for all of your sins on the cross, you go immediately to be with God. This dying thief was taken that day to paradise.

So, he was saved *from* hell. He was saved *for* heaven.

And he was saved by *grace*.

He wasn't saved by living a good life, he lived a horrible life. He wasn't saved by performing some ritual, he couldn't move his hands or feet. He was saved simply by calling on the name of the Lord, trusting in Jesus Christ. That's why Ephesians 2, verses 8 and 9, says, *"It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."*

You know, no matter how much in your pride you want to pay for your salvation, you can't afford it. Because the price is the death of a perfect man, and you don't qualify. You didn't even keep the sixth commandment, for heaven's sake! There's only one person capable of paying that price, and that is Jesus Christ. And the only thing we can do is swallow our pride, admit our lack of resources, put our trust in Christ, and thank Him.

Now the way that this thief expressed his faith was to do the one thing that he could do, even though it was hard for him to do, and that is that he spoke. He said, *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”* (Luke 23:42).

Now the way we express our trust in Christ is to do two things.

One is, we are to *confess* our faith in Him, too.

Romans 10:9 says, *“If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”*

The second thing we do to express our faith in Christ is to be *baptized* into Him.

In Mark 16:16 Jesus said, *“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved...”*.

Now sometimes people say, “Well the thief on the cross didn’t get baptized, so I’m not going to get baptized either.” Well, he couldn’t. Besides, he was living under the Old Testament Law. The New Testament didn’t begin until Jesus died and arose from the dead. And we are commanded to express our faith by confessing Him publicly, unashamedly, and then being baptized into Him.

But you know what, the dying thief really isn’t a good example, in a way, for us to use for salvation. He’s not the best example because he waited until just before he died to put his faith in Christ. If you wait until your dying breath to call on the name of the Lord, you will miss an entire lifetime of joy, and service, and witness. But more importantly, you don’t know when death will come. You could die in your sleep. Or you could be so sedated toward the end that you can’t call on the name of the Lord. One commentator wrote: “There is one deathbed conversion in the pages of Scripture so that none may despair. But there is only one so that none may presume.” The Bible says, *“Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near”* (Isaiah 55:6). The Bible reminds us that we don’t know what a day will bring forth. You may live many more years, or you could die in your sleep tonight. But you can be assured that you will go to heaven if you place your trust in Jesus Christ. Because in John 6:37 he promised, *“...whoever comes to me I will never drive away.”*

This dying thief, who had blasphemed Him just minutes before, was accepted by Jesus. And whether you’ve lived a notoriously sinful life, or whether the worst thing you ever did was to take an answer off the test of somebody in the 6th grade, He is anxious to reach out and save you. If you will humbly come to Him in repentance, you can be assured of the promise of eternal life.

If I were to die tonight and I were to stand before God, and God were to ask me, “Why do you think you ought to go to my heaven?”, I would not say, “Well, I’ve tithed ever since I

was a 10-year-old boy. And I preach every Sunday. And I loved my family and was faithful to my wife. And I never once got drunk.” No, I wouldn’t say those things. I would say, “God, I am a sinner. And nothing in my hands I bring, but simply to that cross I cling.” And I know that He would say, “Today you’ll be with me in paradise.” Because He’s promised that *“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:16).