



THE MAN IN THE MIDDLE

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There have been many messages given throughout time about the thief on the cross. This will not be the first or the last. My recalling of this beautiful story will not be unique. The true story of the thief on the cross remains an amazing account that often baffles the spiritual theologians of the day. It is a story of the gospel in the simplest form.

When Jesus Christ was condemned to death on the cross, he was placed between two criminals - two thieves. Jesus was in the middle. The Bible does not tell us what their crimes were, but in the words of one of the criminals himself, we find that it was for crimes worthy of death. They were taken to a place called Calvary, also translated in the ESV as “The Skull.”

“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” (Luke 23:32-33, NKJV).

“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” exclaimed the thief on the cross to the other criminal in Luke 23:40. The thief acknowledged that his crimes were worthy of death.

At about 9 a.m. that morning, Jesus and the two thieves were led to their place of crucifixion. Three crosses were prepared. We know that Jesus was mocked. He was scourged. Nails were driven through his hands and feet before being hoisted up on the cross. The two thieves would have had a similar fate.

I can imagine in my mind that the thieves, at 9 am that morning, were expecting to do no more than suffer and die for their crimes on that fateful day. Going to heaven was not on their list of objectives for the day. Only death faced them. Most likely their language was filled with curses for the Romans, their captors and executioners. There probably was not much virtue flowing from the hearts of the two thieves.

As the hours slowly passed and the excruciating drama of slow suffocation set in, the Roman guards gambled for Jesus garments

at the foot of the cross. The crowd mocked Jesus. The rulers shouted, *“He saved others, let him save himself: If he is the Christ of God, His chosen one”* (Luke 23:35)!

The drama that played out at the foot of the cross had been foretold 1,000 years earlier in Psalm 22.

1. All who see me mock me (Psalms 22:7).
2. They have pierced my hands and feet (Psalms 22:16).
3. I can count all of my bones (Psalms 22:17).
4. They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing, they cast lots. This is amazing because it was illegal for the Roman soldiers to gamble at the foot of the cross, and yet they did fulfill a 1,000-year-old prophecy (Psalms 22:18).

In the midst of the scoffers, the slow death, the humiliation, the blood loss, Jesus exclaimed, *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”* (Luke 23:34a, NKJV)!

We will never know, but was this the moment that brought mental and spiritual clarity to one of the two criminals? When he saw an innocent man call out to God to forgive those who placed Him on the cross? All we know is that something sincere and genuine suddenly sparked in the heart of one of the thieves.

In a few short hours, even the Roman centurion soldier, the captain over 100 soldiers would exclaim, *“Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God saying, ‘Certainly this man was innocent’* (Luke 23:47, NKJV).

In a few short years, another follower of Jesus, Stephen, a deacon mightily used by God, would be falsely accused and would die a horrific death by stoning. As Stephen’s life was slipping away, Stephen would fall to his knees and echo the words that Jesus said on the cross: *“Father, forgive them.”*

“Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not charge them with this sin.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:57-60, NKJV).

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

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’” (Luke 23:39-43, NKJV).

In this short narrative, we see that Jesus opened a door to heaven for one of the two thieves, the repentant thief, that very day. At about 9 a.m. that very morning, the criminal had anticipated a painful death, nothing more, just the end of his miserable and failed life. By 6 p.m. that evening, he was ushered into Paradise, or heaven. Don’t get caught up as a reader in the choice of words.

This was a miracle. We rejoice in the simplicity of this salvation experience. This experience, recorded by Dr. Luke, the great Gentile writer who wrote about 30% of the New Testament, has brought great joy to us all and has also raised many questions for the legalists.

Jesus’ answer to the unnamed, but repentant, criminal was too simple, some might say. *“Today you will be with ME in Paradise.”* Some might imagine the thief trying to make his way into heaven, and perhaps being stopped at the gate (as if there were one!). The skeptic might say, *“Where are your credentials, Mr. Thief?”*

Did you understand the doctrine of justification? Were you baptised in water? Were you filled with the Spirit? What Church did you go to? Did you prophesy? Did you tithe? Did you go to church camp? Were you a good man? A good father? A good husband? Did you partake of communion? Did you read your Bible through in a year? Did you memorize scripture?

One can imagine Mr. Thief explaining to the skeptics, as he makes his grand entrance into heaven, that *“The Man in the Middle said I could be with Him.”* How can this be true?

Jesus had said this very thing to the disciples in John 14:

“‘Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know.’ Thomas said to Him, ‘Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me’” (John 14:1-6, NKJV).

Let me pause for a moment, my friends, and say something that is not pleasant to the ears, but has eternal implications. There is only ONE WAY into heaven. Jesus is the way. Noah’s ark only had ONE door as a symbol that there was only one way into safety. The blood during the passover was applied to ONE DOOR of the home. Jesus is the only way.

The two thieves, the two criminals, were hung on their respective crosses unknowingly beside the only way into heaven that fateful morning. So close, and at the same time, so far. One was close to salvation. He recognized it and embraced it. We don’t know about the other one.

“But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved” (Romans 10:8-13, NKJV).

Let’s take a look at what happened to the thief, for truly all the elements of salvation took place in a few flashing moments on the cross.

1. The thief perceived his own guilt; he repented: *“We receive the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong” (Luke 23:41).*
2. He acknowledged Christ and prayed for forgiveness: *“Do you not even fear God.... Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom” (Luke 23:40,42).*

It is not through many and mighty words that we are saved.

“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. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8-10, NKJV).

The thief may not have used the proper words that we often use when leading souls to Christ. He did not have time or opportunity to be water baptized. He did not have time or opportunity to be part of a local church. His life was quickly dripping away on the cross with no time to spare to make things right with God.

“And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.” (Hebrews 9:27-28, NKJV).

The proverbial clock was ticking. He had run out of time, but in the last 3 or 4 hours of his physical life, he made a decision that affected him for eternity. He met “The Man in the Middle; the Lord Jesus Christ.” The sad part of the story is that we do not hear the same testimony from the other thief. Both had the same opportunity, only one repented.

At the cross, a new door was opened by the shedding of blood by the Lamb of God. No longer would it be necessary to go to a high priest to intercede on behalf of God’s people. Animal sacrifices were no longer needed. A brand new door and a brand new way were opened for all of mankind into heaven, for all who would make the choice. And it is a choice, a conscious, decisive choice.

I find it so ironic and yet such a grand display of the grace of God, that when this new door of salvation was opened by the work of the cross, perhaps the first human soul to make their way

to “Paradise” was not a Rabbi, not a Pharisee, not even one of the Apostles, but an unnamed, repentant thief on the cross. How fitting that Jesus died for sinners!

Permit me to reprint a short write-up I prepared some time ago on the last words of Jesus, “It is finished.”

Tetelestai (Gk), a Greek word meaning “paid in full” is also translated as *“It is finished.”* Business documents unearthed from the days of Christ would often show a bill with the word *tetelestai* written across the top meaning, this bill has been “paid in full.”

It is finished. There is no more debt to be paid.

There are only two times that this word is used in the New Testament. In John 19:28 and in John 19:30.

“Then when he received the sour wine, Jesus said, “It is finished (Tetelestai), and he bowed His head and gave up the Spirit” (John 19:30).

Those who heard those words ring through the air from our suffering Christ must have been very familiar with that term. *“Tetelestai!” “It is finished.”* It is complete. It is paid in full. No more debt!

2 Corinthians 5:21, *“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

All of creation, past, present, and future, was, is, and will be affected by those three powerful words! *“It is finished!” (tetelestai!).*

You can almost visualize the angels falling before the throne in celestial awe of those magnificent words.

God planned for this very moment from before the foundation of the world. All of God’s plans for creation, for the kingdom, for the eternities beyond the eternities, all pivoted on that great payment for sin when Jesus exclaimed, *“It is finished!”*

What was the thief’s name? Who was that criminal? He was me. He was you. It was our dark sins that were nailed to the cross, on Jesus’ cross. It was I who said, “I deserve to be here, but you don’t.” It was you who said the same. There is no sin too great that cannot be nailed to that cross. It was you and me that Jesus spoke to, saying, “You will be with me.”

“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20, NKJV).

I have been blessed, very blessed, embarrassingly blessed! I grew up in a home with two parents who took us to church as children. Parents who loved one another, and I learned to love my wife, by what I saw in my home. I met the “Man in the Middle” when I

was quite young. Then I drifted a little, as many do. And then, as a young teenager, the “Man in the Middle,” the Lord Jesus Christ, asked again for my all. Though on one hand I gave up much, on the other, looking back over the decades, I can see that I only gained. I gained so much. I never lost.

“Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19, NKJV).

Do you know this Jesus? You can. Both men who were hung on adjacent crosses beside Jesus had the same opportunity to have their sins washed away, and an entrance to heaven made for them. Only one made the choice. The choice is yours.

Don't wait. ✝

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