

Today in Paradise

I. The Cross Was the Plan of God for Our Redemption

There are seven “sayings” Jesus made from the cross. The first saying was, “*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*” As the soldiers gambled for His garments, the people were jeering, calling Him names, and yelling accusations, yet He asked for forgiveness towards them. Even though Jesus’ hands and feet had been nailed to the cross, no one could nail His ministry to the cross. Although Jesus could not perform miracles or physically walk among the people where the needs were, He could pray from the cross where He hung, and He did pray for God’s forgiveness toward the people.

Acts 2:22-24

Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know:

Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain:

Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.

Although the Jewish people put Jesus on a cross and crucified Him, all of this was part of the plan of God. Jesus wasn’t sent to the cross to simply die, but that He should take your sin and my sin, your curse and my curse, and remove it. These verses tell us this was accomplished by the foreknowledge of God. God knew what was going to happen. Nothing took Him by surprise.

2 Corinthians 5:21

For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

God knew what He was doing when Jesus went to the cross. Therefore, the seven sayings of Jesus on the cross were known in God's foreknowledge, and many were recorded in the Old Testament.

II. The Two Thieves Represent Us

Luke 23:42

And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.

And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.

Nothing in the Word of God is coincidental or accidental. Everything is by divine decree. Jesus was crucified between two thieves. Isaiah 53:12 says that Jesus was numbered with the transgressors. He had a thief on either side of Him and those thieves represent us. Notice, God did not put a couple of rich people on the cross, He put a couple of thieves. Those thieves had done nothing good in their lives. One of them later admitted he was there because he deserved to be.

While each of them hung on a cross, there was jeering from the crowds, the soldiers, and the religious people. What the people did not realize was that those thieves represented them. A thief is someone who continually takes from someone else, and that is exactly what a person is without Jesus Christ — a thief from the chief thief himself—Satan.

The religious leaders gave money to the poor everyday, yet Jesus said, "You are of your father, the devil." (See John 8:44.) The only time you can really give is when you have the Author of all giving inside of you—the Holy Spirit. Once the Holy Spirit dwells inside you, you can begin to shed abroad the love of God. Until that time, you are empty and taking from the people around you. You can take all you want, but you can never be happy.

The thieves deserved to die. We deserve to die. But Jesus did *not* deserve to die. Jesus being lifted up on the cross between the two thieves represents the fact that He has identified with us. Before we could be lifted up to Jesus' level as kings and priests, He had to be brought down to ours. He laid aside His great position in heaven, humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Jesus is our Great Substitute on the cross.

Why were there two thieves rather than one? I believe it is because there are two answers to the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ: — *yes* and *no*. One thief said *yes*, the other thief said *no*. Both observed Jesus carrying the cross. Both had the same Gospel presented to them. Both heard the crowds jeering at Him. Both thieves were so close to Jesus, they could see His face, hear Him breathing, and hear His words. They both had the same opportunity. One said *yes* and the other said *no*.

Both thieves saw Him fall under the load of the cross. They, too, had to carry their own crosses, as was the custom of the day. It was very degrading to carry your cross down the street in front of the crowds that had gathered for the execution. Both thieves saw Jesus react as no other man had reacted. Both of these men must have stood in the crowds and watched someone else drag their cross down the street at one time or another. They had seen people spit, curse, yell, and try to retaliate, but they had never seen a man carry his cross peacefully. They had never heard a man being nailed to a cross who never once opened his mouth. Historians have recorded that when the nails went into a man's hands and feet, the screaming could be heard for miles. Yet Isaiah 53:7 tells us, "*as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not His mouth.*"

Both of them saw the Lamb of God hanging next to them, and heard Him asking God to forgive those around Him.

Matthew 27:35-44

And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots,

And sitting down they [centurions] watched him there;

And set up over his head his accusation written, THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left.

And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads,

And saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.

Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said,

He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be 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.

The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth.

The thieves joined in with the crowd, jeering at Jesus as they were clearly being presented the Gospel. Suddenly, the heart of one of them began to soften, and he saw what we have all seen: *Jesus*. We have turned away from what the world says and have accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior, just as this repentant thief did. Tradition tells us it was the thief on Jesus' right hand. Matthew 25:31-46 tells us that those on His left will depart into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, but those on His right hand will be accepted into the kingdom of God.

III. The Repentant Thief

Both thieves saw the Gospel clearly presented before them. They were in the same position as Jesus — their hands and feet were nailed to a cross, but you could not nail their faith. They could do no good works, but they could operate in faith.

The thief who was redeemed was saved by grace. There is no way he could have worked for his salvation. If he had to walk an aisle at a church or repeat the sinner's prayer, he would have gone to hell. If this man had to be water baptized or join a church, he would have been eternally separated from God. If he had to tithe or do good works for his salvation, he would not have been saved. His hands and feet were nailed to a cross, so he could not walk in the paths of righteousness. He was dying, so he could not live as a righteous man. He only had a few remaining moments on earth, yet as his hands and feet were nailed to a cross, his faith was in full operation.

Hebrews 13:6 says, *The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.* We should not fear what man can do to the body; the spirit belongs to the Lord. People often believe it is easier for young people to be saved than older people. However, I believe when we get to heaven, we're going to see many more older folks than we thought because many, in their dying moments, received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and we didn't even know it.

This man had lived as a thief all of his life and had been written off by society, yet he received Jesus Christ as Lord his Lord and Savior just before he died.

The thief had done no good works *before* the cross to deserve salvation. He could do no good works to get salvation because he was hanging on a cross. After his salvation, he could not perform good works to keep salvation because his life was coming to an end. This man was saved by grace and by grace alone.

Those two men on the cross represent all of humanity for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. (See Romans 3:23.)

IV. Comparison of the Thief on the Cross and Saul of Tarsus

The exact opposite of the thief on the cross was Saul of Tarsus. Saul had done every good work known to man; the thief had done none.

Philippians 3:4-6

Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more:

Circumcised on the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee;

Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.

As far as keeping the law, Paul was blameless. On the road to Damascus, he was filled with good works. He was on a holy crusade for God, heading to Damascus to kill the Christians to preserve the Jewish faith. Suddenly, the Lord knocked him down on the road by a blinding light. After he was saved, he did many good works, but his works before, during, and after salvation had nothing to do with his salvation. Saul of Tarsus was just as bad as the thief hanging on the cross.

It doesn't matter how good you have been, how much money you have given, what church you have joined, or how many times you have been water baptized. If you have not accepted Jesus Christ strictly on the merits of what He did on the cross, you are no nearer to salvation than the thief on

the cross or Saul of Tarsus. Eternal life is as free today as it was to the thief on the cross.

V. Yielding to the Conviction of the Holy Spirit

Luke 23:39-40

And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?

And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but his man hath done nothing amiss.

Both thieves had been mocking Jesus, but one thief came to the realization that Jesus should not have been hanging on the cross. The thieves were receiving their just punishment. You and I deserve to be on the cross; Jesus did not. Jesus took our place, for He who knew no sin was made to be sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. (See 2 Corinthians 5:21.)

The Holy Spirit brought conviction to both thieves, but only one of them yielded. In regards to praise and worship or our service to the Lord we often quote John 12:32: *If I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.* But this verse of Scripture is referring to Jesus going to the cross and being lifted up, drawing *all* men. *All* men are drawn. Anytime the Gospel is preached, the Holy Spirit convicts men's hearts. Some yield to that conviction, others do not. Both thieves heard what Jesus had to say and both were mocking Him. One turned and repented, the other did not.

Perhaps you have witnessed to someone and they did not accept Jesus. The good news is that although they said "no" yesterday, they can say "yes" today. Both thieves had said "no," but the longer they hung on the cross, the more they saw Jesus' reaction, and the more they listened to the crowd, one man continued jeering against the conviction of the Holy Spirit and the other man yielded to the conviction of the Holy Spirit and accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior.

What good is our preaching if the Holy Spirit is not present? This thief heard no sermon. He couldn't say, "The greatest preaching brought me to Jesus." It isn't our eloquence, our great preparation, or our no-fail formula that brings people to Jesus; it is the Holy Spirit. We need our sermons, but without ultimately turning it over to the Holy Spirit, our sermons are in vain.

The thief never heard a sermon. As he was walking down the street, carrying his cross, listening to the jeering crowd, no one reached out to him and said, "Hey, thief, that man over there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." This thief heard nothing but the jeering of the crowd. He got to the cross and amidst all the jeering, the Holy Spirit drew him to Jesus and this man said, "Yes." The man without a sermon accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior.

You need to be prepared to lead people to the Lord Jesus, but you also need to pray for divine appointments. Your words are nothing if the Holy Spirit isn't there to convict. The Holy Spirit can use even the worst sermons to convict people's hearts!

VI. Spending Eternity With Jesus in Heaven

Luke 23:42-43

And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom

And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.

Jesus said, "Today." That is how fast the thief was born again. His whole life was changed in an instant because of what Jesus did on the cross.

The thief didn't ask for a big crown or lots of rewards; he simply wanted Jesus to think about him when He entered His kingdom. He asked for the smallest amount of mercy he could think of and Jesus gave him the biggest amount this man could ever imagine. Not only did Jesus remember this man, He took this man with Him.

Every person innately knows certain things. First, this thief knew there was a hereafter. Many philosophers will tell you otherwise, but deep down they know that when you die, it is not over. Philosophers will say, "When *my* body is gone, everything is gone because it's just *my* body," but who is the *my* that owns the body? There is someone on the inside that possesses us, so it is not over when we die.

Secondly, this man knew there was a judgment after life. Hebrews 9:27 says it is appointed unto man once to die and then the judgment. He knew that if he didn't face judgment here, he would face it there. Minutes before

he died, this man faced that judgment and Jesus said, he would be with Him in paradise and eventually in heaven forever and ever.

Aren't you glad you've taken care of that judgment in this life? When you stand before that judgment, it won't be for the Lake of Fire; it will be for rewards in heaven. The Holy Spirit continues to convict people. Even though the other thief said "no" to accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, I believe the Holy Spirit convicted him and gave him opportunity until his dying breath.

If you have never accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you are a thief. The two thieves hanging on crosses on either side of Jesus represent us. One said, "Yes," and the other said, "No." Don't resist the Holy Spirit or His conviction any longer. Say, "Yes," to Jesus and you, too, will spend eternity in heaven with Jesus!