

## Lessons from a Thief

Blessings of a slow death

Luke 23.39–43

Don Ruhl • Savage Street, Grants Pass, Oregon • March 6, In the year of our Lord Christ, 2022

Scripture Reader and Reading: Jake McNeil – Matthew 27.38–44

Song Leader and Song Suggestions: Phil Joseph – Songs on the crucifixion

### **Prelude:**

#### **I. This past Monday,**

A. I spoke at brother Dave Fitzwater's memorial service.

B. Afterward, I spoke with Bill and Lisa Turner, and Charlotte Reise of J Street.

#### **II. We talked about what I said at the end,**

A. that Dave and I had some rough times, but

B. that a few weeks ago,

1. when I was visiting him and Karen,

2. he apologized to me generously for things that he had said to me.

#### **III. He knew that he did not have much time left.**

A. Therefore, he spent much of his final days thinking about the past and

B. dealing with regrets,

1. which was also confirmed to me by one of his daughters.

2. As the four of us continued talking,

a) I mentioned that I had written an article many years ago

b) for the *Gospel Advocate*, titled, "Blessings of a Slow Death."

(1) The point of the article was

(2) that a quick and painless death may not always be best, because

(a) it does not consider setting things in order on earth, and

(b) it does not consider the prospect of the second death:

i) Revelation 20.14–15

**14 Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire.**

**This is the second death. 15 And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.**

ii) Revelation 21.8

**8 “But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.”**

(c) If someone is aware that he only has a short time left,

i) he can become a Christian and

ii) set things in order before he leaves.

C. Anyway, if brother Dave had died suddenly,

1. he would not have had a chance

a) to make things right with people and

b) to make things right with the Lord.

2. Since he could see what was coming, and

a) since he knew that he was about to meet his Maker,

b) he took the appropriate actions to prepare for that meeting.

#### **IV. For faithful Christians,**

A. a quick death might be appropriate, but even then,

B. that does not allow us to take care of somethings first.

#### **V. For unbelievers and unfaithful Christians,**

A. death does not end their suffering, but

B. it only begins an eternity of suffering.

#### **VI. In connection with a slow death,**

A. let us look at one of the thieves who died with Jesus and

B. see what we can learn from this man in his last moments:

**39 Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, “If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.” 40 But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, “Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.” 42 Then he said to Jesus, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” 43 And Jesus said to him, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”**

– Luke 23:39–43

C. What can we learn from this episode?

1. First, I want to deal with a controversy,
2. then I want us to see somethings
  - a) that the controversy keeps us from seeing.
  - b) I have mentioned this to you with other passages.
    - (1) E.g., I used to be caught up in controversies about Acts 2.38,
    - (2) so that I missed a powerful truth.
      - (a) There is the controversy on baptism and
      - (b) the other one is on the gift of the Holy Spirit.
        - i) Is baptism necessary for forgiveness and
        - ii) what is the gift of the Holy Spirit?
3. Then one day,
  - a) I read the passage and noticed
  - b) that baptism is in the name of Jesus Christ,
    - (1) the one Peter had just convicted his Jewish brethren of killing, but
    - (2) that Jesus desired to save them!
4. The same thing happened with “The Thief on the Cross.”

**Persuasion:**

## I. Did Jesus Accept the Penitent Thief without Christian Baptism?

A. Unfortunately, the way that we know the story of the thief on the cross

1. is that people use him as an example
2. to teach that baptism is not necessary for salvation.
  - a) He was not baptized.
  - b) Therefore, people argue that we do not have to be baptized.

B. Jesus promised the thief

1. that on the day on which they both experienced a slow death,
2. he would be with Jesus in Paradise.
  - a) That man would go from one extreme to the other in less than a day.
  - b) Jesus clearly promised salvation to this thief.

C. Here are some things to consider.

1. The baptism of Jesus had not yet gone into effect.
  - a) That did not start until Peter announced the terms of salvation:

**38 Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”**

**– Acts 2.38**

- b) His law would not go into effect until sometime after his death:

**15 And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. 16 For where there is a testament, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. 17 For a testament is in force after men are dead, since it has no power at all while the testator lives.**

**– Hebrews 9.15–17**

2. The baptism of Christ never applied to him as it does to us.
- D. The thief may have submitted to John's baptism earlier and
1. that baptism was in effect,
  2. so that the thief was being rededicated.
  3. Jesus baptized during his ministry, but
    - a) not with the baptism that is required of us now, because
    - b) his current baptism puts us into his death, and
      - (1) obviously, Jesus still lived as he spoke to the thief.
      - (2) The thief may have submitted to John or Jesus' baptism.
        - (a) He did not need the baptism
        - (b) with which we are baptized.
- E. Also, Jesus can save people in any manner he so desires.
1. Obviously, this man could not get off the cross and go for John's baptism.
  2. This was an emergency situation, an exception, but
    - a) you do not take an exception and
    - b) make it into a rule.
      - (1) Most of humanity can submit to the baptism of Christ,
      - (2) which is now in effect.
- F. Did you know that to reject John's baptism was to reject the will of God?

**29 And when all the people heard Him, even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John. 30 But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.**

**– Luke 7.29–30**

1. What then can we say of someone
2. who rejects the baptism of the Lord Jesus Christ,

- a) even when they are not being crucified or
- b) are not in some other emergency condition?

G. The New Testament makes it clear as to baptism's relation to salvation.

1. Mark 16.16

**16 "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned."**

2. Acts 2.38

**Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."**

3. Acts 22.16

**16 "And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord."**

- a) Does the situation of the thief on the cross nullify these passages?
- b) Jesus, Peter, and Ananias
  - (1) were under the impression
  - (2) that baptism has some kind of relation to salvation.
    - (a) Jesus said that if you believe and are baptized, you are saved.
    - (b) Peter said that if you repent and are baptized you will have
      - i) the remission of your sin or forgiveness and
      - ii) you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.
  - (3) Paul repeated what Ananias told him
    - (a) that if he would arise and be baptized,
    - (b) he would wash away his sins, and
      - i) he would be calling on the name of the Lord in doing so.

ii) I prefer to go with these three Holy Spirit-approved men.

H. Having dealt with that controversy what else can we learn?

## II. Sinners Can Repent

A. Initially, both of the robbers reviled Jesus.

**38 Then two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left. 39 And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads 40 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." 41 Likewise the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and elders, said, 42 "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. 43 He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, "I am the Son of God." 44 Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing.**

– **Matthew 27.38–44**

B. The robbers wanted someone to save them from their crucifixions.

1. So, they repeated what others were saying.
2. They quoted to him his claim
  - a) that he could rebuild the temple in 3 days.
  - b) They failed to understand that he meant his body.
    - (1) Nevertheless, their thoughts were
    - (2) that if he could do that,
      - (a) surely he can save all three of us from our crosses.
      - (b) He claimed to be the Son of God, surely God could save us.

C. Yet, the one we call, "The Thief on the Cross,"

1. started thinking, even while in immense pain.
2. He listened to the other robber.
  - a) Suddenly, it dawned on the changing thief

b) that what the other guy said was wrong.

### III. The Thief Understood God

A. He knew that we should fear God.

B. Failing to fear God leads to a sinful life.

1. He questioned whether his fellow robber feared God.

a) The thief's first thought went to God!

b) When you put your life and the world around you

(1) in the context of God,

(2) it changes your perspective on

(a) yourself and

(b) the world around you.

i) Is that not what I just showed you

ii) last week from the Book of Ecclesiastes?

2. Fearing God leads to everything good:

a) Proverbs 1.7

**7      The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,  
But fools despise wisdom and instruction.**

b) Proverbs 3.7

**7      Do not be wise in your own eyes;  
Fear the LORD and depart from evil.**

c) Proverbs 9.10

**10     The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,  
And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.**

d) Proverbs 10.27

**27 The fear of the LORD prolongs days,  
But the years of the wicked will be shortened.**

e) Proverbs 14.27

**27 The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life,  
To turn one away from the snares of death.**

#### **IV. The Thief Understood Justice**

A. He understood that doing evil brings a just reward.

B. Yet, he could also see

1. that in the case of Jesus,

2. the system failed.

a) Nevertheless, the Lord used man's failure

b) to bring man salvation!

C. The thief knew what the Bible, and

1. he knew that something such as stealing

2. brings on the justice system, but

a) the other thief did not understand such justice,

b) even as Solomon wrote in the Book of Proverbs:

**5 Evil men do not understand justice,  
But those who seek the LORD understand all.**

**– Proverbs 28.5**

#### **V. The Thief Knew of the Innocence of Jesus**

A. The thief knew enough

1. of the ministry of Jesus to know of his innocence, because

2. he confessed that Jesus had done nothing wrong.

B. Living in the land of Israel in those days,

1. everyone knew Jesus and
  - a) knew what he taught and
  - b) what kind of works he did.
2. The thief saw nothing that deserved crucifixion.
  - a) I think when you hear what else the thief said,
  - b) you will understand
    - (1) that he also believed Jesus had done everything right,
    - (2) that he went about doing good.

C. However, it is not enough to know that Jesus did nothing wrong, and

1. it is not enough to know that Jesus did good things.
2. Even Pilate knew that Jesus had not done anything wrong.

## **VI. The Thief Knew the True Identity of Jesus**

A. The thief addressed Jesus as “Lord.”

B. I understand that there are various lords, but

1. Jesus did not fit any of those other positions, because
2. he had been a carpenter and then a teacher/preacher.

C. The thief must have thought about Jesus for sometime.

1. Then he was moved to defend Jesus,
2. although he would not gain anything from it,
  - a) such as being freed from the crucifixion, but
  - b) he did know of another way of being blessed.

## **VII. The Thief Knew of the Kingdom of Jesus**

A. That means he knew a kingdom was coming.

1. He would have known from the prophets, and
2. he would have known from the teaching of Jesus.

B. He knew that Jesus was the king of that kingdom.

1. He wanted his part in it.
2. He requested, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”
  - a) Now, he rests comfortably in Paradise.

### **VIII. Blessings of a Slow Death**

- A. The thief had time to reevaluate his life and the justice being poured out.
- B. Hezekiah was going through a slow death:

**1 In those days Hezekiah was sick and near death. And Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, went to him and said to him, “Thus says the LORD: Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live.”**

**– 2 Kings 20.1**

1. Then the king of Judah prayed to God, and
  2. God granted him another 15 years of life.
- C. When you know your death is coming, consider it a time of grace from God.
    1. Make preparations for your funeral.
    2. Make last minute changes in your will.
    3. Settle any debts, so as not to burden your family.
    4. Forgive any you have a complaint against.
    5. Seek forgiveness from others for wrongs you have committed.
    6. Tell your family, friends, and others that you love them.
    7. Seek salvation and find it in Christ as it is written in the Scriptures.
  - D. Do not view a slow and painful death
    1. as allowed by an unconcerned and cruel God.
    2. Consider such a death as a time of mercy and grace from a God who:

**“...is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”**

– 2 Peter 3.9

**Exhortation:**

**I. Do not assume that someone who leads a sinful life**

A. does not know any truth, or

B. that he has not done any thinking about biblical things, or

C. that he does not want to change.

**II. Do you know more than a thief?**

**III. Will you now do what a thief did and more?**