

Lessons From The Thieves On The Cross

Introduction. Much has been said about the thief on the cross -- articles have been written, tracts have been distributed and sermons have been preached. Yet, the scriptures make it plain that Jesus was crucified between two thieves, the one on the right and the other on the left.

Hence, in this sermon we are not thinking on the thief on the cross, but of the thieves on the cross. We will also view the cross between them that we might see the full picture and that it might have its fullest effect for good upon us.

I. ***The Thieves On The Crosses Were Opposite In Character To The One Between Them***

A. They were thieves.

1. They robbed others to enrich themselves, violating the laws of God and man (Matthew 27:38, 44; Mark 15:27). Luke uses the term "malefactors" (Luke 23:32-33, 39).
2. In contrast, Jesus deprived Himself to enrich others (2 Corinthians 8:9).

B. They were revilers.

1. They reviled the sinless Christ, along with the rest (Matthew 27:44; Mark 15:32).
 - a) Some say there is a contradiction between the gospel writers (cf. Luke 23:39).
 - b) Evidently they both reviled Jesus at first, but one changed his mind.
2. In contrast, Jesus reviled not again (1 Peter 2:23).

C. They deserved death.

1. They were condemned by civil decree (Romans 13:1-4). Also, they were deserving of the punishment God will inflict on all evildoers (Romans 2:8-9; Hebrews 10:28-29).
2. In contrast, Jesus was a doer of good (Acts 10:38) and totally innocent of evil (Luke 23:14, 22; 1 Peter 2:22; Hebrews 4:15).

II. ***The Thieves On The Crosses Fulfilled Prophecy Concerning Christ***

A. Hundreds of years prior, Isaiah had prophesied of the vicarious death of the coming Messiah, signifying among other things the he was to be "numbered with the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12).

1. There is no doubt that Isaiah referred to Jesus (Luke 22:37). Thus, the thieves present valuable evidence that Jesus was the Christ.
2. This does not mean that the thieves are to be commended; they were not forced to do what they did.

- B. The fact that Jesus was numbered with transgressors did not make Him a transgressor.
 - 1. He was the "friend of sinners and publicans" (Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34). That is, He was numbered with them, but He did not participate in their sins or condone their evil in any way (cf. John 8:11).
 - 2. Nevertheless, He died as though He were a transgressor because of our transgressions (Isaiah 53:5; 2 Corinthians 5:21).

III. ***The Thieves On The Crosses Were Different From Each Other***

- A. One is untouched in the presence of divine goodness (Luke 23:39).
 - 1. He goes deeper in sin by railing against the Lord.
 - 2. He refuses to listen to the words of his dying comrade.
 - 3. Thus, he met death with a hardened and impenitent heart. This brings tragic results (Romans 2:5).
- B. One is touched and moved in the presence of the dying Savior (Luke 23:40-42).
 - 1. He rebuked his dying comrade.
 - 2. He acknowledged his own sinfulness and he proclaimed the innocence of the Lord.
 - 3. Thus, he met death with an altogether different heart. This brings marvelous and glorious results (Numbers 23:10).

IV. ***The Penitent Thief Pleaded With Jesus***

- A. The wise thief had a belief in the consciousness after death both of the Lord and of himself.
 - 1. He was not of the persuasion who say that man has no soul, and that all ends with the death of the body.
 - a) The Jehovah's Witnesses say, "So we see that the claim of religionists that man has an immortal soul and therefore differs from the beast is not Scriptural" (*Let God Be True*, pg. 68).
 - b) The New World Translation changes the comma in Luke 23:43.
 - (1) The New World Translation reads, "I tell you today, You will be with me."
 - (2) Their revision suggests that "today" deals with the time of the statement rather than the relocation of their spirits.
 - 2. In contrast, Jesus taught:
 - a) Man has a immortal soul (Matthew 10:28).
 - b) The soul exists in Hades after death (Luke 16:19-26).
 - c) He would survive the grave (John 2:19-21; Matthew 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19; 26:31-32). Even the enemies of Jesus knew this (Matthew 27:63-64).
 - d) He would one day call forth all the dead to a general judgment and eternity in heaven or hell (John 5:28-29).

3. We do not know how much of this the thief knew, but he had heard some of it.
- B. The wise thief had an expectation of the coming eternal kingdom (2 Peter 1:11; 1 Corinthians 15:50; 2 Timothy 4:18).
- C. The wise thief humbly desired a favorable place in Christ's divine remembrance.
 1. Surely he was not wanting to just be remembered as a thief who died with Jesus.
 2. To be remembered favorably is to enjoy His blessings, approval and intercession.
 3. We will all be remembered in the judgment and some will wish then to be forgotten.

V. ***Jesus Responded To The Penitent Thief***

- A. Jesus proved the existence of a place called "paradise" for the righteous after death.
 1. He did not say that the thief would sleep in death until he would some day be with Him in paradise.
 2. Jesus referred to "Hades," where He also went after His death (Acts 2:27-32).
 - a) The word "paradise" is of Persian origin.
 - (1) It originally meant a garden and particularly a garden of pleasure, filled with trees, shrubs, fountains and flowers.
 - (2) In hot climates these gardens were particularly pleasant; and therefore they were attached to the mansions and palaces of nobility and of the rich.
 - b) The word came to denote any place of happiness and then to denote the abode of the blessed after this life passes away.
 - (1) This was the same paradise to which Paul was taken in 2 Corinthians 12:4.
 - (2) It is also analogous to "Abraham's bosom" in Luke 16:22.
 3. We know that "paradise" was not heaven because of His statement to Mary Magdalene (John 20:17).
- B. When confronted with the gospel condition of baptism for the remission of sins, many ask, "What about the thief on the cross?"
 1. Those who ask this question generally make three assumptions:
 - a) The thief was never baptized.
 - (1) John the Baptist had a very widespread coverage and acceptance of his teaching (Matthew 3:5; John 4:1).
 - (2) The thief was also very well informed as he hung upon the cross (Luke 23:42). He could have been one of those who had gone back (John 6:66).

- b) Anyone can be saved in the same manner as was the thief.
 - (1) To be saved exactly like the thief, they must be on a cross with the Savior.
 - (2) Being saved "in the same manner" demands similar circumstances.
- c) They are under the same law as the thief.
 - (1) This was before Jesus died on the cross, and thereby brought about a new covenant (Hebrews 9:15-17).
 - (2) In other places before His death, He had forgiven the sins of people who lived under the law of Moses (Mark 2:5; Luke 7:47; John 8:10-11).
- 2. This thief cannot constitute a pattern of salvation for us today. We are bound to follow the current terms of pardon.
- C. Jesus taught that when we die in the Lord, we will be with Him in eternity (Philippians 1:23; 2 Corinthians 5:8; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Revelation 22:14).

Conclusion. The thieves on the crosses are typical of two classes of people today (cf. Acts 17:32). We need to consider which class we are in.

One is impenitent who is untouched by the preaching of the cross. These people are hardened and will not repent even in the face of death. The other is the penitent who breaks down by the sight of a suffering Savior. The wise thief took advantage of his opportunity. There was nothing else he could have done, but he had such a humble attitude of heart that he would have done anything the Lord required.

So which class are you in? Will you not repent and comply with the simple terms of the gospel (Acts 3:19)?