

Carnal or Christ-Centred Salvation?

32 There were also two others, criminals, led with Him to be put to death. 33 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. 34 Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do1." And they divided His garments and cast lots. 35 And the people stood looking on. But even the rulers with them sneered, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God." 36 The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine, 37 and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself." 38 And an inscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew1: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

39 Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ1, 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, "Lord1, 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." (Luk 23:32-43)

Years ago, I attended an evangelistic crusade which several churches had sponsored. They brought out a foreign evangelist, who, along with his team of cameramen and sun-glassed bodyguard types conducted four evenings of gripping but second-rate entertainment. As the evenings went on, I sank deeper into my chair as I realised what this man's gospel really was: to create fear of Hell, and to push Jesus as the escape. We were supposed to fear the terrible consequences of our sin, and one of the ways was with a visual demonstration of the cross – he had someone dressed up as Jesus on a cross, one of the evenings.

But the longer we went on, the more I felt deeply disturbed, because the gospel he preached was essentially a man-centred one. You could be entirely devoted to Self, entirely given to living for self and pleasing self, and have fully accepted his message. Since I am headed to Hell, and I don't want to go to Hell, Jesus died on the Cross to provide the solution, so I will happily accept that solution and not go to hell. Self remains untouched, unfazed, unmoved from its throne.

And that is not at all the gospel of the Bible which is about coming back to know and love God. Years ago, A.W. Tozer commented on this trend. He wrote, "The whole concept of religious experience has shifted from the transcendental to the utilitarian. God is valued as being useful and Christ appreciated because of the predicaments He gets us out of. He can deliver us from the consequences of our past, relax our nerves, give us peace of mind and make our business a success. The all-consuming love that burns in the writings of an Augustine, a Bernard or a Rolle is foreign to the modern religious spirit."

The contrast between a self-centred utilitarian gospel, and a Christ-centred worshipful gospel is actually illustrated for us on the Friday Christ died. The two criminals crucified alongside Christ almost exactly portray the self-centred Gospel, and the Christ-centred Gospel.

We should know that God makes no mistakes with how things are set up. On that day when Christ was crucified, there were not four crosses, or six, or only two. There were three. Jesus in the middle, and on either side of him, two men who illustrate all men. These two men on opposite sides of Jesus had exactly opposite responses to Jesus. You couldn't have a more appropriate picture of the Gospel. Because the cross of Christ is the centre-point of history, and all humans will file to either one side of it or the other.

Who were these two men? We are never told their names. Here they are called by the general term criminals. Matthew and Mark call them *thieves*, which is a word that could mean armed robbers,

but it can also mean revolutionaries, insurrectionists. Romans didn't crucify people for theft. They reserved crucifixion for foreign citizens convicted of murder, or high treason. The chances are, these two men were compatriots of Barabbas, who was a political revolutionary.

As we look at these two responses, we will see two very different ideas of salvation. We'll see the carnal, selfish view of salvation in the one man, and the Christ-centred, selfless view in the other.

I. Carnal, Selfish Salvation

We turn our attention to the criminal on the one side of Jesus. We see a man going through all the agonies of crucifixion. The severe pain, not only through the nails, but through the extreme pain in the joints, the dislocation, and the almost unimaginable thirst. The dehydration was extreme, and massive migraines went with it. Probably most painful was the near asphyxiation which took place because of the way the arms were nailed, making it impossible to breathe, unless you pushed yourself up on your nail-pierced legs. Hours, and even days of tremblingly exhausted legs pushing down in unbearable shooting pain, so as to get a breath, and then slump back down to relieve the pain in the feet, while renewing the pain in the wrists.

What we can confidently declare about this man is that he deserved to die. He deserved to die on two counts: first, he was a convicted felon, having committed some crime which Rome punished with death. Now we might debate whether his crime merited this particular kind of death, a torture so severe that Romans would not speak of it in polite company. But he did deserve death. Second, he deserved death, because in God's court of justice, every sinner deserves death. The wages, or the payment for sin is death, according to Romans 6:23, and every human being that has ever lived has worked in the vineyard of sin. Every human being has fallen short of God's perfect standard of love, every sinner has gone his own way, taken the gifts without thanking the Giver, living a borrowed life with no thought of repayment, living a life of worshipping and adoring all kinds of things besides God Himself.

He deserved death, and death was coming to him. But this was only going to be the first death, because once his heart stopped beating, he would face a second death, separation from His Creator forever, in a place without pleasure, without light, without beauty, and above all, without God's grace. So we can confidently say the man needed to be saved. He was a prime candidate to be saved.

But amazingly, though this man was dying, look at what he did when it came to Christ.

39 Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us."

Matthew's Gospel tells us some more. *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. (Mat 27:41-44)*

This criminal may have known nothing about Jesus before this day. He may never have heard Jesus personally, He may never have had anyone explain to Him who Jesus was. He had never been a seeker of Jesus, nor had he tried to find out exactly who Jesus was. But here, on his cross, a condemned and dying man, he chooses to follow the crowd when it comes to Jesus. Whatever the crowd said about Jesus, he picked it up, and parroted it.

What a strange sight- a man dying, his life draining out of him, but even with his dying breaths, he wants to be part of the crowd, fit in, not stand out. It seems silly doesn't it? What possible gain could he get from joining the crowd in mocking Christ? Did he think they would cheer him on? Did he think they would let him off the cross? I doubt it. He probably knew there was no hope to come down. But see the irrationality of unbelief. I am a dying man, but I am still going to go with what most people say about Jesus. My life is ending, but I'd rather fit in that stand out.

I wonder if more people will be in Hell for simply following the crowd than for any other reason. I wonder if more people have rejected their only hope of eternal life because they simply accepted what their parents said, or what their friends and peers said, what their own religious leaders said, what the political leaders said, what the scientists and academics said, what the opinion shapers of the day said. All those people can't be wrong, is the motto of the man who follows the majority.

13 "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. (Mat 7:13)

26 Woe to you when all men speak well of you, For so did their fathers to the false prophets. (Luk 6:26)

So hear we have a dying man, deserving of death, being a man-pleaser when it comes to Christ, copying what the crowd says about Jesus.

People who are not genuinely saved are happy with a hearsay Jesus. All they know about Jesus is second-hand knowledge, hearsay, mere gossip. No seeking Jesus from the words of His own mouth. Happy to pick up some cliches or half-truths from others and bounce it along. How amazing it must seem to the immortal angels to see a whole race of mortal men, dying every day, using up their limited time to mock and ridicule One they do not know.

But notice the next thing the man did with his hear-say Jesus.

39 Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us."

This man wants deliverance. He wants to be saved from his cross. He wants Jesus to do two things: first prove Himself with a sign to overcome the man's unbelief, and second, release the man from his punishment.

If you had asked that man, do you want to be saved, he would have replied, yes. But what did he mean by saved? He meant, reverse the consequences of my sin. Get me off the hook. Subvert the justice of Rome. Did he deserve to die? Yes. Had Jesus taken him down, how would that have been justice?

Did he want to be saved? Yes, but not from his sin. He wanted to be saved from the consequences of his sin. He wanted to be saved from the death that shortens his opportunity to sin some more. He wanted to be saved from that circumstance which was preventing him from living his own life a little longer.

He had no concept of the Gospel, no idea that Jesus was dying to save from sin itself, from the death that it brings, and that His death would bring the death-blow to sin and death. He could only look over at Jesus, and think in terms of the selfish, carnal, fleshly life he knew. From his perspective, Jesus needed saving. So he says to Jesus, on the off chance that you are the Messiah,

save yourself, and while you're at it, save us too.

Here is how carnal man thinks about salvation. Jesus must save me from my poverty. Jesus must save me from my sickness. Jesus must save me from depression, or marital conflict, or some kind of pain or discomfort in my life right now. Jesus must save me from Hell in the next life. Why? So I can then go on with my life the way I want it. I then have health, or wealth, or personal comfort, alongside fire insurance. I can live how I want, do what I want, in the knowledge that He has done His job. And it's because He does this job that I believe in Him. Not the biblical idea: I believe in Him, and I know He saves those who do; instead, "I'll believe in Him because that's how I'll get Him to save me. I can manipulate Christ with this faith thing: He will do what I want, and if He doesn't, I won't believe anymore."

21 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.

22 "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?'

23 "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" (Mat 7:21-23)

I want you to notice the silence from Jesus. There is no response from Jesus to this man. Such unbelief, such manipulation, such unshaken selfishness gets no response from Jesus. It has made up its mind, and it must live with its choice. But there was a second man.

II. Christ-Centred Selfless Salvation

Now the thing I want you to notice about this man is precisely the same observations about the first man. He was a dying man, condemned to death. He was worthy of death in the eyes of Rome, and worthy of death in the eyes of God. His day of death was coming through execution, but had it not come through that way, it would have come another way. He was a sinner, dying and worthy of death.

I want you to notice as well that he did exactly what the other man did and began insulting Jesus. Matthew 27:44 says it clearly: Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing.

32 "Let the Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe!" Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him. (Mar 15:32)

He began doing what the other man did. Picture it, ridicule for Christ from the front with the Jewish leaders and Romans, ridicule from one side of him, ridicule from the other. Jesus in the middle, the supreme object of scorn. So this criminal was also a man-pleaser, a crowd-follower, happy to pick up second-hand statements, happy to believe gossip, happy to repeat untruths, happy to join in with ridicule if it made him seem to be on the right side.

But then something changes. We don't know when it happened. We don't know what the Holy Spirit used to grab, grip, and change his heart.

Most likely, it was when he saw how Jesus responded to the insults and the hatred. He threw insults across at Jesus, and in those brief moments when Jesus looked at him, he didn't see hatred in Christ's face. He didn't see malice or vengeance. Jesus seemed to be absorbing it. He seemed to have a nobility about him that took this abuse without it causing him to lash out or retreat in shame. It was as if He was pure and strong humility.

And then he heard Jesus say, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Perhaps those

words pierced this criminal's heart like a spear. Here was Jesus not praying against His enemies, but praying for them. He was asking His Father to be merciful to them, to not count their sins against the Son as spite towards the Father. He was asking His Father to consider how ignorant they were of all they were doing, and to let that mitigate their judgement. In the middle of hatred poured on Him from every side, Jesus was loving.

And in those moments, the Holy Spirit did a work of opening this man's eyes, showing him his own heart, showing him God's holiness, showing him his own sinfulness. Deep profound conviction set in. Brokenhearted repentance set in, as he began to think of how he had wasted his life. The anger and sense of injustice he had had just a few hours ago was replaced with a sad sense of resignation. He deserved this. He had ended up on this cross by his own hand. His life had been sin and more sin, and now he was getting his wages.

And then it began to hit him, what about when I die? I have lived in high-handed rebellion against God. What will I say to Him when I see Him? What will I say to someone as holy and righteous as...as this man Jesus next to me?

At that point, the mocking words of the other criminal began to sound more and more arrogant and more and more offensive. Until eventually it reached a boiling point, and he was willing to shout across, past Jesus, in the full hearing of all the other mockers.

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." (Luk 23:40-41)

Here is a man who has come to a position where he understands more than the fact that he has sinned and there is a consequence. He is seeing something only the Holy Spirit can show a man – the sinfulness of sin. He is seeing sin as ugly, sin as punishable, sin as deserving of death. He has changed sides, from the team of Adam which blames others and even God for our sin, to the side of God, agreeing, we are sinners, being punished. He knows that mocking Christ only adds to your guilt.

But remarkably, in those short hours on the cross, he can tell that Christ is innocent, Christ is guiltless, he is an innocent being punished as if He were guilty.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, (1Pe 3:18)

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2Co 5:21)

But then, he turns to Christ, and prays, asks one of the humblest prayers in all of Scripture.

42 Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." (Luk 23:42)

Here is a man looking over at a physically ruined Jesus, beaten probably beyond recognition, and he calls him "Lord". Now the word translated *Lord* is a Greek word that can mean more than one thing. Sometimes, it simply means *Sir*. It is a polite form of address. It can also mean something like "Master" for those in authority. It can also mean "king", a term reserved for a human or divine lord. So which does he mean? His words tell us: "Remember me when you come into your *kingdom*." What kind of person has a kingdom? A king, a lord over a realm. Who does this man think Jesus is?

He believes Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one, the Messiah. The Messiah is the one who will be

prophet, priest, and king, the one who will usher in God's universal and eternal kingdom in time and space. But who would look at bruised, bleeding, broken Jesus and conclude that He will be ushering in a royal, glorious kingdom? This man has remarkable faith – He believes Jesus will rise from the dead, return to the earth, and rule. Through Christ's weakness, he sees the coming King. The other man says, *If* you are the Christ, save me. This man says, *Since* you are the Christ...

What does he want? What does he request? The other man wanted temporal deliverance. He wanted Jesus to serve as a means to his own selfish ends. But what does this man ask for?

Remember me. What a humble, gentle, broken way of saying, save me. By remember, he doesn't mean, call me up in your memory. He is using the word remember the way Scripture often uses it to mean, give help. In Genesis 8:1 it tells us that after the destruction of the Flood, God remembered Noah. That means God set His grace upon Noah. The writer of Hebrews exhorts his readers in chapter 13 to remember those Christians in chains. Paul says the same thing in Colossians 4, which means show mercy, be gracious.

This man is humbly saying, if there is a place for me in your kingdom, remember me. Notice the completely different attitude to the other thief. The selfish criminal says, I'll accept you if you save me in ways that I want. This one says, will you accept me, in your kingdom?

I'm reminded of when Joshua meets the pre-incarnate Lord before the battle of Jericho, with a drawn sword. Joshua asks Him, "Are you on our side, or on our enemies' side?" The answer is not what Joshua expected. He says, "Neither. I am Commander of the host of the Lord." The Lord essentially says, I am not on your side or on their side. I am on My side. Whose side are you on, Joshua? Joshua does the right thing and falls to the ground saying, "What does my lord say to his servant."

It's not, is Jesus on my side. It's am I on *His*? Have I accepted that I am sinful and unworthy, and believed Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the only way to the Father, and have I turned to Him humbly, asking if He will let me be on His side?

Now what does Jesus say to this humble faith?

43 And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." (Luk 23:32-43)

You won't have to wait till that day, Jesus says. You won't have to wait for the day of resurrection. This very day, you will consciously be with Me in glory. Your spirit and soul will be in the presence of My Father! No extra works for him, no baptism, no good works, no added extras. Like Abraham, like David, like Peter, he had been saved by faith. He had turned from sin, and placed his entire trust in the God-Man, Jesus Christ, and he was saved.

The Bible tells us that our hearts, above all things, are deceitful. It takes a work of the Spirit to show us if we have accepted a shallow, self-centred gospel which is no gospel at all, where we have actually been trying to use Jesus to our own ends. The Spirit of God works in us to show us, you need to be saved, not only from hell, but from yourself! From your self-serving ways, where you were the sun and God was the orbiting planet. You need to be saved to bow the knee to a King, where His glory, and His honour and His beauty become the heartbeat of your life.

The faith that believes in Christ is not complicated. The real question is – which Jesus have you trusted? The Jesus you accept to get you what you want? Or the King who'd have to accept you into His kingdom, for His glory?