

Three Crosses, Two Responses

The day Jesus died, there were three crosses and two decisions. God could have arranged for His Son to die by Himself, a single lone cross on Mount Calvary, but God deliberately made sure that was not the case. Instead, Jesus was crucified between two other people. I believe God did this and recorded it in Scripture to teach us a lesson. On the most important day of human history – the day Christ died for our sins – God left us with a picture of every single one of us.

Christ in the centre, and everyone either filing to the one side of Him – rejecting Him, or filing to the other – receiving Him. Christ is the Great Divider of men: He is the centre of human history, and people's eternal destiny rests on their response to Him. In the one man's reaction, we have a picture of those who reject Jesus Christ. In the other man's reaction, we see a picture of people who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Why are these two thieves such a picture of mankind? For two reasons:

1. Just like those thieves, we are also dying.

Those criminals had only a few more hours to live, and they knew it. They were dying. Their life was slipping away from them. They would soon pass into eternity. There was nothing they could do about it – and the same is true of us. All of us are dying. Not one of us can change the date of our death, and our lives are slipping away as we speak.

Every moment brings us closer to eternity. We are not immortal. Adam lost that when he sinned. Unless if you are saved and the Lord returns, every one of us will face death. Some us very soon. Some of us later. But we're all approaching death, and nothing we do can stop that.

2. Just like those thieves, we are also condemned criminals.

Now, you might get offended by that. You might say – I haven't killed, raped or stolen anything. Well, consider a criminal is someone who breaks the law. If you have broken any of God's laws, you are a criminal before Him.

Have you ever hated someone in your heart? Have you ever desired your neighbour's car, clothes or possessions? Have you ever lied? Even if we pretend and say, 'I have never done those things,' I will ask another question which will prove we are criminals before God: What, according to Jesus, is the greatest commandment?

To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. Question: Have you and I perfectly loved God every moment of our lives? If you say no, like I must, then we have broken God's law. We are criminals before Him. We have done what displeased Him. We have insulted His value.

We have said: 'I don't want God, I want other things. I don't want to obey God, I want to live life my own way.' Already in the unbeliever is a convicted criminal before God. God

says of the whole world, *"There is none righteous, no, not one"* (**Romans 3:10**). God says, *"He that believeth not the Son of God is condemned already"* (**John 3:18**).

3. Just like those thieves, we can do nothing to save ourselves.

When you were crucified, you were nailed to the cross. There was nothing you could do to get yourself off the cross. You were as good as dead. In the same way, there is nothing we can do to change our status before God. No human ritual, no made-up religion, no amount of saying prayers, going to church, being baptised, taking communion, confessing or trying to keep the Ten Commandments will help.

If those thieves had cried out, 'I promise, I will never commit crime again!' – do you think the Romans would take them down from the cross? No, they would say, 'Fine, but you must still face the penalty for what you have already done.' You and I have already done enough sin to condemn ourselves, and there is nothing we can do. Our hands and feet are nailed.

And so now we can see that these two thieves dying next to Jesus are actually perfect pictures of you and I. All of humanity will end up being like one or the other. So let's look at both thieves, and ask, which one am I like? The good news is if you are like the wrong one, you can change that, even today. Let's see firstly, that:

You can reject Christ, like the first criminal

One of the criminals decided to join in the chorus of insults at Christ. Luke shows how the mocking went from the people watching, to the rulers standing near, to the soldiers at the base of the Cross, and now right up to the Cross beside Jesus. Perhaps this criminal thought that by mocking Jesus, the Romans would be lenient on him, or even let him go. Whatever the case, he heard what people were saying, and he joined in.

The most obvious and foolish thing about this man was that he allowed other people's opinions of Jesus to shape his own. He listened to what the crowds were saying, and copied it. Like so many today, they do not find out for themselves about Jesus by reading the Bible, they rely on the cries of the sceptics, the mockers, the scoffers. And this criminal railed on Jesus. He pushed through his pain to spit out hatred and venom.

It's interesting that the Greek word is literally 'blasphemed.' Luke understood that Jesus was God in the flesh, and this man was showing irreverence and disrespect to God the Son. The criminal says, *"If thou be the Son of God, save thyself and us"* (**Luke 23:39**). He was in rejection. What does that mean – to reject Jesus Christ? Firstly, using the word *"if"* shows the man was expressing unbelief. 'If you are truly the Messiah – prove it!'

Classic unbelief says, 'If Jesus is the way, then He must prove it to me first! If there is a God, He must appear to me!' But God doesn't work that way. **Hebrews 11:6** says *"without faith it is impossible to please Him."* God sets the terms, and His terms are this: believe what I say about Myself. God never tries to prove His existence in the Bible – He assumes it as fact – His name

means I AM. So the unbeliever begins on the worst foot, from where he can go nowhere, by saying to Christ, 'If you are the Saviour...'

It reminds us of Satan's temptations of Christ. Satan used three different angles, but his central attack was, "If you are the Son of God..." It was where Satan thought he could attack Jesus, hurt Him the most. 'You're God the Son? Doesn't look like it, in that weak human flesh. Prove it!' Once again, on the cross, the satanically inspired taunts all surrounded the theme, 'If You are who You say You are, come down from the Cross and prove it!'

But Jesus had a greater love, and for the joy set before Him, He stayed on the cross. This criminal disbelieved Christ's claim to be the Saviour. Notice he says, "*Save Yourself*." He looked at Jesus from a human standpoint and said, 'You appear to need some saving yourself!' Unbelief says, 'You go first, God! You show me, then I'll believe.' But God has gone first, taking the initiative to reveal Himself over and over. It's up to man to believe now.

Doubt says, 'Why should I trust God? Why should I believe the Gospel? It's up to God to prove Himself to me.' See, the problem with that thinking is this – it acts like we have done nothing wrong. It assumes life is neutral, and God must prove Himself to us. Oh no, it is *us* who abandoned God and got ourselves into a mess. We rejected God. He now approaches us on His terms and says, 'Believe Me.'

Rejection is also denial

What is the criminal saying when he says, "*If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us*" (**Luke 23:39**)? He is saying, 'If you are the Saviour, take me off this cross.' In fact, like an unbeliever, he does not own his sin personally, he uses the plural pronoun "*us*." Save us. 'I haven't really sinned, and if I have, I'm in it with this guy as well who has also sinned. So save us all.' He denies His own sinfulness and the correctness of God condemning Him.

That sounds just like the unbeliever today. He says to God, 'If you are God, then you could never send me to Hell. Save us all, because we're all in the same boat.' Point out a man's sin, and he will quickly say, 'Well, what about you? What about so and so? I'm not that bad! I'm better than some!' They think that if the whole world is deserving of Hell, somehow God will pardon the lot.

But God says He will not clear the guilty. The unbeliever does not regard himself as a convicted criminal deserving of punishment, but as a victim who got caught, while others got away. This sinner is denying his need of spiritual salvation, and he looks to Jesus for a physical saving. When you deny your sinfulness, you accuse God of lying. You say that God's verdict on your life is untrue. 'God is wrong, I am right.'

That's why David said that by confessing His sin in Psalm 51, God would be justified in His speaking. David was admitting, 'God you are right, and I am wrong.' Paul says in **Romans 3:4**: "*let God be true, but every man a liar*." The person who denies they need saving makes the cross of Jesus out to be a waste of time. And listen to what God says to this person in Hebrews:

Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden underfoot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?

Hebrews 10:29

Rejection is also dictating

Notice also how he is demanding from Jesus the terms of his own salvation. He arrogantly tells Jesus what he is supposed to do – imagine that! Here is a man, nailed to a cross, his life draining away, and he is still raging at God, bossing God around, telling God how the universe ought to be run. Unsaved man continues to want his independence, his own way, his autonomy, even in salvation. Notice he wanted Christ's power on his behalf, but not his Person.

Many like that today. They want Jesus to apply saving power to their lives, but they do not want Him as their new Master. They want to be saved, but they do not want to follow Him. They want Him as Saviour, but not as Lord. They want salvation on their own terms. What a tragedy. The criminal's only hope of salvation was a few metres away from him in the flesh, but his darkened heart rejected Him.

The sad thing is, Jesus did not respond to this angry man. He had no words of anger back, but no words of encouragement or pleading either. The man made his choice. And how many there are today, who look at Jesus with eyes of doubt. They then turn to Him with anger and say, 'If you are God, why is my life like this? Why is there so much suffering in the world? Save me from my circumstances, and if You do, I'll believe in You.'

They say, 'I don't need to be saved. I've been to church all my life. I'm fine. It's those murderers and rapists who need to be saved.' They say, 'Jesus, You give me health and wealth, and a fine life, and then I'll consider being a Christian.' They doubt Jesus, they deny their own sinfulness, and they demand that He save them on their own terms.

This is the picture of the unbroken, unbelieving heart of man. This man represents all who will reject Christ. All of us are dying. All of us are justly condemned. And all who thrash violently against their fate as condemned men, and rage at God, seal their fate.

Fortunately, there is the joyful side of the story - the other criminal. What's interesting to note is that he too began by mocking Jesus, according to the other Gospels. He also joined in the chorus of insulting Jesus. But something obviously changed in this man. Somewhere, as the Spirit of God got busy in his heart, there was a change.

This was before the supernatural darkness, before the earthquakes, before the graves opening, before any such sign. Perhaps what changed his heart was when he heard Jesus repeatedly pray, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' Perhaps his darkened heart never looked darker to himself than to hear the one who he had just been insulting pray to God for his forgiveness. Perhaps he never felt as vile as when he saw the gentle innocence of the Lamb of God beside him. However it happened, he has no doubt been observing Jesus,

and looking into his own heart, and coming to conclusions. When the other criminal makes his taunt at Jesus to 'save thyself and us', it seems his bubble bursts. We see:

1. You can repent like the second criminal

The Bible says the second criminal rebuked the first one. He cries out in righteous anger, shouting past Christ on the middle cross. His words could definitely have brought about harsher punishment – more torture from the soldiers – so we can be sure that he is not trying to impress when he speaks up. He means them. What does he say? He asks the other thief, *"Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation?"* (**Luke 23:40**)

In other words, something the other thief had said reflected a lack of a fear of God. What was it? It was when he said, *"If you are the Christ, save yourself and us."* That first man, though facing death, was not owning his sin, he was not repenting or preparing to meet the Judge of all the earth. Though he was dying, he was still clinging to his bravado, to big talk. The second man points out that he clearly does not fear God if that's how he's talking!

'Here we are, death is upon us, and you have no remorse over your sin.' Paul said of the unsaved, *"There is no fear of God in their eyes"* (**Romans 3:18**). The unbeliever makes a mockery of sin, jokes about heaven and hell, and thereby shows they have no fear of God. However, the second criminal man is different. Listen as he gives an almost perfect definition of repentance. He says, *"And we indeed justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for what we did"* (**Luke 23:41**).

Now back up and look at that remark for a moment. Here is a man saying, 'This death on a cross is exactly what I deserve. This torturous death is a fair repayment for my sin. I have earned this.' In contrast to the other one who wanted to escape the consequences of his sin, this man accepted them as what he deserved. He claimed ownership for his sin. He condemned Himself, and notice the next phrase – *"but this Man has done nothing wrong."*

So the second criminal condemns himself and vindicates God. The unbeliever gets it the other way around, condemning God and vindicating himself. Repentance is seeing your sin for what it sin – a crime against God. It is admitting that, accepting full culpability, full ownership, and not shifting the blame. It is then forsaking the sin – turning our back on it. It is not only realising one's guilt, but the justice of God in condemning us.

The second man agreed that crucifixion was an adequate punishment for his sins. That can only happen as God opens our eyes to how evil sin is. It is only as we see how holy God is, and by contrast how wicked and rebellious we are, that we could ever come to a point of saying, 'Yes, God I do deserve hell.' But that's repentance. Vindicating God by saying 'God, You are just, You are right, I am wrong. You are holy, I am the offender. I have sinned against You, and were you to condemn me, you would be perfectly fair.'

This broken heart is a far cry from the other, isn't it? The cries of the unbelieving self-righteous– 'God, save thyself, and us! Now! Get me out of this! I don't deserve hell! I'm not that bad! How could a loving God send anyone to hell?' are screams of rebellion. The believer says, 'How could

so holy a God save anyone?' It was the mercy and love of Jesus the second man saw in Christ's prayer for forgiveness that he now turned to.

You can receive Christ like the second criminal

If you turn *from* something, you necessarily turn to something else. The second man turned from sin *to* Christ. He repents of his sin, and now in faith, turns to Jesus. Notice his remarkable request – a simple expression of faith in Christ: "*Lord, remember me, when You come into Your kingdom*" (**Luke 23:42**).

See firstly all that this man had come to believe about Jesus. We saw in verse 41 when he said Jesus had done nothing amiss that he regarded Jesus as sinless. He believed Jesus was a spotless man who had perfectly kept the Law. But verse 42 shows he also understood Jesus was more than a man, because He calls Jesus "*Lord*."

The man sees Jesus not merely as One who can bring salvation, not merely the agent of salvation, but the Lord of it all. He realises who this is next to Him – truly is the Son of God. Not only Lord in an objective sense, but in a subjective sense: *my* Lord. He was saying, to begin with, I don't want my lordship over myself anymore, but Yours. I'm turning from self to You.

He sees Christ's sinlessness, His deity, His lordship, and look what else he sees: "*when You come into Your kingdom*." This is remarkable. This criminal believed that Jesus was in fact the promised Messiah. He saw a bloody, broken man, barely recognisable for all the beating, and he saw the King of Israel. He believed, right there on the cross, that Jesus would rise from the dead, return, and set up His kingdom.

This man had summed up all that one must know about Jesus to believe correctly: that He was the sinless Son of God who lived a perfect life and died for our sins. He rose again, and will return again to reign on earth. This is amazing faith for one who sees such a terribly broken, wounded, bleeding man in front of him – but that is the nature of faith – it is a gift from God, a miracle of God turning on the light.

But that would not be enough. It would not be enough to simply recognise your sin, admit to it and claim ownership for it. It would not be enough to turn from it, and want to forsake it. It would not be enough to believe that Christ is the Son of God, the Saviour of the world, the Risen Lord. The final piece is the thief's request. He turns from sin, and believing these things about Christ, makes his request: "*Remember me*."

Remember me. What does that mean? Perhaps to avoid using the same arrogant words as the other criminal, He does not say, save me. He does not want his words to be thought of as a plea for physical salvation, for a temporary relief from sin's consequences. No, by saying "*remember me when You come into Your kingdom*" this repentant man is underlining what kind of request he is making. He is asking for Jesus to save his soul. He is asking that Jesus remember far beyond the present circumstances. That means he is talking about a time after his death.

So this man believes he will be alive. He does not doubt the certainty of life after death, but he turns to the only one who can save him – Christ, and says, “Remember me.” The Greek word ‘remember’ in the New Testament is often used to mean ‘be mindful of,’ like we would say today, ‘bear me in mind.’ He is saying to Jesus, ‘When you are the king, please don’t forget me.’

What a touchingly humble request for salvation. So far removed from the demanding cries of the other, he can barely bring himself to plead mercy. But he does so, with the simplest of words – don’t forget about me. Don’t leave me behind. His is true faith. He is not proudly saying, ‘Okay fine, Jesus, I accept You, now fix up things for me.’ No, he is saying, ‘Will you please accept me?’ That’s a humble plea for mercy, not a demand for relief from sin’s consequences.

He has just exercised faith. He has publicly acknowledged his guilt and turned from his sin to Christ, who he believed to be the sinless Son of God, the Messiah who would rise again to rule in the future. He places trust in Jesus for his spiritual salvation, looking to Him for forgiveness of sins, for the righteousness that will enable him to stand before God in the future. Oh, he doesn’t understand all the theology behind it, but he knows who Jesus is, he knows his own sin, and he turns from it to Christ. That’s repentant faith. Notice then:

The Lord Jesus Christ's response

Jesus says immediately, *“Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise”* (**Luke 23:43**). I wonder if ripples of grateful sobs didn’t rack that forgiven criminal’s body when he heard those words. I wonder if tears didn’t well up when he saw the compassionate expression in Jesus’ broken and marred face.

Notice: the transaction is complete. With certainty, Jesus says, Today, you will be with Me in paradise. His repentant faith in Christ has justified him before God. There is nothing more to do. He does not need any church ordinance, any ceremony, and form of ritual to secure his salvation. It is secure. And Notice Christ says *“today.”* It’s not going to be an indeterminate time before he wakes up in heaven, Jesus uses today, and he means today.

Notice: Jesus says *“assuredly”* or *“truly.”* He cannot lie, and when He promises you eternal life, nothing can break that promise, nothing can cause Him to go back on His Word. What a fantastic thought: if God says, ‘I promise you eternal life,’ then you have the most full-proof guarantee in the universe.

Above all, notice that Jesus says, *“with Me in paradise.”* The word for paradise was the same word used in the Greek version of the Old Testament to describe the garden of Eden – perfection. Why is it perfection? Because of the *“with Me.”* That’s the greatest thing of all. Heaven will be Heaven because Jesus will be there. Some think Heaven is the place believers go, and God will happen to be there. No, Heaven is Heaven only *because* God is there. To put it another way, Heaven is wherever God is. A specific place, it seems, but nevertheless paradise, because He is there.

It says in John that because it was a Jewish day of preparation, the crucified men could not be left on the cross. Crucifixion could actually last for day, so the soldiers decided to break legs. See, crucifixion so stretched the arms and limbs out that it made it impossible to breathe if you hung by your arms. So you would push down on your nailed feet, to get a breath of air, and then let go and hang by your nailed wrists till you needed another breath.

So crucifixion was one long unimaginable torture of pushing down on nailed feet for air, and then falling back onto nailed hands. By breaking legs, it would disable the ability to push down to get air, and crucified men would quickly suffocate and die. So the soldiers broke the legs of both the thieves, and when they came to Jesus, they found He was already dead, and so one of them pierced His side.

But for those two, as they descended into the panic of suffocation, and darkness came upon them, one of them opened their eyes to see something so wonderful that John struggled for metaphors to describe it when he saw his revelation. The other opened his eyes in a flame, in a darkness, in a bottomless feeling of falling, amid screams and cries of blasphemy, in eternal torture.

The one thief saw Jesus that same day in paradise. The next time the other thief will see Jesus will be as His judge before the Great White Throne of Judgement. He will look into the same eyes He saw on the cross. And those eyes of mercy will now be eyes of justice. For rejecting the Supreme One, for rejecting a gift of infinite value, He will be punished with infinite punishment.

Which are you today? We are all condemned criminals. We all begin by mocking Jesus. We all begin pretending we are so in control. But the truth is, we are all dying. Worse, like those men, we are totally helpless to save ourselves – our hands and feet are nailed by our sin. We cannot change our predicament. Every moment takes us closer to eternity.

Will you be the rejecter, who denied he had a problem, he denied his sin and his guilt? Will you be one who doubts the Person of Jesus, and cries, 'Prove yourself God, then I'll believe.' Are you one who is demanding that God meet your needs on your terms, that He give you salvation the way you want it, when you want it? Are you still condemning God and justifying yourself? Then, sadly, Jesus has nothing to say to you.

Or are you the other? Though you began mocking Him, you change your mind. As He reveals Himself to You, you see how holy He is, and how dirty you feel. You feel terribly ashamed and guilty. So guilty, you'd like to run from God. But instead of running from God, you run from your sin. You repent of it, you hate living life your own way and instead turn to the waiting Christ.

You believe Jesus truly is the Son of God, the sinless one, who died and rose again that we might have our sins forgiven and have new life. And you turn wholeheartedly to Him as your Lord and Saviour, and beg forgiveness and salvation from Him. You place your faith solely in Him, and His power to save you from your sin. Like the thief, you are desperate for it, and are not ashamed to publicly confess that Jesus is your new Master. I think if that criminal had been given another chance to live, he would have served Jesus and followed Him. That's salvation.

There were three crosses that day, and two responses. They are the two responses which will divide up the entire human race into saved and unsaved, believer and unbeliever, Heaven and Hell.