

# The Heart of the Gospel: Gethsemane to the Burial of Christ

## Chapter 15: A Criminal Converted

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And with him they crucify two thieves; the one on his right hand, and the other on his left.... “Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” And they that were crucified with him reviled him. (Mk. 15:27, 32)

Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left.... “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. (Mt. 27:38, 43-44)

And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death. And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.... And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, “If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.” But the other answering rebuked 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 this man hath done nothing amiss.” 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.’” (Lk. 23:32, 33, 39-43)

### Introduction

The story of the salvation of the crucified robber is one of the most amazing records of a conversion in the whole Bible. J. C. Ryle writes, “The verses we have now read deserve to be printed in letters of gold. They have probably been the salvation of myriads of souls. Multitudes will thank God to all eternity that the Bible contains this story of the penitent thief.”<sup>1</sup> This section of Scripture is comforting and encouraging to lost sinners. It also greatly strengthens our faith because it so explicitly teaches God’s sovereign power to save and Jesus’ willingness and ability to save, even when He was in agony, dying on the cross. When Christ saved the wicked robber, he was a spectacle of shame on the brink of death. Even while our Lord was near the lowest point of His humiliation He achieved this amazing act of grace. If a simple trust in the Savior when He was emptied of all His glory and marred beyond recognition can save a wicked, murdering thief, then certainly our faith in the resurrected, glorified King who sits at the right hand of Power is sufficient to save.

As we study this section of Scripture there are four areas that merit our attention: (1) the character and condition of the robber before his conversion; (2) how this criminal was converted to Christ; (3) the evidences of this man’s faith and repentance; and (4) what we can learn from our Lord’s promise to the penitent thief. May God enable us to profit from this amazing section of Scripture.

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<sup>1</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Luke*, 2:469-470.

## The Criminal's Character and Condition

As we study the conversion of the robber on the cross, it is important to note that, in God's providence, this man was no ordinary, average, everyday sinner. This man, rather, was the vilest of the vile, the lowest of the low, and the bottom of the barrel of sinful, wretched humanity. Indeed, he was the scum of the earth who deserved to be put to death. This point is easily established if we look at the terms used to describe him in the gospels.

(1) The gospels of Matthew and Mark describe the two men crucified with Jesus as "thieves" (KJV) or "robbers" (NJKV, NASB, RSV, NIV). Although the KJV translates the Greek word used (*lestes*) as "thief," the word "robber" is a better translation. We know this because the Greek word for thief is *kleptes* (thus the English word kleptomaniac) and the word "robber" is a more serious offense than being a thief. A robber, brigand or bandit is someone who is more than a petty thief. He is someone who operates as part of a group of wicked associates who use organized planning and violence to achieve their ends. A robber "would require an armed band to apprehend him."<sup>2</sup> Roman law even "distinguished between theft (*furtum*) and robbery (*rapina*, theft combined with violence)."<sup>3</sup>

According to Roman scholars, theft and robbery were not capital crimes in the days when our Lord walked the earth. Therefore, the fact that the robbers received the death penalty can only be explained in one of two ways. Either these men were guilty of murder during the commission of their crimes, or the Greek word for robber has the sense of insurrectionist or revolutionary. "Josephus uses *lestes* for the Jews who were revolutionaries against the Roman government."<sup>4</sup> The consensus of modern commentators is that it is very likely that these two "robbers" were in fact violent revolutionaries who were seized in connection with the insurrection led by Barabbas (cf. Mk. 15:7). These men were Barabbas' accomplices and were awaiting execution with him. When Barabbas was released by the Jews, the Messiah took his place in between these two wicked insurrectionists.

Whether or not the criminal on the cross was a violent revolutionary or a murderous brigand, we know that this man was thoroughly wicked and had absolutely no regard for human life. Both groups used violence to secure other people's money and property and both used murder to accomplish their evil deeds. This robber would lie in wait for travelers. When innocent people came by, he would use violence to rob them and even kill them if necessary. He would leave the dead on the road to be eaten by the birds; the wounded would be left behind to bleed to death and agonize under the hot sun. He was a man without morals and without mercy. He is accurately described in Proverbs 1:11-13: "Come with us, let us lie in wait to shed blood; let us lurk secretly for the innocent without cause; let us swallow them alive like Sheol, and whole, like those who go down to the Pit; we shall find all kind of possessions, we shall fill our houses with spoil."

We can get an idea of how evil the robber on the cross was by the behavior of his comrades (the Zealots) during the Jewish war they provoked. Although they claimed to be nationalistic and religious, their tactics were lawless and barbaric. Soon after the outbreak of war, the Zealots took control of the temple area.<sup>5</sup> They committed many murders, some within

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<sup>2</sup> Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1887] 1946), 1:142.

<sup>3</sup> William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 568.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, footnote 61.

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent description of the lawless activities of the Zealots see: Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Atlanta, GA: American Vision, 1999), 104, 105.

the temple itself. They allowed the worst of criminals to walk around in the Holy of Holies. They beat and murdered the strictest priests and even appointed their own lawless pretender, Phanni, as the high priest. “[I]n response to this action...the retired priest Ananus with tears lamented: ‘It would have been better for me to have died before I had seen the house of God laden with such abominations and its unapproachable and hallowed places crowded with the feet of murderers’ (Wars, 4:3:10).”<sup>6</sup> This criminal on the cross was a heartless, cruel robber and murderer who had no regard for God or man.

(2) Luke uses a different word to describe these robbers. He refers to them as “malefactors” (KJV, malefactor is from the Latin) or “criminals” (NKJV). The Greek term *kakourgos* used is a compound word consisting of two words: *kakos*, “evil,” and *ergon*, “work.” Literally then, the robber was an “evil worker.” In context a good modern rendering would be “criminal.” Luke, writing to a predominantly Gentile audience, wants us to know that the men crucified with Christ were evil thugs. They were criminals who spent their time planning and committing evil deeds.

The law of God and the Roman state meant nothing to this man. He existed to please himself; he lived for the moment. There was no fear of God before his eyes. Everything existed to satisfy his lusts. His heart was a heart of stone; the loss of property, the injury to and even the death of innocent people did not prick this evil man’s conscience. He was a hardened, blood-thirsty, despicable criminal.

(3) But even worse than everything observed so far, he also was a blasphemer. Both Matthew and Mark tell us that this man was mocking Jesus before his conversion. When the unbelieving crowds were mocking our Lord’s helplessness by challenging Him to come down from the cross, *both* criminals joined in and mocked Him. “The rebels (v. 27) revile Jesus out of their fear and anguish. Their own hopes and aspirations have been foiled, so they reproach Jesus for having made even grander plans that seemingly have also gone unfulfilled.”<sup>7</sup> The mockery of the robbers is in the imperfect tense, indicating that they joined in the derision for some time. In Matthew the robber is even mocking the Savior’s claim to be the Son of God (27:44). Before his conversion, the robber had a contempt and hatred for Christ. He was an avowed enemy of the Savior and all that He stood for, just like the mocking crowd. “The contempt shown for Jesus by those gathered about the cross may have encouraged the two others who were crucified to vent their rage upon him. In their eyes Jesus was a contemptible caricature of sovereignty, and they reproached him.”<sup>8</sup> At this point in the story, it appears that the just punishments these robbers received only hardened them in their rebellion. Instead of repenting of their evil, they were adding new sins to their old. It looked as though both men would be fierce, impenitent and defiant to the bitter end. God, however, had a different plan.

Some scholars (e.g., Calvin, R. C. Trench) see an apparent contradiction between the account from Mark and Matthew where both brigands are said to be mocking Jesus and Luke which says “one of the criminals...railed on Him” (23:39). As a result they offer clever arguments as to why these evangelists do not actually disagree (e.g., Calvin says the plural robbers is a synecdoche [i.e. a figure of speech where the whole describes the part or the part describes the whole]—that Matthew and Mark are saying the Messiah was mocked by the class of robbers [i.e. the plural of the category]). Such argumentation is completely unnecessary because Luke is simply describing what occurred *after* both robbers were mocking the Lord. It is

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<sup>6</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 469.

<sup>7</sup> Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 506.

<sup>8</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 570.

not a contradiction but an addition. Both Matthew and Mark state very clearly that both men reviled Christ. In the context it is obvious that they are not discussing the class of robbers or using a plural number to describe a transaction, but are speaking plainly that both criminals railed at first, but then, as Luke says, one criminal was enlightened by the Holy Spirit and repented.

(4) Note also that this robber was suffering the just consequences of his crimes. He was on the cross under the sentence of death from the civil magistrate and, even worse, under the sentence of eternal death from God. Suffering on the cross was, no doubt, a terrifying, excruciating way to die. But we must keep in mind that the penalty of hell is far more serious and terrifying than even the agony of crucifixion. Jesus warned us of this in Matthew 10:28: "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."

Our Lord is saying that for those who do not know Him there is an everlasting future of suffering for both the soul and the body. There is no such thing as annihilation or the cessation of existence. But rather, those who reject the Savior will spend eternity in the place called "the pit of the abyss" (Isa. 14:15; Rev. 9:2), "the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:15), "the second death" (Rev. 20:14; 21:8), "hell" (2 Pet. 2:4), "the outer darkness" (Mt. 25:30; Jude 1:13). Those who do not believe in Jesus will suffer: "everlasting punishment" (Mt. 25:46); "everlasting fire" (Mt. 18:8); "everlasting destruction" (2 Th. 1:9); "eternal fire" (Mt. 13:40-42; Rev. 14:10; Jude 7); "torment" (*basanos*) or torture (Lk. 16:23-24; Mt. 24:50-51) where "there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt. 24:51). If this robber did not repent and look to the divine-human Mediator, he would have gone immediately to hell upon death and suffered the "resurrection of condemnation" (Jn. 5:29).

This condemned robber, hanging on the cross of execution, is a graphic picture of everyone who has not embraced the Lord Jesus Christ by faith. This statement is true because every individual apart from the Redeemer is under the eternal death sentence from Almighty God. Jesus said that, "he who does not believe is condemned already" (Jn. 3:18). God says, "He who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (Jn. 3:36). The Psalmist says, "You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness, nor shall evil dwell with You. The boastful shall not stand in your sight; You hate all workers of iniquity. You shall destroy those who speak falsehood; the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man" (5:4-5). "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31).

This dying thief, before his amazing conversion, was on the precipice of a Christless eternity, without God and without hope. He was unregenerate, weighted with a lifetime of sin and guilt and was in complete bondage to sin and the devil.

If you are not a Christian, then you need to realize that you are not very different from the robber on the cross. Yes, it may be true that you are not an insurrectionist and have not committed cold-blooded murder. Yet, you are guilty of sin. You have lived your life without trusting or serving Christ. And if you died this very moment, you would be cast into hell and forever be separated from our Lord's love and presence. This very moment you are under the sentence of eternal death. But there is hope for you. For, if Jesus could transform the stony heart of that robber on the cross and completely save him at His weakest hour, then He most certainly can deliver you. Pray that God would open your eyes and ears to behold the amazing saving power of God's beloved Son.

## The Criminal's Conversion

In his gospel Luke records that a radical change of mind occurred in one of the robbers crucified with Christ. At first, both robbers were railing against the Savior and “casting the same in His teeth” (Mt. 27:44; Mk. 15:32). But a time comes when the grace of God shines upon the heart of one of the criminals and that man displays an astonishing faith in God's Son.

This dramatic and obvious conversion raises an important question. How was this wicked criminal converted while he hung on the cross? Obviously, there was no sermon or evangelistic message spoken to him while he was dying. There is no evidence that prayer was given on his behalf or that he had received prior instruction by one of our Lord's disciples. Yet, this man repented of his sin, believed in Jesus and was admitted to paradise that very day. How can we account for this remarkable change of heart? To understand what occurred to the penitent thief on the cross that day there are a number of things to consider.

(1) It is important to note that this man was converted by the sovereign grace of God. Only God has the ability to turn blasphemers into worshippers. Only the Holy Spirit can take hearts of stone that are spiritually dead and turn them into hearts of flesh. Behold the power of Christ to save. “Salvation is of the Lord” (Jon. 2:9). The only biblical way that we can explain such a radical and sincere change in this robber is that God first did something to this man's heart that no one could see. The Bible refers to this sovereign act of God as being “born of the Spirit” (Jn. 3:5-6), “regeneration” (Tit. 3:5, Gk. *palingenesia*), “a new creation” (Gal. 6:15), “having been born again” (1 Pet. 1:23; cf. Jn. 3:3), a making alive with Christ (Eph. 2:5; Col. 2:13), or a being “begotten by God” (Jn. 1:13; 1 Jn. 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18). This change in man's heart is so radical that Scripture describes it as a heart of stone becoming a heart of flesh (Ezek. 32:2) or an uncircumcised heart becoming a circumcised heart (Col. 2:11).

Both of these criminals were equally wicked and guilty. Both had the same unbelieving, unbiblical, blasphemous view of Jesus in the early hours of the crucifixion. Both were spiritually dead and blind as they mocked the Savior. Both also saw and heard everything relating to Christ during the nearly six hours He hung on the cross. “Yet one died in his sins, as he had lived, hardened, impenitent and unbelieving.”<sup>9</sup> He died just as blind, guilty and spiritually dead as he was when the crucifixion began. But the other robber was regenerated by the Holy Spirit, enlightened and drawn to our Lord. Therefore, he repented, believed, confessed, prayed for mercy and was saved.

One purpose of this passage is to teach us that conversion is the fruit, not the cause, of regeneration. When there are two men of virtually identical character and condition; who both are in the exact same circumstances; who have the very same information regarding the Savior; and, one becomes convicted and repents, while the other could not care less, the only biblical and rational explanation is that God changed one's heart and passed the other by. This means that the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit raises dead hearts (Eph. 2:5) and enables sinners to see and hear the truth, causing them to repent and turn to Christ.

This is the explicit teaching of Scripture. “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God” (1 Cor. 2:12). Without this spiritual renewal, which is purely a gift of God dependent upon nothing that we do, no one would turn to Christ. “For it is God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of knowledge of the

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<sup>9</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, 2:470.

glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). Note that Lydia, like the criminal on the cross, believed because God first opened her heart and enabled her to respond to the gospel. Paul “sat down and spoke to the women who met there. Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshipped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul” (Ac. 16:13-14). As our Lord said to Nicodemus, “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (Jn. 3:6). The Holy Spirit came upon one of the criminals and made him a spiritual person. Therefore, he saw the blessed Savior with new spiritual eyes and, thus, this cursing, blaspheming and railing rebel became in an instant of time a devout worshipper of Christ. This profound truth is the only way to explain the pervasive, radical change in the penitent thief’s heart.

This truth teaches two related things. First, when a sinner is saved, God alone deserves the credit and glory for his salvation. The Bible teaches that faith and repentance are gifts of God (cf. Jn. 3:3-8; 6:44-45, 65; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29; 2 Pet. 1:2; Ac. 11:18); that “[n]o one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.... [n]o one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father” (Jn. 6:44; 65). The idea common in evangelical circles that regeneration is God’s response to man’s exercise of faith (i.e. decisional regeneration) is unscriptural and robs God of the glory that belongs only to Him. Second, the fact that unsaved men can only be changed spiritually and drawn to the Savior by the power of God should teach us humility. We were spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1-5), with a heart of stone (Ezek. 11:19), living in spiritual darkness (Jn. 1:4-5), unable to repent (Jer. 13:23), totally helpless (Ezek. 16:4-6), spiritually blind (1 Cor. 2:14), with a sinful hatred of Christ (Jn. 3:19-21) and enslaved to the prince of darkness (Ac. 26:17-18). But God, while we were His enemies, reached out and touched our hearts giving us new spiritual life and causing us to love His precious Son. What a glorious salvation! We love Him only because He first loved us (1 Jn. 4:19). Obviously, we have nothing of which we can boast. If it were not for God’s grace, we would be just like the thief who died cursing Jesus. Without the work of the Holy Spirit upon our hearts we would be just as wicked, obstinate, unrepentant and full of hatred toward Christ as that impenitent criminal. It is for this reason that we shall cast our crowns at His pierced feet when we behold Him in heaven (cf. Rev. 4:10).

(2) We need to examine the means used by the Holy Spirit to bring the penitent criminal to Christ. This is a more difficult topic than regeneration, for in the new birth God works immediately (i.e. without means) or directly upon the human heart. However, when it comes to the production of saving faith in the heart and laying hold of Jesus, the Bible teaches that something else is necessary. As Paul writes, “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). James says, “Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of His creatures” (Jas. 1:18). Under normal circumstances a person is converted to Christ by the preaching of the gospel. Sometimes God will use Bible reading, a gospel tract or a Christian book to bring a sinner to the Savior. In other words, the Scriptures teach that the Holy Spirit applies the Word of God to the regenerated heart in the process of conversion. Therefore, a genuine conversion presupposes a certain amount of biblical knowledge regarding the person and work of Christ. This teaching raises an important question: what did the Spirit of God use to convert this robber? There is no evidence that he had listened to our Lord preach or heard any sermons by the traveling disciples; however, it is a distinct possibility. But even if this robber had never heard Jesus or His disciples preach, given his Jewish upbringing and knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures, he saw a number of things that could be used to lead him to Christ.

If the robber could hear the trial of our Lord he would have learned not only the major titles for the Messiah, but also of His innocence and righteousness. The Jewish leaders publicly accused Jesus of making Himself a king (Lk. 23:2) and our Lord acknowledged that He indeed was a king (Lk. 23:3; cf. Jn. 18:37). Pilate repeatedly referred to the Savior as a king of the Jews (Mk. 15:9; Jn. 18:39; 19:15) and even had the inscription “This is Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews” (Jn. 19:19; Mk. 15:26; Mt. 27:37; Lk. 23:38) placed above the suffering Servant’s head on the cross. Perhaps when he thought about the trial and the inscription he thought, “Could this really be the Messiah, the king of the Jews?”

“This is he who wrought miracles, and raised the dead, and said that he was the Son of God; is it all true, and is he really our Messiah?” Then he would remember the words of the prophet Isaiah, “He was despised and rejected of men, a Man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. Surely, he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows.” “Why,” he would say to himself, “I never understood that passage in the prophet Esaias before, but it must point to him. The chastisement of our peace is upon him. Can this be he who cried in the Psalms—‘they pierced my hands and my feet?’” As he looked at him again, he felt conviction creeping over his spirit. Then he looked again, and he marked how all men down below rejected, and despised, and hissed at him, and hooted him, and all this would make the case the more clear. “All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, He trusted on the Lord that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him.”<sup>10</sup>

Pilate identified Jesus as the Christ (Mt. 27:17) and the Jews said that our Lord claimed to be the Son of God (Jn. 19:7). Further, Pilate, who had no axe to grind, said that the Savior had done nothing worthy of death (Lk. 23:22; 23:15); had committed no crime (Jn. 18:38; 19:4, 6); and could not be proven to have done any evil (Mt. 27:23; Lk. 23:22). Both Pilate and his wife emphatically declared the Nazarene to be a righteous Man (Mt. 27:19, 24). If the thief was a witness to these events, the Holy Spirit would have applied these truths to his heart.

On the way to the cross, the criminal would have witnessed our Lord’s amazing words to the daughters of Jerusalem. The robber would have thought about these words. Jesus warns these women about the coming destruction in a unique manner. He does not speak as the prophets of old who would say, “Thus saith the LORD,” or “the LORD says.” This weakened, bleeding Man speaks as though He Himself both knows and controls the future. He speaks as the divine judge who rules the universe. The robber was right behind our Lord as He spoke those sober words. He saw the Master warn these unbelieving women with love in His eyes and the frightening truth on his lips.

Then the criminal saw something that the Holy Spirit would use to pierce his soul. He beheld the Savior interceding for His own people—“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Lk. 23:34). One could reasonably expect to see a man falsely condemned, scourged, beaten, mocked and railed upon with insults and sarcasm to be cursing such a crowd. But Jesus, with His infinite love, is even here on the cross interceding for the elect, who out of ignorance are participants in His humiliation and murder. The robber learned that Christ is compassionate and merciful and takes a very active role in saving sinners. Such a Man not only dies for the sins of His people, but also works to apply that wonderful redemption unto them even when they are ethical scum and worthy of the curse and death. Later, when the Holy Spirit changed the thief’s heart, our Lord’s prayer would be precious to this robber. Perhaps he would think, “This Man of Sorrows was compassionate, loving and kind to his own who were involved

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<sup>10</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Dying Thief in a New Light,” 32:53.

in this wicked affair. He even interceded for them to God His Father. Therefore, I can place my faith in the King who is merciful to sinners and I can ask Him to remember me when He enters His glorious kingdom.” While obviously the robber’s understanding of the gospel would have been rudimentary and his appreciation of all that was taking place before him imperfect, nevertheless, the Holy Spirit used it all to such a great effect that this robber would become a teacher of faith and repentance to the whole world.

There was even (paradoxically) a gospel message set forth in the mocking of the chief priests, scribes and elders. They cried out, “He saved others; Himself He cannot save” (Mt. 27:42, Mk. 15:31). The point the Jewish leaders were trying to set forth before the crowd was that if Jesus cannot even save Himself from suffering and death, then why should we recognize His claim to be the Messiah—the Son of God (cf. Mt. 27:42-43; Mk. 15:32)? Even the robbers joined in this blasphemous mockery. But once the Holy Spirit planted a new spiritual life in the heart of that dying criminal and began to draw him to the Redeemer, those words of mockery took on a whole new meaning. “He saved others. Then can He not also save me? If He has the power to save others, then certainly He can also save me.”

One thing is clear when we examine this thief’s confession. His mockery that spoke of a salvation in terms merely of physical deliverance from suffering and death was changed by the Holy Spirit to a concern for deliverance from spiritual death (i.e. deliverance from the guilt and penalty of sin). The robber’s outlook was changed by the Spirit from a concern and focus upon this world to the world to come. The words that the crowd cast in the Savior’s teeth as mockery became precious gospel truths to this dying sinner. As Spurgeon eloquently notes, “You may pick a jewel from a dunghill, and find its radiance undiminished; and you may gather the gospel from a blasphemous mouth, and it shall be none the less the gospel of salvation. Peradventure this man learned the gospel from those who jested at our dying Lord; and so the servants of the devil were unconsciously made to be the servants of Christ.”<sup>11</sup>

As the criminal was dying on the cross the Holy Spirit convicted him of the profound truth that, in order to save His people, Jesus could not save Himself. If Christ was to fulfill His mission, then He had to die on the cross as a propitiating sacrifice unto God. As we shall see when we examine the robber’s confession, he believed that our Lord’s death was not in vain, or useless, or a defeat. Rather, he looked to it as a victory that ushered in the Messianic kingdom. Beloved, we must never underestimate or doubt the Savior’s ability to save even the most wicked and obstinate sinners by the power of His Spirit. The Spirit of God took the information that this robber had regarding the Master and so convicted and converted his heart that he went from being a blasphemer to a worshipper in only a short period of time. “[H]e displayed astonishing faith by committing himself and his salvation to the protection of Christ, while he saw him hanging on the cross near death.”<sup>12</sup>

## Evidences of the Criminal’s Faith and Repentance

When a person is truly converted to Christ there will be fruit (doctrinally and morally) or evidences that demonstrate repentance and saving faith. As James says, “Faith without works is dead” (2:20). What is particularly interesting about Luke’s record of this dying robber’s interaction with Jesus is the clear and abundant evidence of his conversion. This is especially amazing when we keep in mind that he was literally nailed to a cross. He was never baptized. He

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3:309.

never attended church and he was never able to use his hands or feet to do any good works. We learn solely of this man's faith from his lips. "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Mt. 12:34). There are a number of distinct evidences of this robber's conversion to examine.

First, he came to our Lord's defense in rebuking his partner in crime. "Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, 'If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.' But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation?'" (Lk. 23:40). This is an amazing statement for someone who, not long before, was joining in such railing against Jesus. Note how this statement is rich in theological meaning.

The robber emphatically rebukes his fellow sinner for not fearing God by his behavior. "This implies that it was the fear of God which restrained him from following the multitude to do this evil."<sup>13</sup> In fact he now feared God so much that he would not even allow another person to mock God in his presence. This dying criminal had been changed by the Holy Spirit and now he no longer cared about what the world thought or what the crowd said, but his chief concern was what God thought. With his new heart of flesh came a love for God and Christ. He could not bear to hear his old comrade making fun of his precious Savior. This penitent criminal had a radical change of mind, a complete about-face regarding his view of God and the Redeemer. He publicly and dramatically retracts all his earlier unbelieving statements and takes his place beside Jesus.

The penitent robber's rebuke presupposes that all such blasphemous comments toward the Redeemer will have their due recompense of reward after death and that every sinful remark will be answerable to God. The gist of his rebuke is, "Look, don't you have any fear of God at all? You are under the sentence of death and are about to be ushered into the very presence of Almighty God. Is it not time to stop following the wicked crowd when you know that the Nazarene is righteous and innocent?" In the moment when all voices are raised against Christ from the political and religious leaders, the scholars, the Roman executioners and the large body of onlookers, this criminal displayed an astonishing loyalty to the Savior. "This malefactor is the last man who, before the death of Jesus, disposes a testimony in honor of Him."<sup>14</sup>

This public expression of faith and loyalty is a blessed example to every Christian. Do we remain silent when relatives, fellow students or co-workers mock our Lord and His holy Word? In our decaying, wicked and degenerate culture, is it not crucial for believers to call sin a sin and rebuke it? If Christians who claim to believe in the inerrancy and perfection of Scripture are unwilling to rebuke sin, then who will do it? The secular humanists, sodomite perverts and baby murdering feminists certainly won't. Yet, a great many professing Christians in our day not only refuse to do their duty to be a salt and light to culture but also are quick to condemn those who are attempting to take a public stand for Christ and His law word. "Do you not know that a person who is silent when a wrong thing is said or done may become a participator in the sin? If you do not rebuke sin—I mean, of course, on all fit occasions, and in a proper spirit—your silence will give consent to the sin, and you will be an aider and abettor in it."<sup>15</sup>

Second, the robber acknowledged his sin and guilt. "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds" (Lk. 23:40-41). One crucial element of repentance is that we have a change of mind

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<sup>13</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:828.

<sup>14</sup> Alfred Nevin, *Popular Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke*, 667.

<sup>15</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Dying Thief in a New Light," 32:57.

regarding our sin and acknowledge that our sins are sinful, wrong, evil, and against God's throne. There must be an honest acknowledgement of our sin and guilt before God. This is precisely what occurred with the criminal on the cross. As a robber and insurrectionist, he justified his sinful behavior by various excuses. Perhaps he believed that his unlawful actions would lead to a greater good—the liberation of Palestine. He may have reasoned that as an insurrectionist he was involved in a just war. Therefore, committing murder and robbery were justified by unique circumstances. In any case he lived out a worldview that justified killing the innocent and taking their goods.

But now that the Holy Spirit had changed his heart, all of that self-justification and excuse-making disappears. He begins to see his sins as God sees them and now loathes his sins and despises his past lifestyle as warfare not against Rome, but against a thrice holy God. He acknowledges that he deserves to die for what he has done. He freely admits that God's wrath against his sin is just. "Note, true penitents acknowledge the justice of God in all the punishment of their sin."<sup>16</sup> He has abandoned a spirit of human autonomy in ethics and has accepted the biblical teaching that the law of God is holy, just and good (Rom. 7:12). He has laid down the weapons of his warfare with God and said, "Lord, I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done evil in Your sight" (Ps. 51:3-4). "There is no more certain sign of an effectual work of the Holy Spirit of God than a readiness on the sinner's part to accept and acquiesce in whatever his punishment may be, to put his mouth in the dust and say, 'Thou art righteous, O God, that doest this;' 'Wherefore doth a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sin?' (Lam. iii.39; cf. Ezra ix.6, 7; Luke xv.18, 19)... How profound the conviction, how unreserved upon his part is the confession, of sin!"<sup>17</sup>

This robber's repentance reminds us that genuine faith is always accompanied by repentance. We cannot expect to be saved from our sins if we do not acknowledge the awful evil of our transgressions, admitting our guilt and endeavoring not to continue in the sin that God hates. If a person has a very light view of sin and intends to continue in it, then he has no reason to believe that he is a child of God. "Let us beware of a repentance without evidences."<sup>18</sup> Let us pray that God would open our eyes and subdue our hearts so that we would loathe our sins and take up our cross daily. There are multitudes of professing Christians today who have accepted the diabolical doctrine that repentance is not necessary for salvation. While it is true that we are saved solely by Christ apart from any works of the law, nevertheless true faith is *always* accompanied by repentance.

Third, the criminal openly confessed the innocence of the Savior. "Do you not even fear God seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong" (Lk. 23:41). The word "*amis*" (KJV) or "wrong" (NKJV) *atopos*, is compounded of *alpha*, "negative" and *topos*, "place." Therefore, it literally means "out of place." Thus, the criminal is not simply asserting that our Lord is not guilty of any criminal act, but also is not guilty of any sin. Consequently, the robber with his half-dead, mangled body, racked with pain, relied on the grace of Christ and confessed his faith in the righteousness of the Redeemer.

The Holy Spirit enlightened his mind to the beauty and perfection of the Lamb of God who is without spot and without blemish. Here the robber publicly rebukes the whole nation of

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:828.

<sup>17</sup> R. C. Trench, *Studies in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1874] 1979), 306.

<sup>18</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Luke*, 2:472.

Israel and testifies that Jesus died as an innocent Man. “When all other voices were silent, one suffering penitent spake out, and said—‘This man hath done nothing amiss.’”<sup>19</sup> Luke repeatedly emphasizes Christ’s innocence (cf. 23:4, 14, 15, 47) because our Lord had to be sinless for His sacrifice to be efficacious as an expiation for the sins of the world.

Note the excellent example of the penitent’s confession and faith. First, he acknowledges that he is sinful and guilty and has nothing to offer God; his whole life ethically in God’s sight is a stinking pile of rubbish. Then he looks away from himself to the righteousness of Christ. Every person must be saved in the same manner as that penitent robber. First, we must acknowledge that we are sinful and guilty before God and that we have nothing in ourselves that merits salvation or any approach to God whatsoever. We have guilty records and corrupt hearts; we need to be saved from what we have done and what we are. Second, we need to look to Christ for salvation. We must believe that our sins were placed upon the Savior on the cross. Like the penitent criminal we must have a child-like trust in what the Nazarene accomplished.

Fourth, the criminal makes a request or prays to Christ. “Then he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom’” (Lk. 23:42). This short prayer is remarkable for its depth of theological truth. It contains a number of memorable elements.

(1) Note that he addresses the Savior as Lord. He acknowledges that Jesus is the Messianic King and the Son of God. This prayer presupposes the deity of Christ. “The petition is worded as if he felt, ‘Only let Christ think of me, and it is enough. Let him remember me, and the thought of his mind will be effectual for everything that I shall need in the world to come.’ This is to impute Godhead to Christ.”<sup>20</sup> With the eyes of faith this robber saw the Master as One who would soon be seated at the right hand of God. Calvin writes,

I know not that, since the creation of the world, there ever was a more remarkable and striking example of faith; and so much the greater admiration is due to the grace of the Holy Spirit, of which it affords so magnificent a display. A *robber*, who not only had not been educated in the school of Christ, but by giving himself up to execrable murders, had endeavoured to extinguish all sense of what was right, suddenly rises higher than all the apostles and the other disciples whom the Lord himself had taken so much pains to instruct; and not only so, but he adores Christ as a *King* while on the gallows, celebrates his *kingdom* in the midst of shocking and worse than revolting abasement, and declares him, when dying, to be the Author of life.<sup>21</sup>

(2) The penitent criminal asks Jesus to remember him when he enters His kingdom. This short request reveals a strong and sturdy faith in a number of important biblical truths.

This petition presupposes that the life of the soul continues after death, such that physical death does not mean the end of our existence. Further, the robber has an understanding that in the world to come there is punishment for the wicked and a reward for those who believe. “Lord I believe in you. I trust in Your power to save. Remember me as You sit on Your throne of glory.”

The robber understands that in the world to come it is the crucified Savior who determines our place. He knows that Christ is the judge of all mankind. This criminal looks to the Lord as the gate of heaven. He places himself upon the bosom of Jesus knowing that the Redeemer is his only hope in life and death. He believes that to be remembered by the Master means that he has a favorable relationship with Him. This remembering is not simply an

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<sup>19</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Dying Thief in a New Light,” 32:58.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 32:58-59.

<sup>21</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3:311.

intellectual affair, but involves thinking upon with love. The penitent robber is looking to his relationship with Christ as his only hope in entering the kingdom of heaven. This amazing request shows us the power of the Holy Spirit to illuminate the mind and turn ignorant criminals into brilliant theologians.

The penitent robber's request reveals a biblical understanding of the Mediator's kingdom. The vast majority of Jews at that time, including the political and religious leaders, were looking for a political-military Messiah who would crush Rome and exalt the Jewish nation. But this dying criminal places his trust in a dying Messiah, a king under the dark cloud of humiliation. Thus, we see in this man a Spirit-given perception that the kingdom of God came by the bloody cross of Christ and not the blood-stained sword of revolution. This robber now embraced a doctrine of the kingdom that was the very opposite of his old opinion. The Holy Spirit turned a violent, cruel insurrectionist into a humble servant of the crucified King. Is this not proof that with God all things are possible (Mt. 19:26)?

Note also the great humility in this prayer. The penitent criminal does not ask for any great privilege in the kingdom. He does not request to be seated on the right or left hand of Jesus. He knows that he does not deserve any place of honor; he simply wants to be remembered. He is not concerned with gold streets, pearly gates and bejeweled crowns. He wants the heart and love of the Mediator. "Oh, Lord, just think of me with your loving heart; remember that I believe in You. I trust in your precious blood. The only thing I want Lord is to be with You." What a beautiful request! Beloved, let this penitent criminal be our teacher in the school of faith. Oh, Lord, remember us and we shall be safe; think of us and we will be secure; intercede for us poor sinners who are burdened with a sense of sin and we shall dwell with You forever. Master, you have promised us saying, "The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out" (Jn. 6:37). We have come and placed our trust in You, in Your precious blood and sinless life and we rejoice that You have given us sonship and eternal life.

## Our Lord's Promise to the Penitent Criminal

After the dying robber confesses Christ and asks the Lord to remember him, Jesus answers with a glorious promise. "And Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise'" (Lk. 23:43). There are three things to consider regarding our Savior's answer. First, this answer teaches us about the amazing power and willingness of Christ to save sinners. Second, it proves the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Third, it says a number of things about the afterlife. First, the reply of our Lord is a glorious example of the Savior's love and power extended to His people. Jesus' love and power is exhibited by the reassuring, comforting words He used as well as His specific promise. Note the following: a) The Mediator gives the penitent criminal much more than he ever requested. The robber had only asked to be remembered when the King entered His kingdom. The penitent criminal expects the Lord to think about him because he believes that distance, space and time will exist between himself and the glorified King. But Jesus says, "Instead of being merely remembered, you will be with Me. You will live in My presence. I will not keep you at a distance but I will receive you, as it were, into My very bosom." The robber, having believed, confessed and prayed, is promised perfect fellowship and communion with the Son of God.

Also, while the robber had in mind some indefinite, future time, our Lord promised an immediate emancipation: "Today you will be with Me in paradise." "What a change from the cross to the crown, from the anguish of Calvary to the glory of the New Jerusalem! In those few

hours the beggar was lifted from the dunghill and set among princes.... Can you measure the change from that sinner, loathsome in his iniquity, when the sun was high at noon, to that same sinner, clothed in pure white, and accepted in the Beloved, in the paradise of God, when the sun went down? O glorious Saviour, what marvels thou canst work!”<sup>22</sup> “This robber breakfasted with the devil, but he dined with Christ on earth, and supped with Him in paradise. This was a short work, but a blessed work.”<sup>23</sup>

This word to the dying robber shows us that there is a graciousness and richness to our salvation that is almost beyond our human comprehension. As Paul says, “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Eph. 3:20-21). There is a saving love in the heart of Jesus for His people that goes far beyond the greatest love on earth. It is infinitely greater than even the love a mother has for her child. Our Lord loved His people so much that He came to earth to die for them and He loves to rescue these sinners from the terrors of hell. He achieved a perfect redemption on their behalf and He personally, lovingly applies that salvation to each sinner for whom He died.

This robber was given the greatest comfort by these words as he suffered severe affliction. This incident should teach us to cling to the precious promises of the Savior as we endure persecution, calamity and heartache. “So then, if we are dreadfully tormented in body, we ought to be on our guard lest the severity of pain hinder us from tasting the goodness of God; but on the contrary, all our afflictions ought to be mitigated and soothed by this single consolation, that as soon as God has received us into his favour, all the afflictions which we endure are aids to our salvation. This will cause our faith not only to rise victorious over all our distresses, but to enjoy calm repose amidst the endurance of sufferings.”<sup>24</sup>

b) The salvation freely given by the Mediator is assured because it comes from Christ. Our Lord spoke to the robber with a divine authority when He said, “Assuredly I say to you.” The word “assuredly” or “amen” reveals that Jesus was a King and Mediator as He hung on the cross. Even at His lowest point of humiliation He could save souls. The robber’s faith meets with an immediate absolution and promise of heaven. Only the Savior could say this. “By this word Jesus acquits this criminal of sin and guilt. By this word he here and now unlocks heaven for him.”<sup>25</sup> “He speaks royally, ‘Verily I say unto thee.’ Are they not imperial words? The Lord is a King in whose word there is power. What he says now no one can gainsay. He that hath the keys of hell and of death saith, ‘I say unto thee, “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.”’ Who shall prevent the fulfillment of his word?”<sup>26</sup>

We must learn from this that when Jesus speaks a word of assurance to us, there is a certainty that is the anchor of our faith and hope. Many people think that if they could only see and hear the Savior speak to them in person they would have faith and assurance. But such thinking ignores the fact that the promises we have in the Bible are “God breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16-17) and just as sure and reliable as a direct Word from Christ. God said, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” (Ac. 16:31). Jesus promised “That whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:15); that, “whoever believes in Him is not condemned” (Jn. 3:18). The Holy Spirit promised, “That if you confess with your mouth the

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<sup>22</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Believing Thief,” 35:188.

<sup>23</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Dying Thief in a New Light,” 32:59.

<sup>24</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 3:314.

<sup>25</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel*, 1146.

<sup>26</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Believing Thief,” 35:188.

Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). Just as the Savior gave this believing robber His certain word of forgiveness and eternal life, His infallible written Word gives us believing sinners that same certainty. Look to the death of the Savior as well as the promises that flow from His perfect redemption. If you confess Him, He will confess you before His heavenly Father (Lk. 12:8).

c) The salvation given by the Mediator is particular. One criminal was converted by God while the other was not. Jesus spoke words of life and peace to the believing robber and says not one word to the other. The impenitent robber proves that suffering, torture and death is insufficient to cause conversion. It demonstrates that conversion is a great miracle caused by the Holy Spirit. The idea that is common in evangelical circles that the Holy Spirit is working equally to convert all men and that the ultimate reason some believe and some do not believe lies in the heart of man is dangerous and heretical. Paul said that “no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). Luke declared that “as many as were ordained to eternal life believed” (Ac. 13:48). “For who makes you to differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did receive it, why do you glory as if you had not received it?” (1 Cor. 4:7). “Man needs for God to draw him irresistibly by His grace, or man will never make so much as a single step in the direction of Christ.”<sup>27</sup> “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (Jn. 6:44).

This point is important because the story of the penitent criminal has been used by people as an excuse to postpone repentance so that they can continue in sin. Once we understand, however, that this man was converted by God and was not the author of his own salvation, then we see the incredible folly of those who delay repentance to an indefinite future or even until their death bed. The passage before us teaches that God can convert even the most wicked, obstinate sinner at any time or any place, even on the verge of death. It, however, does not say that we can change our own wicked hearts and turn over a new leaf without a work of sovereign grace at any time we please. People who think this and put off bowing the knee to Christ have twisted the Scriptures to their own destruction. A person who purposely delays repentance so that he can serve his lusts demonstrates that he does not have saving faith, but at the most has only a mere historical faith in the gospel. Repentance in a hypothetical future is no repentance at all. Such thinking is merely an excuse for unbelief, for living a life of ethical autonomy from God. Make no mistake. If this is your thinking, then you are not a Christian. You are still at war with God. While it is true that while there is life there is hope, we must not abuse God’s goodness and longsuffering nature which is intended to lead to repentance. In God’s sovereign good pleasure only one criminal was saved so that none may despair, but only one, so that none may presume.<sup>28</sup>

Second, our Lord’s statement to the penitent criminal proves the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Note, Jesus did not say to the robber, “Today you will enter purgatory.” With one blessed sentence the Savior completely overthrows the Roman Catholic doctrine that most Christians enter an intermediate state for further purification after death. Because the Papal church believes that God only saves people who are personally or subjectively righteous, they have accepted the human tradition<sup>29</sup> that believers who are not good enough to go to heaven have

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<sup>27</sup> Duane Edward Spencer, *TULIP: The Five Points of Calvinism in the Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 49.

<sup>28</sup> See Alfred Nevin, *Popular Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 669.

<sup>29</sup> The doctrine of purgatory arose long after the death of the apostles. “The early Christians of the New Testament never believed in such a place as purgatory. The word appears nowhere in the Bible. The idea of purgatory and

their venial sins eliminated through the tortures of purgatory (see the Council of Trent, 25<sup>th</sup> session; Baltimore Catechism, sec. XIV, no. 181, 129).

Jesus promised the dying criminal that he would go directly to heaven when he died. The robber received complete forgiveness for all of his sins and a title to eternal life. The moment a person believes in Christ all of his sins (past, present and future) are completely forgiven. The Savior took away all of those sins as well as their spiritual penalty when He died on the cross. Thus, our Lord said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death unto life” (Jn. 5:24). This means that believers are in possession of eternal life now. They do not have to merit it, earn it, do good works to achieve it, or suffer in purgatory to attain it.<sup>30</sup> The Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory is based on the demonic doctrine that the Messiah’s atoning death was insufficient to remove all guilt and penalty of sin. Further, it ignores the biblical teaching that our Lord’s perfect obedience to the law as the second Adam merited eternal life for us (Mt. 3:15; Rom. 5:10-20; 1 Cor. 1:30; Phil. 3:8-9; Zech. 3:3-4).

Our Lord’s statement to the dying thief disproves all systems of works salvation. There are some who assert that on the day of judgment God will weigh one’s “good works” against the bad and if the “good deeds” tip the scales then that person will be allowed to enter heaven. Others, such as Roman Catholics, believe that heaven is only opened for believers after they achieve a state of personal righteousness. Auburn Avenue heretics assert that God only justifies a person after their covenant faithfulness is evaluated on the day of judgment. Jesus completely refuted all of these deadly legalistic errors when he said to the criminal, “Today you will be with Me in Paradise.” Did this robber live a life of good works? No! His whole life was dedicated to gross sin and debauchery. Only moments before his conversion he was blaspheming the Son of God. Was this criminal personally righteous before Christ’s glorious promise? No! Subjectively there was nothing in him to commend him to God. Thankfully, “God imputes righteousness apart from works” (Rom. 4:6). “When we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6).

The criminal simply believed in the Savior, trusted in Him for salvation without any personal righteousness or good works and was immediately justified before God. As Paul said, “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God which is through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:20-24; read 3:28; 4:3-8; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 3:8-9; Ac. 13:39; etc).

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prayers for the souls in purgatory was not known in the professing church to any degree until A.D. 600 when Pope Gregory the Great made claims about a *third* state—a place for the purification of souls before their entrance into heaven. It was not accepted as a dogma of the Catholic Church, however, until 1459 at the Council of Florence. Ninety years later, the Council of Trent confirmed this dogma by cursing those who wouldn’t accept the doctrine” (*Heresies of Rome*, 82 as quoted in Ralph Woodrow, *Babylon Mystery Religion: Ancient and Modern* [Riverside, CA: Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association, 1966], 71).

<sup>30</sup> Believers will grow in practical holiness over time as they seek to live and obey Christ, yet this holiness can in no way contribute to their justification before God. Good works are the fruit of justification and never the ground, instrument or cause of it. The Romanist teaching that the Protestant doctrine of justification leads to antinomianism and licentiousness is absolutely false doctrinally and historically. Bible-believing Protestants have always emphasized the need for personal godliness and attending the means of grace.

The Bible teaches that our own so-called righteousness contributes absolutely nothing to our salvation because: (1) all of our good works are tainted with sin and non-meritorious (Lk. 17:10); and, (2) God demands an absolute moral perfection of His rational creatures in thought, word and deed. This moral perfection must occur 100% of the time from our birth to our death. Such an accomplishment is obviously impossible. Therefore, like that penitent robber and even like Paul, the greatest apostle, we must look at all of our “good works” or “moral achievements” as filthy rags before God and look solely to Christ for salvation. The apostle said, “I count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith” (Phil. 3:8-9). Paul “draws a contrast between two kinds of righteousness—the one being of man, the other, from God. He intimates, accordingly, that one is the reward of works, while the other is a free gift of God. He thus, in a general way, places man’s merit in opposition to Christ’s grace; for while the law brings works, faith presents man before God as naked, that he may be clothed with the righteousness of Christ.”<sup>31</sup>

Jesus’ promise also refutes all forms of sacramentalism. The penitent robber died unbaptized, yet all of his sins were forgiven. The criminal was regenerated and saved without the water of baptism. Thus, baptism is not an automatic conveyer of grace as sacramentalists assert, but rather is a sign and seal of what God does to the heart. While water baptism is not necessary to salvation, Spirit baptism certainly is. The penitent criminal would have been baptized if he had the opportunity, but he could not and still went straight to heaven. This example explicitly contradicts Roman Catholic dogma that water baptism “delivers from the guilt of original sin and of all actual sins committed up to the time of baptism...and sets man free from eternal punishment...”<sup>32</sup> “To avoid this difficulty some writers of Romish tendency have actually caught at the idea, suggested by Augustine, that he was baptized with the blood and water which came from our Lord’s side, when it was pierced with a spear! This baseless and gratuitous assertion shows the absurdities into which men may be driven to maintain their theory of baptismal regeneration. It is clear that the thief was born again. It is equally clear that he was never baptized. It follows therefore that a man may be born again without baptism.”<sup>33</sup>

Third, the Savior’s statement proves that the souls of believers who die go immediately to heaven to be with Jesus. This point is established by the following: a) The word *paradeisos* (Gk. *paradeisos*) is used by Paul in 2 Corinthians 12 as a synonym for the word heaven. In this chapter “the first heaven was that of the clouds, the second that of the stars, the third that of the redeemed.... [N]otice that the man who, according to verse 2, was said to have been caught up to *heaven*, was caught up to *paradise* according to verse 4. This certainly indicates that heaven and paradise are the same place and not two different places.”<sup>34</sup>

The word “paradise,” which is a transliteration of the Greek word, is believed to be of Persian origin. “Among the Greeks it was first used by the historian Xenophon in reference to the parks of Persian kings and nobles (A-S, p. 338). He describes it as shady and well watered. And so it came to mean ‘a garden, pleasureground; grove, park.’”<sup>35</sup> Interestingly the same Greek

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<sup>31</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary of Paul to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 98.

<sup>32</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 626.

<sup>33</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Luke*, 2:477.

<sup>34</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 1033.

<sup>35</sup> Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament*, 263.

word is used in the Greek Septuagint translation of Genesis 2:8: “God planted a paradise in Eden.” “As the paradise in Eden, the primeval place of beauty and happiness, had been closed to the human family after the apostasy, our Lord seems to have selected this term as expressive of the fact that a higher and more blessed paradise was now opened, that the paradise *lost* was now to be *regained*, and rendered accessible to all, who by faith would so unite themselves to the *second* Adam, as to entitle them to be with Him in blessedness and glory.”<sup>36</sup> The use of this word to describe heaven very likely indicates that the rather common view of heaven in literature and film as a cloudy, ethereal, sterile place is grossly inaccurate.

b) This teaching is supported by the whole New Testament. Paul said that believers are confident “to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). Speaking of his future death the apostle said he had “a desire to depart and be with Christ” (Phil. 1:23). The writer of Hebrews describes the members of the invisible church as the “church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” (Heb. 12:23). When John was transported to heaven, he saw “the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God” (Rev. 20:4).

The passage before us refutes a number of erroneous doctrines. It disproves the idea that the soul of man goes to sleep at death and does not awaken until the resurrection (psychopannychy). This teaching has been advocated throughout the history of the church (e.g., some Anabaptists, the Irvingites, Jehovah’s Witnesses or Russelites, and some Adventist sects). This view is based on passages which speak of death as sleep (e.g., Mt. 9:24; Ac. 7:60; 1 Cor. 15:51; 1 Thess. 4:13) and verses which speak of the dead as unconscious (e.g., Ps. 6:5; 30:9; 115:17; 146:4; Eccl. 9:10; Isa. 38:18, 19). The problem with these arguments is that the clearer portions of Scripture must be used to interpret the less clear. Obviously, when our Lord said “today,” He did not mean the final resurrection thousands of years in the future. Also, the Bible never says that the soul goes to sleep. When the body dies, it *appears* to be asleep. That is what is meant. Likewise, a dead body is not conscious of its surroundings. That reality, however, does not negate the fact that upon death the souls of the redeemed go immediately to heaven.

It also disproves secular humanism or materialism which teaches that at death the soul ceases to exist forever. This satanic idea (which is based solely upon a presupposition or a blind faith in anti-Christian secular science) is responsible for countless people casting off all ethical restraint in order to serve their selfish lusts. After all, if death ends everything, then is it not logical to live like a beast and say “let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor. 15:32)? Not only does our Lord’s statement refute such thinking, but the atheistic view of death renders all concepts of justice and meaning null and void. If the destiny of the human race is to turn into compost and afterward be destroyed by a supernova, then all human history is a meaningless black void: no justice, no memories, no records, no history, no love, and no future—nothing. Such was the thinking of Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Hitler. Such thinking leads directly to abortion, human fetal experimentation, euthanasia, the death camps of Auschwitz and the Gulag Archipelago.

c) It refutes the idea of *Sheol* as a shadowy underworld. Modernist scholars often teach that the Old Testament term *Sheol* or the New Testament word *Hades* refers to an abode for the dead that is neither heaven nor hell. Some see *Sheol* as divided into two compartments, one for the righteous dead—Paradise; the other for the wicked—*Gehenna*. A study of Scripture, however, reveals that the terms do not contradict the New Testament teaching regarding heaven and hell. A study of the terms *Sheol* and *Hades* reveals that they are not always used in the same

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<sup>36</sup> Alfred Nevin, *Popular Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke*, 669.

sense. They can be used in an abstract sense to designate the state of death or the grave. “Since both believers and unbelievers at the termination of their life enter into the state of death, it can be said figuratively that they are without distinction in *sheol* or *hades*. They all alike are in the state of death”<sup>37</sup> (cf. 1 Sam. 2:6; Job 14:13, 14; 17:13, 14; Ps. 87:48; Hos. 13:14; *hades*, cf. Ac. 2:27, 31; Rev. 6:8; 20:28). “There are also several passages in which *sheol* and *hades* seem to designate the grave... (Gen. 37:25; 42:38; 44:29; 29:31; 1 Kings 2:6, 9; Job 14:13; 17:13; 21:13; Ps. 6:5; 88:3; Eccl. 9:10).”<sup>38</sup>

*Sheol* or *Hades* can also refer to hell. “And being in torments in Hades, he lifted his eyes and saw Abraham afar off.... Then, he cried and said...I am tormented in this flame” (Lk. 16:23, 24). In Hades the unsaved are fully conscious, with memories and their senses, yet are living in continual torment. Revelation says that after the final judgment everyone who is unsaved and Hades itself will be cast into the lake of fire (20:13-15). “In the Old Testament the word *sheol* is used more often for grave and less often for hell, while in the New Testament the corresponding use of *hades* the contrary holds.”<sup>39</sup>

d) Our Lord’s statement disproves the misleading and unfortunate statement in “the apostles’ creed” that Jesus, after His death on the cross, “descended into hell.” The idea that the Savior descended into hell or the place where unsaved souls are suffering torment is nowhere taught in Scripture and explicitly contradicts the statement, “Today, you will be with Me in Paradise.”

But, someone may ask, doesn’t the King James Version say in Acts 2:27, “you will not leave my soul in hell”? Indeed it does. This translation, however, is inaccurate. The New King James says, “For You will not leave my soul in Hades, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption” (2:27; cf. 2:31). Peter, who quotes Psalm 16:10, is not teaching that our Lord at His death went down to the subterranean region of hell to strike His enemies with terror or proclaim His victory over the devil. In Psalm 16:10 David uses the word *nephesh* which can mean soul, life, a living creature or person.

The following passages refer to the latter: “Whosoever hath killed any *soul*—person” [Num. 31:19]; “Let my *soul*,--let me die the death of the righteous” [Num. 23:10]; and “Let my *soul*, let me die with the Philistines” [Judges 16:30]. The expression, Psalm xvi.10, might be explained in the same sense: “Thou wilt not leave my soul,” that is, MYSELF. But, what is more in point, *Nephesh* signifies even a dead animal, or a corpse: “He that toucheth the dead body of any *man*, shall be unclean seven days” [Num. 19:11]: “Whosoever toucheth *the dead body of any man that is dead*” [Num. 19:13], &c. Innumerable phrases of the same sort might be quoted. Why then may we not, with the venerable Beza, in his first edition of the New Testament, understand at least if not translate, the Psalmist’s expression thus; “Thou wilt not leave my dead body in the grave.” For we have now seen that a dead body is sometimes meant by *Nephesh*; and...*Sheol* sometimes means the grave.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 685.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 686.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>40</sup> Herman Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations on What is Commonly Called the Apostles’ Creed*, Donald Fraser, Translator, (Escondido, CA: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, [1823] 1993), 2:143-144. The Geneva Bible’s translation of this verse is better than the KJV. It reads: “Because thou wilt not leave my soul in [the] grave, neither wilt suffer thine Holy one to see corruption” (Ac. 2:27).

Thus, Acts chapter 2 verses 27 and 31 are teaching that the Savior's body will not be left in the grave and will not be allowed to decay. This fits with the contrast of David in verse 29, "He is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day."

Another passage used as a proof text for the doctrine that Jesus' soul went down to hell after His death is Ephesians 4:9, "Now this, 'He ascended'—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth?" Does the phrase "the lower parts of the earth" refer to hell? No, it does not. Note the following reasons.

(1) Paul is discussing Psalm 68:18. His use of the phrase "into the lower parts of the earth" comes directly from the Old Testament Scriptures. If we examine how this expression is used in the Old Testament, we will see that it does not refer to hell. Psalm 139:15 uses this expression poetically to describe a mother's womb. Isaiah uses it to describe the surface of the earth in opposition to heaven (49:23). Most examples use the expression to describe the grave or being placed in the earth (Ps. 63:9; Ezek. 26:26 and 32:24. In Ezekiel 31:14 we see a poetical progression: "death...the depths of the earth [i.e. the grave]...the Pit [or hell].") Although some commentators see Ezekiel 32:24 ("There is Elam and all her multitude, all around her grave, all of them slain, fallen by the sword, who have gone down uncircumcised to the lower parts of the earth...; now they bear their shame with those who go down to the Pit") as speaking of Hades, it more likely refers to the grave. Note the progression: slain (i.e. death); the lower parts of the earth (i.e. the grave); the Pit (i.e. hell).

(2) There is nothing in the context of Psalm 68:18 or Ephesians 4:8-9 that suggests Christ went into hell. Further, such an interpretation would explicitly contradict the gospels: "Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit" (Lk. 23:46). "Jesus...yielded up His spirit" (Mt. 27:50). "It is finished" (Jn. 19:30). Jesus experienced hell on the cross not when He was in the tomb, even though His physical body was still in a state of humiliation. "Today, shalt thou be with me in Paradise" (Lk. 23:43). "Nor is there any hint of it in Phil. 2 or, for that matter, anywhere else in Paul's epistles. According to the Gospels the dying Christ committed his soul to the Father. On the day of resurrection it was restored to the body from which it had been taken."<sup>41</sup> Ephesians 4:9 refers to the incarnation of Christ with an emphasis on our Lord's humiliation. The Savior had to descend (cf. Jn. 3:13; 6:33, 38; 6:41, 42, 50, 51, 58) and suffer humiliation (Phil. 2:7ff.) before He was glorified and before He ascended to sit at the right hand of God.

Perhaps, the most common text in support of the idea that Jesus went into hell after His sacrifice is 1 Peter 3:19-20: "By whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is eight souls were saved through water."

That our Lord did not preach to the wicked dead after His death is proven by the following remarks.

a) The disobedient people who were preached to are identified not as all the wicked dead, but only those "in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared" (1 Pet. 3:20). If this passage teaches that the Savior went to the infernal region to preach, then why does it only include people who lived during the 120 years prior to the flood? "The reference to the time of Noah is of course explicit and obvious."<sup>42</sup>

b) The context (verse 18—"by the Spirit") indicates that Christ did not preach to the people of Noah's day in His incarnate human nature, but that His Spirit preached. This means

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<sup>41</sup> William Hendriksen, *Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967, 68), 2:192, footnote 111.

<sup>42</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *A Commentary on First and Second Peter* (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, [1967, 72] 1993), 130.

that Jesus was preaching to the people of the antediluvian world by the Spirit through Noah. Therefore, verse 19 must mean that He went and preached to the disembodied spirits who are *now* in prison. “That is, the men to whom Noah preached are now in Peter’s day suffering their just recompense. This is not just a guess, but is based on Peter’s manner of speech. In 4:6 we shall see that the Gospel was preached to certain people who are now dead.”<sup>43</sup>

c) The word translated “preached” (*ekeruxen*) in the New Testament almost always refers to the preaching of the gospel or the proclamation of salvation. There are no examples of this word being used for a judicial announcement of judgment. Indeed, 2 Peter 2:5 refers to Noah as “a preacher of righteousness.” Any idea that our Lord preached the gospel to the people in hell, limbo or purgatory is unscriptural and must be rejected. The Bible teaches that there are no second chances for those who die without Christ. “It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27). Further, Scripture indicates that the public vindication of Jesus against all His dead and living enemies will be on the day of judgment, not while His human body was still in a state of humiliation (e.g., Mt. 25:31-46).

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 129.