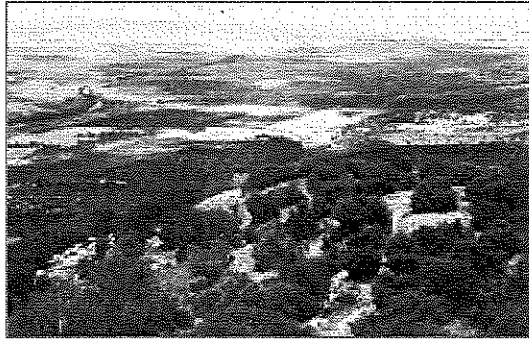


In no uncertain terms, the dying thief believed the gospel. He believed that Jesus was the Son of God and that He died for sinners and would rise again.

GRACE IN ACTION

Lesson From A Dying Thief



A young man who had just trusted Christ as Savior was emotional and eager to tell others about his experience. He read a gospel tract and noticed a “sinner's prayer” on the back. “If I can get people to pray this prayer, will they be saved?” he asked.

I was tempted to say, “Yes, if they really mean it.” But instead, I picked up the Bible and led him to the story of the dying thieves (Lk. 23:39-43). It's one of the most dramatic and heart-warming stories to illustrate the gospel of grace, and provide an important lesson on faith.

The passage is about two criminals who were being crucified along with Christ. Both asked Him for help, but only one received it. Both “prayed” to be “saved” – but only one made it into Paradise. What was the difference? Their faith. One believed in Christ and the other did not.

At first glance, it would appear that the one thief was saved by his prayer. But a closer examination of the text reveals he was saved like everyone else – by faith alone, in Christ alone. His prayer was prompted by what he believed about Christ. It was simply an expression of his faith. He believed on Christ as Savior and showed it by calling to Him for salvation.

That said, let's take a closer look at what the believing thief thought about the man who was dying next to him.

He Believed Jesus Was God In The Flesh

Faith in the deity of Jesus was first noted in the form of a rebuke: “But the other criminal rebuked him: ‘Do you not even fear God?’” (Lk. 23:40 NIV). The believing thief made it clear that he believed Christ to be God – an essential to being saved by faith. His faith in Jesus as God is also seen in his prayer: “And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me” (Lk. 23:42 KJV).

The thief also acknowledged Him as a man: “This man has done nothing wrong” (Lk. 23:41). In short, he believed that Jesus was who He claimed to be: the Son of God manifested in the flesh. But that wasn't all.

He Believed Jesus Was Innocent

Whether the thief believed in Jesus' sinless perfection or perfect holiness is not clearly stated. However, such a belief may be suggested by the simple fact that he believed in His deity. After all, it would be hardly thinkable for him to trust in a deity tainted with sin. At any rate, the thief specifically stated that Jesus was not guilty of any crimes: “This man has done nothing wrong.” Indeed, Jesus was the Lamb without spot or blemish. He was tempted in all points as we are, yet without sin. He was innocent in the strictest sense of the term: “He made Him (Jesus) who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

He Believed Jesus Was Dying

The believing thief could actually see Jesus dying on the cross. He didn't think for a moment that the death was a hoax or that the person dying was a fake. In rebuking the other thief, he said, “You are under the same sentence of condemnation” as Jesus. That suggests that Jesus, the Son of God, was actually dying – something He had to do to fulfill Scripture and because of His love for humanity.

Notice that the first thief wanted Jesus to come down from the cross and save Himself along with the thieves. He obviously was clueless about the supreme importance of Christ's death. Had he known or believed Scripture, he would have known that Jesus came to die.

On the other hand, Christ's death was fully accepted by the second thief. He knew Jesus was dying, but said nothing about stopping the process. Why? He apparently looked beyond the cross and saw something that was hidden from

the first thief. For he obviously believed there was a purpose in Jesus' death: "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6).

He Believed Jesus Would Rise Again

The term "resurrection" is not mentioned in this story, yet it is implied in the prayer of the believing thief: "And he was saying, 'Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!'" (Lk. 23:42). Some manuscripts read, "... come with your kingly power."¹ The thief believed that though Jesus was dying, His death was in no way final. Unlike the others who believed that Jesus was a failure and that it was all over, the thief believed He would rise to power and rule in His kingdom.

Now think about it. Such an achievement is only possible through One who has the power over death, and that is Jesus – the resurrection and the life. One writer makes this striking analysis of Luke 23:42-43: "The dying criminal had more faith than the rest of Jesus' followers put together. Although the disciples continued to love Jesus, their hopes for the Kingdom were shattered ... By all appearances the Kingdom was finished. How awe-inspiring is the faith of this man (the thief) who alone saw beyond the present shame to the coming glory!"²

In no uncertain terms, the dying thief believed the gospel. He believed that Jesus was the Son of God and that He died for sinners and would rise again. For only a living Savior can rule in the kingdom.

He Believed Jesus Would Save Him

The believing thief prayed a simple prayer and was saved. He said, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" And Jesus answered: "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Lk. 23:42-43).

It's interesting to note that the thief did not promise to commit himself to Jesus or to stop sinning. After all, he was dying. Still, no mention was made of baptism, repentance, commandments or any such thing that people deem important. He didn't even pray a "sinner's prayer." Instead, he simply asked Jesus to remember him. And Jesus did just that. It is clear now that in addition to believing all the other important factors about Jesus, the dying thief also believed in His power and willingness to save him.

Conclusion

This Bible story illustrates the simplicity of the gospel of grace. It shows that God's salvation is a gift freely given to anyone who asks for it in simple faith. Prayer may be seen as an expression of faith in requesting the gift, but it is faith alone in Christ alone that actually secures it. Some people, like the first thief, may ask for salvation in disbelief, even mockery. They will be disappointed. But those who believe will be saved.

So in response to the young man who asked about the "sinner's prayer" on the back of a gospel tract, my answer was simple: People will not be saved because they pray a certain prayer. They will only be saved when they put their trust in Christ alone as Savior. That is the lesson from a dying thief.

END NOTES

1. See *The NIV Study Bible* note on p. 1586.
2. See *The Life Application New Testament* note on p. 225.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Roscoe Barnes III is a chaplain with the Good News Jail and Prison Ministry. He is assigned to the Baltimore, Maryland Bureau of Corrections, where He works with approximately 1200 inmates.*

[Return to Contents Page](#)