

Saving Faith

Mark Heath, 2 Sep 2004

Luke 23:39–43 “One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.””

This short conversation between Jesus and the two criminals who were crucified either side of him has become one of the most well loved texts in church history. One reason for this is that it gives us great hope for our friends and family who are not saved. If they, like the second criminal, turn to Jesus, even hours before their death, then they can be saved.

The other reason is that it removes any lingering doubts in our minds that you somehow might have to earn your salvation. Nowhere is the doctrine of salvation by faith alone more clearly demonstrated. The criminal had lived an unrighteous life, and had no opportunity to perform any good deeds to earn his salvation. He was not baptised, didn't take communion, didn't join a cell group, and didn't tithe. His salvation was entirely a free gift, completely undeserved.

But we should beware of simply looking at this text and concluding “just call out to Jesus to be saved, even on your deathbed and you can be sure of going to heaven”. This is an extremely dangerous way to think. To decide to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a while and then turn to Jesus for salvation at the last minute is utterly reckless and may well prove impossible. Whether you count yourself a Christian or not, this passage has some crucial teaching on what is involved in salvation.

A Futile Plea

We need to look carefully at the words of the first criminal. Here was a man who was dying. He was desperate. If there was any way he could have escaped this agonising death he would have taken it. And next to him was the one who had claimed to be the Christ. It was worth a try. He calls out to Jesus, “You're the Christ, aren't you?”. This is surely a good start. He was willing to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the saviour sent by God. And then he asks Jesus to “save” him.

Now how many times have you heard someone explain that to become a Christian all you need to do is to “believe in Jesus” and ask him to save you? Well that is pretty much exactly what the first criminal did. But he was not saved. His cry for salvation actually did not amount to much more than the mocking of the onlooking rulers who were taunting Jesus saying “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” (Luke 23:35). So merely asking to be saved did not help him.

Clear Insight

So what did the second criminal do that was different? His rebuke to the first criminal shows that he had three important insights.

i) The need to fear God

All three of them had been tried, sentenced and crucified by the Romans, but he realised that it was God who was the Most High Judge. Escaping the cross would not mean getting away with your crime. After death they would face the living God. The first criminal feared pain, and he feared death, but he did not fear God. It's not just atheists who don't fear God. Many people go through religious rituals simply as "fire insurance" – they don't want hell so they sign up for salvation but don't care about doing anything beyond the bare minimum required to get them into heaven. They make sure that they go to confession once in a while, or pray a prayer, or attend communion, or whatever else they think will keep God happy, but the rest of the time, they live for themselves. Basically, they don't fear God.

ii) The need for genuine repentance

The second criminal willingly admitted that he was guilty. He made no excuses for himself, as can be seen from the fact that he even acknowledges that he deserved his punishment. Here was someone who was not just upset that things had turned out badly for him. He saw that the consequences of his sin were actually deserved. If repentance is about a change of direction, then this man clearly in his heart was repentant. He couldn't undo what he had already done, but knew what way he now ought to go. John the Baptist knew that a mere claim to have repented may not actually be genuine – people needed to "bear fruit in keeping with repentance". (Matt 3:8). It is possible to grieve over your sin, but not come to repentance. 2 Cor 7:10 says "For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death."

iii) The sinlessness of Jesus

It appears that this criminal knew a few things about Jesus. Perhaps he had heard some of his teaching. Possibly he had overheard some of Jesus' trial. But he knew enough to know that not only did Jesus not deserve crucifixion, he didn't deserve any punishment whatsoever. He literally had done "nothing wrong". Like the sacrificial lambs in the Old Testament which could have no defect if they were to be offered for sin, Jesus was a perfect sacrifice. In fact, he was what the Old Testament sacrifices were pointing to. He was the only human ever to have lived without sinning, and therefore the only one who could possibly make atonement for the sins of others. It was a realisation of Jesus' sinlessness that gave him the confidence that Jesus could in fact offer him salvation from the judgement that was to come.

The Cry of Faith

But what the second criminal says next is incredible. He asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom. What could he have meant by that? Jesus was quite clearly about to die, and so was he. He obviously believed that death was not going to be the end for either of them. Most probably he believed, like the Pharisees (Acts 23:8) and Martha (John 11:24) in the resurrection of the dead. That God would raise the righteous to life and the unrighteous to judgement (John 5:29). And perhaps he was expecting to be counted among the unrighteous.

Not only though did he expect both himself and Jesus to experience life again, after death, but that Jesus would be vindicated by God. The kingdom would be Jesus' kingdom, not just the kingdom of God. This is what believing in Jesus is all about. It's not just believing he existed, or even that he rose from the dead, but that he is the rightful king of the world. This criminal saw by faith that Jesus' death was not the end but the beginning, not a defeat but a victory. He knew that Jesus really could offer him salvation.

Today in Paradise

So the difference between the two criminals should be very obvious by now. The first had no real respect for Jesus, even though he might be willing to accept he was the Christ. The second firmly believed that Jesus was indeed the sinless Messiah who would soon be crowned as king. The first regretted his sin only because of its consequences, while the second acknowledged that he was a sinner with no excuse before a holy God. The first asked Jesus to save him but doubted that Jesus could even save himself. The second had every confidence in Jesus and asked for whatever mercy he might be willing to offer. To the first, Jesus offered nothing whatsoever, but to the second, he promised Paradise.

But what did Jesus mean by saying “Today, you will be with me in Paradise”? Clearly Jesus himself was confident that there was life after death, and if there was ever anyone qualified to speak on what happens after death, it is Jesus. Though his body would remain dead in the tomb until the third day, his spirit would be very much alive. The precise activities of Jesus during those days remain something of a mystery with only some enigmatic hints in Scripture (see 1 Pet 3:18-20). But it appears to have been a time of great triumph. The Father accepted the sacrifice for sin, the devil was dealt a mortal blow, and victory was proclaimed in hell. God then raised him back to life with a resurrection body and he appeared to many disciples before returning to heaven to sit at the right hand of God.

So after death, there is a period of waiting, in an intermediate state. We do not yet have our new bodies, but we are not unconscious. Those who are not saved must wait for judgement, whilst those who are can watch God’s plan of salvation unfold (Heb 12:1) and wait for the second coming (Rev 6:10) and the new heavens and the new earth, when they will be given their new resurrection body (1 Cor 15:44).

Notice also how Jesus begins his sentence. It was a phrase he often used: “I’m telling you the truth”. It could be paraphrased “You can be absolutely sure of this” or “Take my word for it”. This was no casual promise; salvation was assured. And if Jesus gives you his word, then there can be no doubting that it will happen.

Now is the Time

So what does this mean for us? We first need to test ourselves that we do not have the casual approach to salvation of the first criminal. Are we really trusting Jesus, or do we trust money most of the time and just have Jesus as a backup plan for if things get really bad? Have we truly repented of our sin, evidenced by a change of heart and constant battle to do what is right, or do we simply regret the way that things sometimes turn out bad for us when we sin? Do we fear God, or do we act most of the time as if he does not exist? Is Jesus our king and master, or just an impressive character from history?

Two men cried out to Jesus for salvation, but only one of them got it. Only one had what is known as “saving faith”. It’s a supernatural work of God in a person’s heart that enables them to truly repent and genuinely trust Jesus for their salvation. If you have not reached that point yet, then you must not delay. Now is the time to be saved (2 Cor 6:2). Don’t assume that sometime closer to your death you can suddenly repent and believe. It was not possible for the first criminal and it may not be possible for you.

There are warnings in Scripture that people can be hardened to such a degree that repentance is no longer possible for them. This happened to some Pharisees (Mark 3:29; John 12:37-40), it happened to Esau (Heb 12:17) and there is only one way to ensure that it does not happen to you. You have to respond now. While God is calling there is hope, but if you harden your heart and decide to wait you may have thrown away your last opportunity. Only a fool would say, "I'll take you up on this offer later".

Conclusion

So we have seen in this passage the wonderful news that salvation is a free gift, not requiring a period of serving God, but given even in the closing moments of life. But we have seen also that there must be genuine repentance and true faith in Jesus. Both of these require a work of God in the heart, so don't assume you can just automatically make them happen later. If God is speaking to you now, then grab the opportunity with all your heart.

And if you are praying for someone you know, then take heart, because God is able to save even at the very end of their lives. And if you get the opportunity, warn them lovingly that it is a matter of urgency that they repent and believe.