

Full Assurance of Faith

"But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost thou not 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."

THESE words, recorded by Luke (23:40-42), came from the repentant thief on the cross. Some say the repentant thief had nothing to lose by believing—that for him to believe, while his doom on the cross was certain, was the best thing he could do for himself. Such reasoning makes it sound as though he HAD to believe—that belief was easy and natural—and that his repentance was not freely and sincerely from the heart, but self-interest. It is also contended that his repentance was based on very little knowledge of God's plan of salvation.

But such was not the case, as a fair consideration of all the facts shows. The other thief did not believe, nor repent, even after Jesus had promised salvation to the first, and even after the first appealed to the second to consider his position before God. There were 2 thieves crucified with Christ, one on his right, and one on his left. One repented; the other did not.

Both thieves on their crosses understood that this Jesus might be "Lord" and "King" and "Messiah." They knew of his claims, and of the charges against him. But only one of them eventually did believe these things. And he, believing, rebuked the other—

"Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?"

And he showed his faith and made his confession by saying—

"Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy Kingdom!"

At the beginning of this triple crucifixion, we are given to understand (by Matthew & Mark) that these 2 thieves had the same mocking spirit as did the people, rulers, priests and soldiers—

"The THIEVES also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth" . . . "And they that were crucified with him reviled him."

What were the allegations of the mocking and reviling of Jesus as he hung on the cross? A composite of parts of Luke 23, Matt. 27 & Mark 15 (John gives no details on this) tells us of the things charged in these revilings by the people and the thieves—

"And THEY THAT PASSED BY reviled him, wagging their heads, & saying, Thou that destroyest the Temple and buildest it in 3 days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross. . .

"And the RULERS also with them derided him. . .

"Likewise also the CHIEF PRIESTS mocking him, with the SCRIBES and ELDERS, saying, He saved others: let him save himself, if he be the Christ, the chosen of God. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God: let Him deliver him now, if He will have him, for he said, I am the Son of God. .

"And the SOLDIERS also mocked him, coming to him and offering him vinegar, and saying, If thou be the King of the Jews, save thyself. . .

"The THIEVES also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth."

There is a whole storehouse of knowledge in these words, no doubt repeated a number of times and more fully expressed, during the period Jesus was on the cross, especially during the first 3 hours while it was light. The many things expressed in these revilings are the things of the Gospel, the things of the Kingdom of God and the Name of Jesus Christ.

So, concerning the thief who repented, when we ask, "What did he believe when he repented?—we are not at a loss to answer. For those who mocked and reviled Jesus on the cross, including the 2 thieves who were crucified with him, were declaring God's truth—though none of

them believed—that Jesus was the Son of God; that he was the Christ or Anointed One, the Chosen of God; that he was the King of Israel and King of the Jews; and that God's promises to both David and Abraham would be fulfilled in him as their promised Seed; that he could destroy the Temple at Jerusalem and build it in 3 days (but actually, of course, Jesus predicted that the Jews would deliver him up to the Gentiles to be destroyed, but he would rise from the dead on the 3rd day); that he "saved others"; and that in connection with his sacrificial death the repentant thief would believe that only through death, the crucifixion of sinful flesh in Jesus, could eternal life come as the gift of God through the resurrected Christ.

Truly, this was the one and only Hope for sinful, mortal, perishing mankind, such as this convicted, condemned robber hanging on the cross. This was indeed the Hope of Israel, to be fulfilled when the crucified but resurrected Christ came into his Kingdom here on earth, to reign in glory where he suffered in shame. The repentant thief came to believe that Christ would save sinners, and he confessed his repentance & his faith in Jesus, saying—

"Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy Kingdom!"

To which he who "saved others" replied—

"Verily I say unto thee today thou shalt be with me in Paradise."

But the unrepentant thief was demanding of Jesus—

"If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us."

This is the same proof wanted by those who were crucifying Jesus. All classes were demanding the same evidence from Jesus as proof that he was the Son of God and King of Israel, and the one who "saved others" and would in 3 days rebuild the Temple.

So all these different classes of people joined in mocking and reviling Jesus, urging him to save himself—that is, they did not believe he could do so. But of all the mocking company, only one believed and obeyed—had faith: the thief who repented.

The idea, then, that the repentant thief had to believe, that it was easy and natural to believe, because of the hopeless circumstances he was in—the belittling "nothing to lose" theory—has no foundation in the facts of the case, since the other thief, in identical circumstances, did not repent and believe. His repentance & belief were deeply sincere and freely confessed.

This is the great lesson to us concerning the two thieves on the cross with Jesus: under the same circumstances and opportunities one believed and the other did not.

One would think that, if anything, both thieves should have continued railing on Jesus, because they appear to be comrade malefactors, both guilty of condemnation, and in their plight should have found affinity together to the bitter end. Or else, we might expect them to accuse one another to the bitter end, each blaming the other for the plight they were in.

The repentant thief may have had a fear of God before he was crucified. Note his significant remark to the other—

"Dost not thou FEAR GOD?"

While he joined in the common reviling of Jesus at the beginning of their ordeal, he was moved to shame at his remarks; then to utter humility and groping repentance; and finally to faith in Jesus. And he put his confession of faith into words revealing much:

"Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy Kingdom."

This was true salvation to the repentant thief, God's salvation through His Anointed One, in that Kingdom to be established.

But the unbelieving thief wanted his one proof: that Jesus keep them from dying on their crosses; that he be saved there and then. That thief did not want to "bear his cross," and die thereon. He wanted a continuation of his present life now, rather than believe in eternal life in the future in Jesus' Kingdom.

The repentant thief made no such demand. In faith born out of conviction of the Truth, he understood that Jesus Messiah must die on the cross and, after 3 days, rise from the dead, and at some future day come into his Kingdom here on the earth.

Does this unique incident of the repentant thief sanction what is called "death-bed repentance," and thereby teach us that baptism is not necessary for salvation? Certainly not.

Death-bed repentance is a matter of, at the last moment, "accepting Jesus as your personal Saviour." As we have seen, there was a lot more to the thief's repentance and faith, even in believing in Jesus as Messiah, the King of the Jews to sit on David's restored throne in the restored Kingdom of Israel, and that the flesh must be crucified.

This was certainly not "death-bed repentance" as that term is normally understood, but rather a complete & sincere repentance that was a full development of understanding God's Truth, joined with faith in a crucified and dying—but to be resurrected—Jesus, and accepting death on the cross as his probation to the end of his mortal life—a faith that went against all present appearances, perceiving the true divine realities when close disciples lost hope.

Also, this unique case of the repentant thief on the cross is not meant to be for us an example of salvation without baptism. Baptism into Christ was not required for salvation until after Christ had risen from the dead. THEN the command went forth for believers of the Gospel to be baptized into Jesus' Saving Name for the remission of their past sins.

On the cross with the repentant malefactor, Jesus' sacrifice was not yet complete. He had to rise from the dead before baptism was preached in his Name. This remission of sins even included those who had crucified their Prince, to whom we are told, Peter said on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:36)—

"Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom YE HAVE CRUCIFIED, both Lord & Christ."

And their reaction to his words, and his subsequent exhortation—

"Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said to Peter & the rest of the apostles, Men & brethren, what shall we do?"

"Then Peter said to them, Repent and be baptized every one of you in the Name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" (vs. 37-38).

Thus we find that the command to be baptized into the Name of Jesus Christ was not proclaimed till "Pentecost was fully come." At the time the thief on the cross believed, baptism into Christ was not a requisite for salvation, but for us it is required.

And those who believe must not only be baptized, but must arise from the waters of baptism to newness of life. The flesh must be crucified. As Jesus said in Luke 9:23 —

"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and TAKE UP HIS CROSS daily, and follow me."

The unrepentant thief did not want to die on the cross. The repentant thief, in faith, accepted it. For his remaining hours on the cross (his legs later broken with clubs to assure his death), he would endure all in patience, and die in faith.

While this believing thief did not have to be baptized by water into the Saving Name of Jesus, we do see him "taking up his cross" and following Jesus to death by crucifixion. Truly, he was nailed to the cross against his will—he did not want to die at the beginning, let alone die the terrible death of a cross—but now that he believed on Jesus, he willingly endured the cross in faith. The unrepentant thief met his doom unbelieving, and unwilling to suffer and die on the cross.

So Jesus prayed on the cross —

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."
—leaving the door of hope capable of being opened by the repentance and obedience of his betrayers and murderers. So surely the same door was to be opened by the thief's repentance and faith and confession. And this forgiving spirit saturated Jesus' whole being as the Saviour, so that he kept saying—repeating—

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Likewise the thief's words, when he said to Jesus—

"Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy Kingdom."

Here too, as with Jesus' prayer for forgiveness of his betrayers and murderers, the verb is imperfect, indicated that the thief repeated his request to Jesus a number of times. The thief was indeed persistent. This is now the repentant thief's fixed state of mind—the spirit of his mind. We remember that Jesus on some occasions did not grant a request immediately, to bring out and manifest the steadfastness of the supplicant.

Can we then imagine the wonderful transformation in the penitent thief's mind?—from a mind of complete despair, a criminal death, seeing no hope of release from certain doom: then transformed to a mind of faith and hope in Christ and God's Kingdom, so that on believing he now kept saying—

"Lord, REMEMBER ME when thou comest into thy Kingdom."

The repentant thief's mind and whole being was now saturated with this one thought, full of faith, so that he now believed—perhaps more deeply, wholly and vividly than you or I believe—that he would be remembered by Jesus when he came into his Kingdom.

—N.M.
