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"A THIEF DEFENDS THE FAITH"

Luke 23:32-43

This indeed is a strange story. A recent newspaper article revealed a startling figure, in which a reporter in the state of Oklahoma listed all of the convicted bank robbers in the state during a 12 month period. He then divided the total amount of their take by the total number of years of their combined prison sentences. This revealed that their individual income for bank robbery amounted to approximately \$400 per year. Now that is not a very high salary for such dangerous and evil work.

When Jesus died, he was crucified between two thieves. And one of these thieves died, he too, left the world with nothing, and very little to show for his life. Yet the other thief died with everything. Not material substance but with that which indeed meant life. And this truly is the difference between the two men and the message that we would like for you to receive today.

There are three men dying on Calvary that day. One man died for sin. One man died in sin. And one man died to sin. Another way of looking at the situation that day, is, there is a cross of rebellion. And then there was the cross of repentance, and then there was the cross of redemption.

There is an old story of Clovis - King, who upon hearing for the first time the account of the crucifixion of Jesus, cried out in deep emotion - "If I had been there with my Army, I would have avenged this wrong!" But only one voice was lifted up that day and it was a strange voice that was raised in defense of the cross. And it was a thief who was dying by the side of Jesus. And he became a man who defended the faith.

We do not hear that John, James, or Peter were there. They surely would have been qualified to defend Jesus. But because of their fear, there was only a thief that was left to champion the cause of that dark hour. Now we may see this man in three or four different ways.

V, 33 There are in Verse 33, when they came to the place, they crucified him with the male factors - one on the right hand and the other on the left. When Jesus came to die, he died in the midst of enemies. And this defender of the faith was one of the enemies. He was a sinner of the lowest type. He was definitely against Jesus at the beginning. Luke describes him as a male factor, a criminal, a lawless man. He had put God out of account. He had no respect for his fellowman. And he was interested in having his own way at any cost. No one thought of coming to his defense. Because society had determined to put him away.

There is little doubt that this thief joined in the reproach of Jesus at the beginning. Matthew and Mark tell us that both thieves reproached Jesus. The thief blasphemed and reviled Christ at the beginning. Both men joined the crowd in the reproach of Jesus. But here is one man who changed. Instead of reviling Jesus, he began to defend him. He began to associate with him.

The crucifiers placed Jesus between these two and this is the strange turn of events, of that day, for in all probability these two thieves had been scheduled to be crucified along with their leader Barabbas. But because of the unexpected choice of the Jews, Barabbas was set free, and Jesus was crucified in his place. Now these two men had followed a dream. And it was false. And it was tragic in its result. The Jews were putting Christ to death. Some of them had their dreams frustrated, and they thought Christ would be a military King, and rule the world, and capture all other nations. And that is why the Jews were quick to follow revolutionary groups. The Roman's made short work of them by either killing them or else driving them to the mountains where they became bandits and robbers. Barabbas was such a false Messiah, and these two thieves were probably followers of this dream.

Perhaps I speak to someone who is following this idea. Maybe in your dreams and in your pursuits you are not seeking the greatest in life and the best in life. And you are trying to realize perhaps knowledge, wealth, power, or abundant life through selfishness. But Solomn discovered vanity and vexation of spirit in this sort of thing. And it

will happen to you.

The point for emphasis is that every defender of the faith was once his enemy - either active or passive. Now this is remarkable. It shows that Christ has won his victory after sin had gained a total triumph. Now there are countless examples of this.

For example the story of Gilbert West and Lord Lyttelton. They were brilliant young men who were determined to demonstrate the character of the Scriptures. West agreed to make a careful study of the resurrection of Jesus and prove once and for all that it never happened. Lyttelton agreed that he would take from the same record, The Bible, the conversion of Paul. Now they parted and they made an appointed time to come back and compare notes. When they met again, they had the truth. But it was far different from what they set out to find. West, on the basis of the evidence, had become convinced of the fact of the resurrection of Jesus. Lyttelton, likewise, on the basis of evidence concluded that Paul actually was converted just as the New Testament recorded it.

V.39 Verse 39 - The common reaction from the two men was that they join the mob and they blamed Jesus for this. Like so many people today. They had left God out of their scheme of life. They had went on their way, the wrong way, and now they were blaming him.

It is interesting to note that both of these men began to pray to Jesus. For instance, one of them blasphemed him saying, if thou be the Christ, save thy self and us. Now this means, he introduced his so called prayer with a curse. And he tentatively recognizes Jesus as the Christ. Sometime before this, Peter had said, thou art the Christ and the thief used exactly the same words except he put a negative thing here - literally, art thou not the Christ. What Peter stated was a declaration. The thief put it in the form of a question. Save thy self and us. He merely regarded Jesus as one of three men nailed to a cross. But if he were really the Christ, he could do something about it. Otherwise, he had no interest in Jesus.

Now another thing to notice is, the salvation that he spoke about had nothing to do with his soul. He simply wanted to get down off of the cross. There is no evidence of repentance here. He merely wanted to get out of his present situation. He would have gone right on in his sinful ways. And he asked Jesus, who commanded him, he knew nothing of the Grace of the Son of God. Now Jesus could not grant this man's prayer and be the Saviour, because he was dying on the cross for the sins of the world. For in truth he was held to it not by nails and spikes, but by the saving will of God.

Actually the man kept saying over and over. Save thyself and us. And he was saying this with his last dying gasp. But it was of no avail. But he prayed without faith and he prayed for the wrong things. And he crossed over into the threshold of Hell. With this prayer on his lips.

V.40 Verse 40 - We read that the other thief was enraged with this and under went a change. Now, as Pilate, who was not ignorant of what the Jews would not see and what the first thief could not see, the second thief could see. Somehow, he was able to see the light and Heaven broke through into his soul and he saw Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God. And he saw the sinless one dying for the sinful and he recognized this great fact.

V.42 Verse 42 - The Bible tells us that he said, Lord, remember me. And this was a prayer that he kept repeating. And he kept saying, Lord, remember me. He recognized him as Lord. Now this time of Jesus is most significant. The former thief addressed him in his prayer to Christ for a political reason, and personal reason. But the latter prayer to Jesus was meaning Jehovah, is Salvation. Spiritual Salvation. He spoke not as an equal to a fellow sufferer but he spoke as a sinner to the Saviour. He said nothing in the world about coming down from the cross. He was staring death in the face. He still regarded Jesus as the Saviour. His greatest need was not escaping physical death at that moment but was to receive eternal life.

Now his earthly dreams had all collapsed. And he asked only to be remembered when he should reach the Kingdom - remember me. Jesus, remember me.

What in this picture do you find in yourself. Are you one of those individuals who has gone astray in your thinking, concerning Jesus Christ.

V. 41 He had changed, Verse 41. He was willing to face his own crimes. He said this man hath done nothing amiss. How did the thief know this. In all probability this was the first time the thief had ever seen Jesus. Even if he had heard about him before. And yet he comes to say that he could not see anything wrong in this man. Now he possesses some amazing information about Jesus. When he joined them on the way to Calvary, no doubt, part of this came out in the experience they had while they were being nailed to the cross.

For one thing, the first time this thief looked upon the amazing sight of a man submitting himself to the crucifixion without protest, without cursing, this was new and extraordinary and gained his attention. His body was in pain - for no doubt this thief had watched other people be crucified.

V. 34 Verse 34 - I think another thing that helped this thief in coming to defend the faith was when he heard Jesus pray the most remarkable prayer ever uttered. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. Now the original Greek indicates that Jesus repeated that prayer more than once, during those awful moments. And this enabled the thief to understand this strange man on the other cross next to him. He was not praying for himself as one might expect. He was wholly concerned about other people. His crucifiers and perhaps his companions on the other crosses. No ordinary man could pray like that, at a time like that, without confessing personal sin. But this man talked to the Father. He was guiltless in his sight.

And strange as it may seem, the mocking words of the Priest furnished the key that unlocked the mystery. They had called him a King. And they made mentioned the Messiah. And that was it. And if he saw clearly now that by his side was the suffering servant of Israel. And so he wanted to speak forth his new found faith. This man had done nothing out of the way. And we thank God for this testimony.

V.40 Verse 40 - This man offers a rebuke to the other thief at Calvary. The blasphemer needs to be rebuked and hence, as all believers should rebuke sin and defend the faith. The one thief foolishly ignored the disaster that was coming. And he pushed Jesus away from him. Do you not fear God cried the rebuker. You must stand before God soon - are you not afraid to stand before him.

Fear is a God-given instinct, it will befriend a man if a man will allow you to do so. The fear of standing before God with sins unforgiven ought to drive men to tears and also to repentance. The fear of infinite justice. And the fear of the pains of Hell and the fear of everlasting death.

Are you not afraid of the consequences of treating Christ as you do. Indeed you ought to be. Seeing that thou art under the same condemnation.

Thou are in the same condemnation. We might ask did this man understand what he was saying. There was a deep significance in his words. Christ's condemnation of the cross might have been so completely identified with the thief's condemnation that the two would have appeared before the bar of eternal justice as one. Now here was a blasphemer with his great guilt. And he was bringing upon him, not only the crucifixion, at the hands of men, but he was bringing upon him God's condemnation to spiritual death and to Hell. And Jesus had no part in his guilt. But Jesus at this moment was suffering that the thief's eternal condemnation might pass and that he might be his substitute. He could have escaped by the mercy of God if he had been willing to accept Christ's condemnation as his own.

Why go to Hell if someone is able and willing to put this out of your future experience. That is what Jesus was doing for these sinners. He was enduring the cross.

Eternal condemnation is a fearful prospect. And apart from God's mercy, there is no escape. It is right. We receive the due reward of our deeds.

V.41 Verse 41 - He declared in defending Christ, we are getting a fit reward. We are getting a appropriate reward. And we will get an appropriate reward for ignoring the Bible. God's love message to our hearts - we'll get our just reward. Because we set

our lives contrary to the laws of divine purpose. Rewards.

What rewards are due to men for trampling under foot, their mother's prayers.
Or what rewards are due men who trample under foot their friend's interest. Who trample the blood of Christ. Who trample God's mercy. Surely the translator could have used some other word than reward. But it was a good word. As a matter of fact, a little translation of what the thief was expressing his faith had to say, was something like this - and we indeed justly for things worthy of things we have done or we duly receiving. Our punishment fits our crime. There is an exact correspondence between our suffering and our former conduct.

Now the rebuke of the penitent fell upon deaf ears because the sinner blasphemed his way into Hell. And he was the biggest fool of all time. In the presence of the Saviour, with a man pleading with him, he continued and refused the testimony and he refused the rebuke of the Redeemed Believer. And he would not change his way of thinking.

V.42 In Verse 42 - We have this man expressing his faith, requesting the Lord to remember him when he entered His Kingdom. Now you contrast this. One man was defending the faith and was pleading for remembrance in the Kingdom of God. He knew that it was an merited reward that if he received help and hope at this time. One man has repented and put his trust in Jesus. The other man refuses to seek his mercy.

The penitent thief suffered with Jesus before he rejoiced with Jesus. He defended the Christ before he heard the word of deliverance. And he endured the agony of the cross in fellowship with Christ.

You remember as Paul speaks as though this matter of suffering with Jesus was something that must take place to get the highest joy with the saviour. Rom. 8:16-18. The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit. We are children of God and if children, then heirs. Heirs of God are joint heirs of Christ. If so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the suffering of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

If so be that if we suffer with him, then we may be also glorified together.

Now that means that we must suffer with him, will the refusal to suffer with and for Christ deprive us of this high degree. Whosoever "doth not bare his cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple". Luke 14:27. Did he really mean it. Paul evidently thought so. For he said what things were gained for me, those I count lost for Christ. That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death. If by any means I might obtain unto the resurrection of the dead. Phil. 3:7-11.

This seems to be the experience of the thief at Calvary. We must suffer along the way. Paul said in 2 Cor. 7:4-17 our light affliction worketh for us in a far more exceeding and eternal weight of Glory. Affliction is a servant. And it is preparing us for the weight of Glory. Will we wear a crown, then let us take up the cross.

There is a story of an old soldier who was a Grecian General, and he was afflicted with disease and had constant pain. Well, he expected death most any moment but he was in every campaign in the hottest part of the battle. He fought to forget his pain and he courted death as a deliverer. One day a physician treated him and he was cured of his disease. But after that, no longer did he seek the front line of battle. Instead, he avoided every danger possible. He wanted comfort from conflict. Whereas his tribulation in his past life caused him to fight.

We can never have true fellowship with Jesus if we avoid the cross where self must be crucified. Fleeting moments of the opportunity, this man became a mighty servant of Jesus. In fact, he came one of the largest leading evangelists on his death bed. The time was definitely short, his hope had just about gone, and he had nothing in his hand. But here is another soul going out to be with Jesus Christ in Glory. How many converts this thief has won only eternity will tell.

If he was able to serve effectively in so short a time, then we cannot excuse ourselves from serving Jesus. If his past life and past evils did not disqualify him to serve Jesus, neither will ours.

V. 43 Verse 43 - not one word did Jesus speak. But here is the word verily translated as

our word Amen. And it means so be it. It put at an end a prayer, an expression of faith. That the petition will be granted. That he will save this great sinner. So Jesus said with this Amen, assured him that his sins were wiped out to be remembered against him no more.

Beloved, if Jesus could do this for one whose hands dripped with blood, then there is no reason why anyone here in this service should despair.

Not because you are worthy but because of God's grace made possible through him, who refused to save himself from the cross. Jesus was not through. He spoke of a Kingdom. Jesus spoke of Paradise, which means Heaven. But Jesus spoke of fellowship with me. For distant events when Jesus should come into his Kingdom. And Jesus said, today thou shall be with me in Paradise. With me thou shalt be, as a companion.

The darkness was as deadly as fog over Calvary that day. But this redeemed thief had the light of God in his soul. He had an anchor - the Rock of Ages. The vale of the temple was rent and he had access to God.

How meaningful is this incident for you and for me. Three men dying on three crosses that day. One man died for sin, another man died in his sin, and another man died to sin. Two men faced a decision - one of them rejected it and went to Hell. The other man accepted the opportunity and went to Heaven. You too must face this decision. And one man who defended the faith was glad and has been rejoicing throughout the ages.

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