

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS SECOND THIEF AND HIS FAITH?

WHAT DID IT MEAN TO THEM

1) We all must make a choice regarding Jesus.

In the passage that we read at the beginning of this study (Luke 23:39-43) we get just a very brief look at the two men that died when Jesus did. We know that one hung on either side of Him, right and left. But beyond that we know nothing about them, until they open their mouths and speak. Even then we know nothing of their backgrounds. Had these men seen Jesus in the cities and country sides as He traveled and spoke? Did they know that He had done miracles? Had they seen the lives that were changed by His love and His life? Had they been raised in Jewish homes and taught to watch for the Messiah's coming?

Both of these men faced certain death and they each had to make a choice that day. One man mocked and rejected Him, sealing his own fate. The other man believed that the Jesus that hung alongside him held salvation within Him and trusted that He was who He claimed to be.

God offers each of us the same choice at some point in our lives. He offers this through the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. Like the criminal that rejected Jesus we have that right to reject Him and His gracious gift. Or like the criminal that believed in Jesus as the Messiah, we can accept the gift. We must make a choice and by choosing to reject Him we've sealed our own fate, like the first criminal.

The words of John, speaking exactly to this choice and the situation of the two criminals, "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:12). We see this profound verse played out in the short story. They each made a choice and it had eternal consequences.

2) No one is beyond hope.

All too often we look at someone we come in contact with and think of them as unreachable for Christ. People seem so far from God that they could never turn their lives over to Him. These people I consider to be like the first thief that was mocking Jesus. We see them all the time on television, those that mock God vocally for all the world to see. We see them online where they can be hidden and still speak their hearts. We so often think, "no hope for them". When I have had those thoughts my mind immediately goes to the Apostle Paul. Here was a man that was out killing Christians in the streets. He was hunting them down, one by one and silencing them. Yet, the man murdering God's own children was not unreachable when He wanted them for His kingdom.

The thief that rebuked the other hanging near him would seem to be one of these people. Some historians believe that this man was most likely a ruthless or violent thug that had been sentenced to die. He wasn't someone that took a coin from someone else, no, he had committed something far more serious to be sentenced to death. Yet, with a single sentence, "remember me when You enter Your kingdom" he was forgiven of all his sins and received eternal life with his savior. With few words the

mighty power of the Love of God redeemed this thief turned saint right then and there, "Today you will be with Me in paradise". (Luke 23:43)

This gives great hope to those of us who have family and friends that would seem as they are unreachable. With the Holy Spirit's work their eyes can be opened like that criminal on the cross and join the brothers and sisters in heaven.

I have experienced the last minute conversion of people on their deathbed. When in their last days they acknowledge that Jesus is who He said He is and He did what He said He did. It is a miraculous event. I am sure that all the angels in heaven were rejoicing. This is what the scripture is talking about when we read, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31)

3) Jesus loves you and I beyond our comprehension.

I remember it like it was yesterday, my dad and I sitting on the edge of his bed and he shared with me the story of Jesus Christ and his love for me. I remember the bedspread, the dressers, walls, it is all so clear, although it happened nearly 55 years ago. As a youth I rededicated my life to Him several times and tried (and failed) to live up to what God wanted of me. My wife lifted me many times through our marriage when I faltered and she held me up before the Lord all the time.

When I was in my 30's I was part of the cast for a local production of the Passion Play. I was one of the disciples and things became a little more real as we worked through scenes. Then when it was time to crucify Jesus and I heard the hammer hitting the spikes, as the actors reproduced the crucifixion, it all became very real to me. He did this all just for me. I cried.

Since that time there have been many productions that have shown what went on. I am sure that none of them really fully demonstrates that true physical pain and emotional and spiritual anguish, they always bring me to my knees and tears to my eyes. That day spent on the cross was far more excruciating than any film production could ever capture. Yet as Jesus was brutally beaten and then nailed to the grotesque cross what did He do? In His last minutes He cried out, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). His final thoughts were on those that would be lost, not on Himself. That is the definition of His love.

4) There is no time between death and new life.

2 Corinthians 5:8 tells us, "but we are of good courage and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord." This would make me believe that there is no time between the two, leaving this body and being in His presence. I've heard the story of when Jesus spoke to the criminals from the cross literally 100+ times. It hit me just recently that Jesus was already welcoming the criminal into His Kingdom. It's like He's saying, "welcome to the family".

For those that know Jesus there is no fear in death. There is nothing to fear as the Bible has made it clear that our suffering ends here as we pass from this life to the next. The Apostle Paul wrote, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). There is no gap in between of being in limbo.

In one of the greatest chapters of the Bible, Romans 8 has so many wonderful insights into a walk with God. In this letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul wrote, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39). If we are left for possibly hundreds of years between our death here on earth and our new life in heaven, we would be separated from God. I believe we can rest on the statement of Jesus when He said, "Today you will be with me in paradise". For those that know Him, there is not fear in death.