



The Thief on the Cross

In Luke 23:39-43, one of the criminals crucified beside Jesus hurled insults at Him, demanding that if He were the Christ He should save Himself and them. The other criminal, however, rebuked his companion, admitted that both of them were receiving the just penalty for their crimes, and then turned to Jesus with a humble plea of faith, “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom!” Jesus answered him with words of stunning grace: “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” In that single exchange we see a dying thief, powerless to perform any good works, make restitution, or live a reformed life, receive the immediate assurance of eternal life. His salvation rested solely on faith in Jesus, not on any deeds he had done or could still do. The account stands as a vivid demonstration that entrance into Heaven comes through trusting Christ alone.

Throughout the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments, it consistently teaches that salvation is by faith and not by works. Habakkuk 2:4 declares, “But the righteous will live by his faith,” a foundational truth later quoted by the apostle Paul. Genesis 15:6 records that Abraham “believed in the Lord; and He credited it to him as righteousness,” showing that God has always accepted people on the basis of faith rather than performance. In the New Testament this principle is stated with unmistakable clarity, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Romans 3:28 affirms, “For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the Law,” while Galatians 2:16 adds that “a person is not justified by works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus.” These passages leave no room for human effort as the basis of acceptance with God.

Jesus Himself is the only way to salvation; no amount of good deeds, religious activity, or moral effort can bridge the gap between sinful humanity and a holy God. He declared plainly, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). The apostles confirmed this exclusive claim, “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under Heaven that has been given among mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Paul further states that “there is one God, and one Mediator also between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5). Good works may be the natural fruit of genuine faith, yet they can never earn the righteousness required for eternal life. Only the finished work of Christ on the cross provides the way of salvation.

This truth challenges every tendency to rest in our own goodness or list of accomplishments. Many people comfort themselves with the thought that they are “good people” who have performed many kind or charitable works, yet the thief on the cross had no opportunity to do any such deeds and still received the promise of Paradise. His story strips away every false

foundation of self-righteousness and leaves us with one decisive question, “Have we, like him, simply trusted Jesus for salvation?” Eternal life is not awarded to those who have accumulated the most good works, but to those who place their faith in the One who said, “Today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” We must therefore examine our hearts carefully, refusing to rely on personal merit and instead resting wholly on the grace and finished work of Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior.

Study Questions:

1. The repentant thief acknowledged his own guilt, recognized Jesus’ innocence, and simply asked to be remembered. Why was this confession and request enough for Jesus to promise him Paradise that very day? What does this reveal about the nature of saving faith? (Luke 23:39-43)

2. Jesus assured the thief, “Today you shall be with Me in Paradise,” even though the man had no opportunity to be baptized, perform good works, or live a changed life. How does this immediate promise challenge any teaching that adds human effort as a requirement for salvation? (Luke 23:42-43)

3. Paul writes that salvation is “by grace... through faith... not as a result of works.” In light of the thief’s experience, why is it dangerous to view good deeds as contributing to our acceptance by God? How does this passage protect the pure gift of salvation? (Ephesians 2:8-9)

4. These verses in this study state that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. How does the thief on the cross illustrate this truth in a vivid, real-life way? What modern religious practices might subtly undermine this biblical principle? (Romans 3:28 and Galatians 2:16)

5. The Old Testament already taught that “the righteous will live by his faith” and that Abraham’s belief was credited as righteousness. How do these early statements prepare us to understand the thief’s salvation? Why is continuity between Old and New Testament teaching on faith important? (Habakkuk 2:4 and Genesis 15:6)

6. Jesus declared, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me.” How does the thief’s exclusive reliance on Jesus alone demonstrate this claim? What does this mean for people who trust in their own goodness or other religious paths? (John 14:6)

7. Peter proclaimed that “there is salvation in no one else.” The thief had no other name or system to turn to, only Jesus. How should this exclusivity shape the way we share the Gospel and evaluate claims of alternative ways to God? (Acts 4:12)

8. The Bible teaches that there is “one Mediator... the man Christ Jesus.” The thief approached Jesus directly in his final moments. What does this teach us about the sufficiency of Christ and the futility of relying on human intermediaries or personal merit? (1 Timothy 2:5)

9. The thief admitted he deserved his punishment, yet received grace. How does genuine recognition of personal guilt prepare the heart for the free gift of salvation? Why is self-righteousness such a barrier to receiving what Christ offers? (Luke 23:41 and Ephesians 2:8-9)

10. Jesus promised Paradise to a man who could offer nothing but faith. Titus 3:5 states that God saves us “not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness.” How should this free us from anxiety about “measuring up” while still motivating a life of gratitude and obedience? (Luke 23:43 and Titus 3:5)

11. After emphasizing salvation by grace through faith apart from works, Paul notes that we are “created in Christ Jesus for good works.” How does the thief’s story help us properly order faith and works? Why must good works follow salvation rather than precede or contribute to it? (Ephesians 2:8-10)

12. Romans 4:5 says that God “justifies the ungodly” who believe rather than work. The thief had no time for works yet was justified. How does this challenge the common assumption that “good people” go to Heaven? What personal response does this demand from those who may be resting in their own moral record? (Luke 23:42-43 and Romans 4:5)