

Illus Two thieves were crucified with Jesus

Tradition holds that the name of the unrepentant thief was *Gastus*, while the repentant one went by the various names of *Dysmas*, *Demas* and *Dumachus*

One legend says Dysmas was a Judean Robin hood who robbed the rich to give to the poor

Another tells that the family of Jesus was attacked by robbers when they fled to Egypt

But there was a young brigand in this band, who could not bear to lay a hand on the lovely child and freed him saying *"O most blessed of children, if ever there come a time for having mercy on me, then remember me and forget not this hour."*

In this legend, the name of that young robber was Dysmas

On that crucifixion morning, we find them hurling profanities at Jesus while on the cross, what the Romans nicknamed, *'The unlucky tree'*

Matthew tells us they were on either side of Jesus, fulfilling Isaiah's prophesy made hundreds of

PP years previous: ***"He poured out His soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors"*** **Isaiah 53:12**

We aren't told the reason why these two were being crucified, but Luke uses a word that means *lawbreaker*, while Matthew and Mark's word means bandit or revolutionary

But we do know this: they were both cursing and reviling Jesus: ***"One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"***

He is goading Jesus that if he really was the Messiah that everyone's talks about, then save us all

He is not expressing faith in Jesus, rather pouring out his hatred for Him

These were Jews-Romans did not crucify Roman citizens-and they knew Jewish beliefs

Here is the terrible scene that Friday morning: sometime between 9am and noon, soldiers are mocking Jesus, the chief priests were thumbing their noses at Him, the crowd taunting Him and now, these two fellow victims hurling curses at Him

Him and now, these two fellow victims hurling curses at Him

And suddenly, in one of those thieves, grace exploded in an incredible display of saving faith

PP 1-We see in this, improbable faith

But the other rebuked him,..." **Luke 23:39-43**

We learn from Luke that one of the two criminals had grown strangely silent, but then began to rebuke the other one for mocking Jesus

He had a change of heart on the cross, godly sorrow that leads to repentance, he shows faith

Friends, I don't believe there is a more unlikely conversion anywhere in Scripture

The One he puts his faith in is dying on the cross, who, to every appearance, had failed

From outward appearances, there was no reason to put his faith in Jesus

What savior wears a crown of thorns jammed into his bleeding head, or gets murdered?

How can someone save anyone if they are dead?

There is nothing outwardly that is convincing here that gives a reason for his sudden faith

In fact, everything gave evidence to the contrary, that Jesus was a charlatan, a fraud

The priests were shouting: ***"He saved others; let Him save Himself, if He is the Christ of God, His Chosen One!"*** **Luke 23:35**

The soldiers were taunting Him: *“If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”* 35
The other criminal was shouting, *“Save Yourself and us!”*
It looked like an airtight case: Jesus couldn’t save Himself, much less anyone else
Yet in the midst of this, miraculously, this criminal’s heart burst into faith

It is clearly the work of our sovereign God’s grace, but maybe you’re not convinced yet
Friends, nothing miraculous had yet occurred on that day, the noon darkness hadn’t come yet
The 3 pm earthquake was hours of suffering from happening, and he’ll never know that the
temple curtain mysteriously rips from top to bottom
His faith came into being before the Centurion and his soldiers confessed Christ
He saw no dove descend onto Jesus, no voice thundered from the Father and no angel appeared

But he had even more that should have made faith impossible
He came to faith in the midst of suffering, with hours to go, until a soldier would come by with
either a sledgehammer or iron bar to break his legs, so he could no longer push up to
exhale, and finally, mercifully, die

How did he come to put his faith and trust in Jesus in that situation?

Friends, the answer is, his faith was a gift given to him by a God Who loves him

PP *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God”* Ephesians 2:8

If this thief is not clear evidence that faith is a gift from God, I don’t know what is
Salvation is always a miracle of grace, a gift from God, to undeserving thieves and robbers!
Do you realize what confidence this gives us to prayer for our unsaved loved ones?

Illus A few years ago, Sandi Mahorsky asked if I would visit her father in the hospital, whom I had never met, and who hadn’t set foot in a church for over 47 years. I wondered if he would even want me to visit. He did, and Bill and I talked and he shared stories from his life, which eventually turned to questions of faith and Jesus Christ. I explained the gospel of hope to him and to my amazement, his reaction was...nothing! Nothing, he wasn’t interested! I went home praying for him. A couple of months later, he was admitted into a hospital and the doctors and nurses brought him some paperwork at 2-3 am to sign because they didn’t know if he would make it through the night. He made it, but he was told he only had a couple of weeks to live. The next day he learned that at that same time, a friend of Sandi’s who was not aware of what was happening to him had awoken to pray for him. He was so amazed at learning that, that it sparked something to life in him. He asked Sandi to have me come see him again. It would be last the time I would see Bill in this life. It was 7:30 Sunday evening at Easton Hospital. We talked about life-I really enjoyed listening to his stories!-and after awhile, I asked him, “Bill, do you know how a person makes it into eternal life?” He said he thought it was by doing good things to people, and living a good life. So I read to him the same Ephesians passage I gave to you a moment ago. He said he never heard that before, so I explained to him what the bible says about salvation. I asked him if he was ready to put his faith in Jesus Christ. Not a moment of hesitation went by before he said ‘Yes’. I thought I didn’t hear him right, so I asked him again and then to clarify why. I couldn’t have made a more clumsy appeal for Christ than I did there, distracted by all the people, hardly able to hear, not believing what I thought I heard. Yes, he said again, and right there at Easton Hospital, Bill Gaston received forgiveness from our merciful God.

God's grace opened Bill's eyes to the offer of salvation that God had given to him
And as we return to this thief, what else but this same grace could have saved him?
And then we remember the prayer that Jesus had been praying on that cross: '*Father forgive them, they know not what they do*'

Suddenly we see that this thief is the first answer to the prayer of Jesus
God brought forgiving grace to this man and his eyes were opened to the glory of the God-Son
Friends, no one is beyond the mercy of Christ

PP 2-We see in this, saving faith

It is really easy to read the account of the crucifixion from a spectator's perspective
Can you picture being there that Friday morning?
Not as a spectator but as one of the thieves, condemned to receive the wrath of Rome
We recoil at the thought of being one of these thieves
But the truth is, all of us are career thieves
The only innocent person on skull hill was Jesus
You might be startled at that and be thinking, *Don't associate me with those criminals*
But Who gave you your life; your health; your job; your talents; and earning power?
Do you really think we have all we have by our own hard work?
God has given all this to us and we all have used it for our own satisfaction, purposes and glory
We're all robbers, and the One we have robbed is God Himself, the most heinous crime possible
We are all in this story!
And we're either the unrepentant thief or the repentant one!
And as the repentant one rebuked the other, a clear display of faith emerges

PP a) *Saving faith opens the eyes to judgment- "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"*

Saving faith begins with a fear of God, a heightened awareness that God holds the power to condemn you to hell or give you eternal life
But some will say, no, saving faith begins with seeing the love of God, it's the kindness of God leads people to repentance
They 'clip and save', meaning they cut out mention of God's wrath toward sin, and any mention of hell, thinking that will turn people away from Christ
But the good news of the gospel message looks so good because the bad news is so bad
The stars look most brilliant on the blackest of nights, diamonds shine against the black felt
It is against the backdrop of God's judgment that the grace of God looks so beautiful and kind
Faith begins to fill the heart of this thief and the first thing he preaches is a healthy fear of God

PP Jesus once preached, "*do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*" **Matthew 10:28**

To fear God is to want to be saved from that divine judgment
But the unbeliever doesn't have that fear, and this is the first criminal's condition

PP Paul could have been thinking of him, "*The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.*" **Romans 3:13-18**

This hardened, unbelieving criminal was going down swinging
It's what happened at the end of the bloody dictator Joseph Stalin's life, who, as he laid on his deathbed, sat up and raised his fist upward and shook it, and fell back down to die
Neither Stalin or this criminal feared God and defied Him straight into hell
It's why C.S. Lewis once wrote that the doors of hell are locked on the inside
Even in that eternal torment, lost sinners will still defiantly want nothing to do with God

PP b) Saving faith admits guilt-*"And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds"*

The fear of God convinces you of personal guilt and impending divine judgment
God opened his eyes to the realization that he was a sinner who deserved judgment
If someone preaches and believes a gospel that makes little of the atrocity of sin, don't believe it
Sin is heinous, it is disastrous, it required the death of Jesus to atone for it
When faith is present in a person's heart, they are cut to the heart at this realization
This repentant thief didn't tell Jesus of his good works, or a bad hand he was dealt in life
He did nothing to justify himself, He admitted he was a sinner who robbed God
You and I, he said to his fellow thief, *are getting exactly what we deserve*

If one insists that God owes it to them to save them, then you're not seeing saving faith
Jesus showed us saving faith: *"the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'"*

Luke 18:13

PP c) Saving faith believes in Jesus Christ-*"but this man has done nothing wrong."*

Saving faith puts its hope in Jesus Christ
This repentant criminal affirmed the truth that Jesus is innocent, blameless, sinless
The grace of God enables him to see just Who it is on the cross next to him, the righteous One of God
When the Spirit of God opens a sinner's mind to the gospel, He first shows the wrath of God, then the guilt of sin, and the glory of Christ and the hope of forgiveness

PP 3-We see in this, eternal faith

And with this God-birthing recognition, our thief turns to Christ, *"Jesus..."*

Jesus is the *'name that is above every name'*

It means *Jehovah saves*, and suddenly, all those people the thief heard mocking Jesus because He couldn't even save Himself, well, now he understood that in order to save, He had to die
"Jesus"-Yeshua, the Hebrew or Aramaic name of the Savior-*"remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

He knows that both he and Jesus are going to die, nobody survived crucifixion
He knew that Jesus was the King, and was about to take up His kingdom

And finally, we get to the words of Jesus, the second statement He spoke on the cross: *"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."*

The word *'Truly'* acted like an emphatic, 'I promise you!'

What He was about to say to this thief was mind-blowing, shocking!

“[I promise you], today you will be with me in Paradise.”

He wasn't going to make an intermediate stop in purgatory first
God didn't send someone to baptize him first, or give him last rites or Holy Communion
Jesus didn't ask Mary, who was standing there on Golgotha to help this man approach God
Today, this very day, **“you will be with me in Paradise”**, a Persian word for walled garden
Paradise is a synonym for heaven

PP “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven...And I know that this man was caught up into paradise” 2 Corinthians 12:2-3

Paul here equates the third heaven with paradise
In Jewish understanding, the three heavens were first the blue sky, second the starry night sky,
and third, where God dwelled in paradise
It wasn't the Muslim promise of 72 virgins that made paradise so appealing, it's being with Jesus
Spurgeon said that *‘this man who was our Lord's last companion on earth...was His first companion at the gates of paradise.’*
This man was saved at the end of his life, similar to what the poet William Camden once wrote,
“Betwixt the stirrup and the ground / Mercy I asked, mercy I found.”

Illus On April 19, 2008, Sandi's father died in a hospice room. Much of his family was there on that afternoon when it looked as if Bill was no longer breathing. Sandi's cousin, a nurse checked to see if he was breathing and at that very moment the patio doors in the room flew open. Her uncle got up to close the doors, but no matter how hard he pulled, they wouldn't close. After about a minute, the doors were able to be closed with ease. One uncle said it was the angels coming to walk him home, to take him to His new friend and Savior, Jesus Christ

What a promise of salvation and the thief never prayed any formula for a prayer
He confessed his sin, and that Jesus is the Savior and King, and asked to be with Him in eternity
Can you do that, Have you done that?
If so, you will be with Jesus one day in paradise and you can truly sing that verse we sang earlier,
“The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day; And there may I, though vile as he, wash all my sins away.”

Pray