

HE OFFERS SALVATION: BELIEVE

Luke 23:32-49

“More like Jesus would I be, More like Him Who died for me.” That's what we sing. We see Jesus dealing with a nation He loved – a nation on “final warning” (Daniel 9:24) in their role as the people of God. He was their final Hope in this time of “final warning” and yet they rejected Him. We see Him dealing with His disciples who had followed Him for three (plus) years, but they were still ambitious adults acting as spoiled brats. Their jealousy surely caused Him grief. We watch as He agonized in the Garden and deep down inside we breathe a sigh of relief that it is He and not we having to deal with these problems. We watch the trial and the ridicule, the abuse and the beatings and wonder – “Is this part of what it is all about to be like Jesus.” We see the cross and hear the words, “He died in my place!” and we may shed a tear or two for what He suffered and yet we forget that He said, “If any would come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me.”

They led Him away, the One who really cared. He told them the truth about themselves – they were nothing more than hypocrites, and He warned them great “woe” was coming. They didn't want to hear it. They probably thought, “If you love someone, you wouldn't call them a hypocrite.” They wanted to hear flattery. Apparently, in two thousand years human nature has not changed a lot. We still want someone to tell us how “good” we are. We still want someone to tell us “things are really OK.” We still want soothing words that give us “self esteem” and we loathe hearing that we are “just playing church” and “fooling ourselves.” Because Jesus wanted to see things improve and for people to be what God intended them to be, those who represented the “in crowd” thought He should be eliminated. By lying and manipulation they succeeded in having Jesus condemned to death.

So, if we are to be more like Jesus, then let us examine what He did in dying. In the passage we are studying, we see that He forgave, He obeyed, He saved, and He was vindicated. How can we apply these actions to our lives so that it is His life that is being expressed in us.

He Forgave – 23: 32-34

³² Two others also, who were criminals, were being led away to be put to death with Him. ³³ When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. ³⁴ But Jesus was saying, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves. Luke 23:32-34 (NASB95)

There were two criminals put to death the same day and the same way as Jesus – one on the right and one on the left. Nothing was done that was not foretold – Isaiah 53:12 records the words “. . . He hath poured out His soul unto death . . . He was numbered with the transgressors; and He bore the sins of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”

How did it happen that Jesus was lumped in with common criminals? Was it because of criminal behavior on His part? No! It was because of lying by those who wanted to maintain their positions of power and influence which were being threatened by the truth that Jesus proclaimed. My guess is that the religious establishment people were delighted that two criminals were being executed that day and that would imply “guilt by association” for Jesus. How does that apply to us today? Do we see those who are in positions of influence who are willing to falsely accuse others of bad or even criminal behavior to maintain their positions of power? We see such things happening to people in the political arena and find ourselves making a comment such as “Why would anyone want to run for office if those kinds of things can happen to you?” We even hear of attacks on people who give financial support to those who are attempting to replace those in power. What do most of us opt to do? We avoid such problems

by not getting involved. Choosing to not get involved is akin to burying your talent (influence). Is this the same as “hearing the word and NOT doing the word?”

How would we respond if we did get involved and someone deliberately harmed us by attacks on our reputation or even physical harm? Would we strike back or take the route Jesus did? Jesus prayed for those who harmed Him. We even find that He prayed for you and me. Paul tells us in Hebrews 7:25 that Jesus “ever lives to make intercession for us.” Just as He interceded for Adam and Eve and every sinner down through the ages and just as He interceded for those who crucified Him, He still continues to make intercession for us.

The Roman soldiers took the only earthly possession Jesus had (His clothes) and they gambled (cast lots) for it. This was probably part of their pay for “cross duty.” How could David have known this would happen more than a thousand years before when he wrote, “They parted my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture?” (Ps 22:18)

What would you think should have happened to Jesus’ clothes upon His death? You would think that they should be given to His next of kin which would have been Mary. Is there any similarity to the confiscation of Jesus personal property (by those in power) upon His death to what happens today when someone dies?

He shed his blood to deal with what we have done – our sins. He hung on the cross to deal with who we are – our sin. By nature, we are sinners and we must deal with that issue by putting to death that old nature. But, just as the story of Jesus does not end with His death on the cross but carries through to the resurrection, so too our story does not end with our putting our old nature to death. We must be raised to newness of life by letting Jesus live in and through us.

If we look no further than the cross, we are drawn to God because of such great love. However, we must look also beyond that sacrifice to see that resurrection and victory are not far away. It is in dying that we live.

He Obeyed – 23:35-38

³⁵ And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, “He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One.” ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, ³⁷ and saying, “If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!” ³⁸ Now there was also an inscription above Him, “THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.” Luke 23:35-38 (NASB95)

All the mocking and the calling to “come down from the cross” were predicted and it happened. Even the offering of vinegar was mentioned in Psalms 69. Pilate even participated in the mocking and ridicule, perhaps as a message to the Jews. He remembered the accusation the Jews made about Jesus: *He was a king*. Pilate put up a sign in three languages, “This is the king of the Jews.” The warning, of course, would be that if we do this to your king, then we will do the same thing to you. Actually, it is a similar warning that Jesus gave His disciple regarding persecution they would encounter.

How does “obedience” factor into the account Luke has given us? Jesus knew that what was happening was the fulfillment of God’s promises. He also knew that what He was doing was the only way to provide salvation for fallen mankind and His love compelled Him to stay on the cross and to take the abuse and scorn that were heaped upon Him. We are told that Jesus said that could have stopped the process in Matthew 26:53 by calling for His Father Who would have sent 12 legions of angels. I assuming that up until the point that He declared “It is finished” that He could have decided that “enough is enough” and could have abandoned the mission. That would have amounted to “disobedience.”

What is the lesson for us? If the world would attack Jesus and crucify Him, then should we be surprised when we are misunderstood and ridiculed and abused? No, we’ve been warned – it is not easy to be a Christian. Jesus said, “In the world, you shall have tribulation; but be of

good cheer, I have overcome the world.” At that moment in time, it certainly did not appear that Jesus had overcome the world. In fact, those observing would have concluded that the Romans, the Jews and the Cross had won the day. We have the benefit of being able to look back on the events and realize the ultimate victory belonged and still belongs to Jesus. Just as Jesus could look past the trials of the cross, we too must look past our present problems when we are misunderstood and ridiculed from our Christian stand and see the ultimate victory. Then our response can be as His, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Would we dare to say that when we “bail out” when the going gets rough that we are not being obedient or faithful to what God has called us to do?

We look at the world system of government and religion and we can sort of understand the play for power and control that motivated the plot against Jesus. However, I find it rather hard to understand the response of one of the criminals who also died that day.

He Saved – 23:39-43

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged *there* was hurling abuse at Him, saying, “Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!” ⁴⁰ But the other answered, and rebuking him said, “Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?” ⁴¹ “And we indeed *are suffering* justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴² And he was saying, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” ⁴³ And He said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” Luke 23:39-43 (NASB95)

Maybe the response of one of the criminals is not too difficult to understand, after all. Is this not the way we pray even today? Sometimes when we are up to our necks in trouble, we are tempted to challenge God to show His power and prove Who He is. The scriptures interpret this as “railing on God.” The other thief identified the problem – lack of reverence for God – “Do you not fear God?” How does the action of the unrepentant show a lack of fear of God? The key to the answer maybe in the next sentence that deals with a proper application of justice. The thieves were receiving appropriate justice because of their criminal behavior, but Jesus was the “victim” of injustice which is contrary to the character of God. By joining in the abuse the unrepentant thief demonstrated a lack of respect for God by acting contrary to His character. We could make the same argument that all sin shows a lack of fear of God.

This penitent thief has become the “proof example” that it is never too late to be saved. This is the only example in the Scriptures of such a “point-of-death” repentance. We would not want to see this as an endorsement of “wait until the last minute to give your life to Jesus.”

Earlier on the same day, a Roman official (Pontius Pilate) had made a pronouncement regarding Jesus saying “I find no fault in Him.” Now we hear an affirmation of this truth coming from a condemned criminal saying “this man has done nothing wrong.” The KJV renders “nothing wrong” with a more literal translation of “nothing amiss.” It may be instructive to examine the charges brought against Jesus and see if He is guilty as charged and if He did the things of which He was accused, were these things “amiss?”

The main charge was that He made Himself the promised Messiah, the Son of God (John 19:7). Did Jesus, in fact, claim to be the Messiah, the Son of God? Yes, He did that. The really important question is “was this anything amiss?” No, it was not. It was the truth. Another charge that was leveled against Him was that He ate with publicans and sinners? Again, He was certainly “guilty” of doing that; however, this was nothing amiss. He claimed to be Lord of the Kingdom and to be able to open and shut the entrance to the Kingdom as He willed. Again, He did nothing amiss. He told them that if they destroyed the “temple” that He would rebuild it in three days. The temple to which He referred was His body and it came to pass just as He said. He did nothing amiss.

In addition to the criminal's testimony of the fact that Jesus had done nothing amiss and certainly nothing worthy of being executed, he showed that he had faith in Jesus by asking to simply be remembered when Jesus came into His kingdom. He did not ask for any special place or position but simply to be remembered. His faith was immediately rewarded by a promise that he would be with Jesus in Paradise that very day.

When most of us hear or read the word Paradise, we equate it with heaven. It is probably not that simple. The word itself is a Persian word that literally means a *protected garden* or even a well kept and well-stocked hunting preserve that was for the use of the king and his friends. In the Septuagint the word was used in conjunction with the Garden of Eden in Genesis. Some have said that is the part of Hades (the abode of the dead) that only the pious can enter and the other part of Hades is Sheol where the unrighteous are kept until the judgment. The third and probably the most common thought is that it means heaven itself. I think it is safe to say that we do **not** know what this really means. Jesus said that He would be there following His death on the cross and we know that it was many days later after the Resurrection that He ascended into Heaven to sit down at the right hand of the Father. Regardless of what it means, we can assume that Paradise is a good situation and God has promised good for those who are pleasing to Him and the way we please Him is by faith. This penitent thief on the cross demonstrated faith in his words.

He Was Vindicated – 23:44-49

⁴⁴ It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵ because the sun was obscured; and the veil of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, "Father, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT." Having said this, He breathed His last. ⁴⁷ Now when the centurion saw what had happened, he *began* praising God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent." ⁴⁸ And all the crowds who came together for this spectacle, when they observed what had happened, *began* to return, beating their breasts. ⁴⁹ And all His acquaintances and the women who accompanied Him from Galilee were standing at a distance, seeing these things. Luke 23:44-49 (NASB95)

The brightest time of the day – noon time – was dark. An eclipse of the sun is ruled out because Passover occurred in the middle of the month when the moon was full. The darkness may have been caused by dark clouds. During this time, the veil in the temple was torn from the top to the bottom. The veil in the temple separated the Holy Place from the Holiest of Holies. In the Tabernacle and in Solomon's temple, the Holiest of Holies was the abiding place of the Ark of the Covenant and the Mercy Seat of God. It was the place which the high priest entered once each year on the Day of Atonement. Now the way was opened for all to come to God through Jesus Christ.

In addition to these two phenomena, Jesus then quoted from Psalms 31:5 and picked the time He died. It is difficult for us to fathom that He was still in control of the situation in spite of all that He had endured physically. Maybe the lesson for us is that being in pain and being exhausted is not a good excuse to lose control of how we behave and to be harsh with others.

Pilate had declared Jesus to be innocent, the thief on the cross had said that Jesus had done nothing amiss, and now a soldier declared Him to be righteous. Those who had schemed to put an innocent person to death never came to know the truth.

Jesus lived His life trusting in the Father's care and He continues to express that same trust as He lives in us. As we commit our lives to God, we are giving expression to the life that is now in us in Jesus Christ. He had come to earth to live among men and to be a sacrifice for the sin of mankind.