

Glad Tidings

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

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The Change in the Thief on the Cross

(Jerry Fite)

A man, seeing his life painfully pass from him over a period of six hours, may find himself in a crucible where a change of mind and new convictions flow freely. The convicted robber, who along with another thief, was crucified with Jesus surely underwent a change while hanging on the cross.

Escaping a painful death was foremost on the other thief's mind. He questioned Jesus, “...Art not thou the Christ? Save thyself and us” (Luke 23:39). However, in the beginning of their crucifixion, we know both thieves joined in on the reproachful and challenging speech directed toward Jesus. The robbers heard the chief priests and scribes say, “He trusteth on God; let Him deliver him now, if He desireth him: for he said, ‘I am the Son of God’” (Matthew 27:43). Such reviling speech came on the heels of the challenge to prove He was the Son of God by coming down from the cross (Matthew 27:40); and in so doing, prove He was the King of Israel (Matthew 27:42). The thief of our focus, along with the other thief, “cast upon Him the same reproach” (Matthew 27:44, Mark 15:32).

We do not know if the thief crossed paths with Jesus before being crucified with Him, but

what he saw and heard on his final day of living certainly made him think.

Instead of continuing to join his fellow robber with reproachful speech toward Jesus, he rebuked the other thief with these words: “Dost thou not even fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss” (Luke 23:40-41). The thief, who from the cross reproached Christ, now from an engaged conscience considers one's relationship with God. The God of heaven and earth is to be revered and feared. How can you not “even fear God”, as you experience sure condemnation of your thievery? We both are getting what we deserve. This thief is distinguished from the other thief because he is focusing on righteousness before God, and realizes that Jesus does not deserve death for “this man hath done nothing amiss”.

This thief changes from reproaching Christ to pleading with Christ: “Jesus, remember me when thou comest in thy kingdom” (Luke 23:42). What a change! Unlike many thieves, he acknowledges that he deserves the punishment he is receiving. He wants Jesus to remember Him.

For what? His crimes against society, and his sins before God? Would not such a one like to be forgotten into oblivion, instead of being remembered by the Son of God? Yet, he wants Jesus to remember him. He knew a kingdom was coming, and somehow would be connected with Jesus as the Messiah, God's Son, and the acclaimed King of the Jews. He wanted to be remembered by Jesus in His kingdom, not as a defiant robber, but as a penitent robber. This plea, undergirded with such conviction, manifested more faith than the apostles at this time. They left Jesus' death scene hopeless, while the thief died believing Jesus would establish His kingdom, despite death.

Jesus promised the thief a change that he probably never thought of previously: “Today, thou shalt be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). He would soon be ushered from a place of pain to a beautiful place of comfort. Jesus entered into Hades to be released from death's grasp in three days (Acts 2:27). In less than two months from His crucifixion, Jesus would be ruling in His spiritual kingdom, the church (Acts 2:29-47). In Hades, the penitent thief awaits in hope for his resurrection to gloriously enter Jesus' heavenly kingdom (2 Timothy 4:18).