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A DEATHBED CONVERSION

Luke 23:39-43

By

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Luke Lesson 110
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A Deathbed Conversion Luke 23:39-43

By his own admission, old Joe was not a religious man. He had never gone to church. He lived a pretty wild life. He drank too much, gambled a lot, swore without even thinking about it, and was not above lying and cheating when it was to his advantage. He thought that Christians were missing out on all the fun in life. He never thought much about God. Not until recently, that is.

Joe had retired and was looking forward to doing a lot of fishing. He had been having some stomach troubles. Probably too much beer, he thought. But then the doctor's report came back: cancer. It had spread to several organs. There wasn't much they could do. Joe might have six months to live, maybe less.

Joe had a nephew who was a Christian. One day his nephew's pastor dropped by the hospital and began to talk to Joe about spiritual things. For the first time in his life, Joe listened with interest. What the pastor was saying seemed to make sense. It dawned on Joe that he had lived his whole life in a selfish, sinful manner. He knew that if he died, he would face God's judgment. But the pastor said that Jesus Christ had died on the cross to pay the penalty that he deserved. He offered forgiveness of sins and eternal life as a free gift if Joe would receive it. Joe prayed to receive Christ. He died in peace shortly after, a deathbed conversion.

Whenever we hear stories like that, hand we're glad and hopeful. But we always have the nagging question, "Was Joe's conversion real?" Was he *truly* saved? Can a person live his entire life in sin, but get saved at the very last moment? Are deathbed conversions possible?

Of course we never can know another person's heart. We can look for evidence of conversion, but the troublesome thing about deathbed conversions is that the person often does not live long enough to give much evidence of true conversion. So we might be inclined to doubt the possibility of deathbed conversions and give up sharing the gospel with those like Joe.

To calm our doubts and to encourage us to share the gospel with those on the brink of death, the Bible includes a story of a genuine deathbed conversion. The dying thief on the cross asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His kingdom, and Christ assured him that he would be with Him that very day in Paradise. The story has much to teach us not only about deathbed conversions, but about any conversion.

By God's grace, deathbed conversions are possible for any sinner who will repent and trust in Jesus Christ.

As John Calvin remarks, "There is ... no room to doubt that [Christ] is prepared to admit into his kingdom all, without exception, who shall apply to him" (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], "A Harmony of the Gospels," 3:313).

1. Salvation is always by God's grace, apart from any human works.

One reason we struggle with deathbed conversions is that we erroneously cling to the notion that salvation is linked to human works. Let's say that old Joe had a wife named Mary, a sweet, kind lady who went to church almost every week of her life. She was nice to everyone. She thought that all good people would go to heaven, no matter what they believe. If you asked Mary why God should let her into heaven when she died, she would tell you that she had tried her best to live a good life. She had never intentionally hurt anyone. She believed in God and went to church.

According to the Bible, Mary, who had lived a good, religious life, would die and go to hell. Her husband Joe, who had lived a wicked, irreligious life, but who repented and believed in Christ on his deathbed, would die and go to heaven. We're inclined to say, "Wait a minute! That's not fair!" The second we think that, we reveal that we do not understand God's grace. We are still clinging to salvation by human works. But the Bible repeatedly proclaims that we are saved by God's grace alone, not by any works or merit of our own (Eph. 2:8-9; Rom. 4:4-5; Titus 3:5). Those who try to add their works actually deny the gospel and come under God's condemnation (see Gal. 1:6-9 in context).

Jesus illustrated this truth in a parable (Matt. 20:1-16). A landowner went out early in the morning and hired workers for his

vineyard. He agreed to pay them a fair day's wage. Later in the morning, he saw some other men standing idle in the marketplace, so he hired them and told them that he would pay them a fair wage. At noon and in mid-afternoon, he did the same thing. Finally, about five o'clock in the afternoon, he hired some others. When evening came, he paid all the workers the same, a full day's wage. But the men who had worked all day grumbled because these men who had only worked one hour got the same wage that they received after working hard all day. But the landowner said, "I paid you what we agreed on. If I wish to be generous to this last man, that's my privilege. I can do what I want with that which is my own."

Jesus was teaching that salvation is by God's free grace, not based on man's merit or works. If God wants to dispense it to someone that we think unworthy, that is His business. In God's sight we are all unworthy. No one has a valid claim against God. If, before they are born, He chooses to love the conniving Jacob but to hate the nice guy Esau, so that His "purpose according to election might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls" (Rom. 9:11-13), that is God's prerogative. If He chooses to be gracious to a thief just before he dies and to leave a religious Pharisee to die and face judgment for his pride and self-righteousness, that is God's prerogative. We have to get rid of the proud notion that salvation depends on even the least amount of human merit, effort, or good works.

How much could this thief do to merit eternal life? He could not clean up his life! He couldn't promise to do better in the future. He had no future! He had made a complete mess of his life. He did not say, "If I had it to do over, I would be a better person." He had nothing to argue, nothing to promise, nothing to bring to Christ as collateral for salvation. He simply asked for something he did not deserve, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" And, Jesus granted his request without strings attached!

If you have lived a good life, you are not an inch closer to heaven than the thief who has lived a wicked life. In fact, you may have more trouble trusting in Christ alone, because your good works fill you with pride and self-righteousness. God's salvation is

always given in one way and one way only: by His free grace, totally apart from any human merit. That way, no one can boast.

2. Salvation is always received through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

You may not have noticed, but both criminals asked Jesus to save them. He ignored the request of the first, but granted the request of the second. Why the difference? The first thief did not ask in repentance and faith; the second thief did. The first thief was angry, bitter, and railing against Jesus. He did not face up to his own sin. Jesus didn't even try to witness to him. He let him die in his hardness of heart. The second thief was repentant, subdued, and trusting. Jesus graciously granted his request and assured him that he would be with Him in Paradise that day.

The two radically different responses show us that not all that come into contact with Christ respond favorably. Some are hardened by the very same message that softens others. The difference does not originate in the human heart, but in God's grace. Sinful people are not capable of exercising repentance and faith by their own "free will." The fallen human will is "fast bound in sin and nature's night," as Charles Wesley put it ("And Can It Be?"). The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God, unable to subject itself to God's law, and unable to please God (Rom. 8:7-8). The natural man cannot understand the things of God (1 Cor. 2:14), because Satan has blinded his mind to the gospel (2 Cor. 4:4). Thus God must graciously grant both repentance (Acts 11:18) and faith (Phil. 1:29).

A. Repentance involves admitting your own guilt and turning from your life of sin.

Both Matthew 27:44 and Mark 15:32 state that both robbers were casting insults at Jesus. Luke alone mentions the conversion of the one robber. It is inconceivable that a careful historian like Luke would have concocted this story to make a point, as liberals assert. Among those who hold to its veracity, some say that Matthew and Mark attribute to both robbers what was done only by one. I prefer the view that at first both robbers railed against Jesus. Perhaps the second robber was wrongly led along by the first, even as he had been in his earlier life of crime. But as he watched Jesus'

demeanor on the cross, as he heard no curses or threats come out of Jesus' mouth, as he heard Jesus pray for forgiveness for His persecutors, he began to be convicted of his sin. He saw his own sin in contrast to Jesus' clear innocence. He stopped joining the other thief in mocking Jesus. The more he heard the other thief continue his blasphemous taunts, the more it bothered him. He finally spoke out in defense of Jesus, admitting his own guilt (23:40-41). He turned from his sin. That's repentance.

A repentant person stops blaming God and others for his problems and admits his own guilt and sin. The repentant thief wasn't blaming the system, his parents, or his environment. He admitted that he was getting what he deserved for his wrongdoing. Before, he could steal and shrug it off. He probably excused it by saying that he just couldn't help it. Whereas before he did not fear God or even think about God's judgment, now he did (23:40). That is repentance: owning up to your sin and turning from it because you now fear God.

One of the most difficult sins to repent of is the sin of trusting in your own good works. But to bring your own merit or good deeds is an affront to God, who gave His own Son as the necessary satisfaction for His wrath against sin. It detracts from His free grace to add your works to it, as if the death of Christ was not sufficient. You have to come to the same place that this robber was, admitting that you justly deserve God's judgment for your sins.

Perhaps you're thinking, "Now wait a minute! I may not be perfect. I have my share of faults. But I'm not in the same league as this robber! But A. W. Pink (*The Seven Sayings of the Saviour on the Cross* [Baker], p. 32, italics his) points out that we all are robbers of the worst sort, because we have robbed God. He explains,

Suppose that a firm in the East appointed an agent to represent them in the West, and that every month they forwarded to him his salary. But suppose also at the end of the year his employers discovered that though the agent had been cashing the checks they sent him, nevertheless, he had *served another firm* all that time. Would not that agent be a thief? Yet this is precisely the situation and state of every sinner. He has been sent into this world by God, and God has endowed him with talents and the capacity to use and improve them. God has

blessed him with health and strength; He has supplied his every need, and provided innumerable opportunities to serve and glorify Him. But with what result? The very things God has given him have been *mis*-appropriated. The sinner has *served another master*, even Satan. He dissipates his strength and wastes his time in the pleasures of sin. He has robbed God.

So every person, whether outwardly good or evil, must repent. But repentance is never alone. It is always the flip side of the coin with faith. True repentance is always bound up with saving faith. The words are often used interchangeably or in close connection in the Bible (Mark 1:15; Acts 11:18, 21; 17:30, 34; 20:21).

B. Faith involves casting yourself on Jesus Christ and His mercy.

This thief's only hope was Jesus Christ. If Jesus were not coming into any kingdom, if Jesus did not have the ability or power to do anything for this dying thief, his hopes would be shattered. The other thief probably scoffed in disgust at the "stupidity" of his partner in crime. Jesus hardly looked the part of a king. He was a badly wounded, dying man, in obvious physical pain. His persecutors were taunting Him and He did not seem to be able to do anything about it. He certainly didn't look the part of the Jewish Messiah. But the second thief looked at Jesus with eyes of faith. He placed all his hopes for eternity on Jesus. That is saving faith.

John Calvin (3:311-312) remarks that since the creation of the world, there has not been a more remarkable and striking example of faith than this thief. He adored "Christ as a *King* while on the gallows." He celebrated His kingdom "in the midst of shocking and worse than revolting abasement." He declared Him, "when dying, to be the Author of life." He "beheld life in death, exaltation in ruin, glory in shame, victory in destruction, a *kingdom* in bondage." In short, the thief "relied on the grace of Christ alone."

C. Saving faith must be in the person of Jesus Christ.

We do not know whether this man had heard anything about Jesus before this day. We are not told whether these few words were the only conversation between them on the cross, or whether this is a condensed version of a more extensive exchange. Certainly this thief could not have expounded on the two natures of

Jesus. He may not have understood that He is God. But he could see that Jesus was no ordinary man. He knew enough about Jesus to hope that He would be merciful to him in the life to come.

A sinner does not have to be a knowledgeable theologian to have saving faith in Jesus Christ, but he must know something about the person and work of Christ. This thief knew that Jesus was an *innocent* man (23:41). A sinner cannot bear the sins of others because he must bear his own sins. Jesus was our sinless substitute. The thief knew that Jesus was truly *a king*, even though rejected by His people. Thus he submitted to Jesus' rightful sovereignty. He knew that Jesus would *triumph over the grave*, and come again in His kingdom, no matter how hopeless the present situation seemed. He knew that Jesus was *ready and able to save* any that called upon Him, or else he would not have asked Jesus to remember him when He came in His kingdom.

The point is, faith is not just a general belief in God. It is not closing your eyes and taking a leap in the dark. It is not, "I believe for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows." It is not believing in God, however you conceive Him to be. Faith must be in the Jesus revealed in Scripture, not in the Jesus of a person's imagination. Faith must be in the Lord Jesus Christ who offered Himself in the place of sinners. Thus people need some knowledge of what Scripture says before they can believe unto salvation. Encourage people to whom you are witnessing to read the Bible. When a sinner's eyes are opened and he sees something of who Jesus is and trusts in Him, God pours out His mercy on him.

3. Salvation is granted instantly, freely, and abundantly.

This thief received instantly and without condition far more than he had hoped for. He asked to be remembered in the future; Jesus promised him Paradise *that day*. He asked merely to be remembered in the sense of just getting in the gate of the kingdom; Jesus promised that he would be *with Him* personally. He asked, not knowing what kind of response he would get; Jesus assured him, "*Truly I say to you.*"

Please note that Jesus did not prescribe a course of *penance* for this guilty man. Penance is based on human works, not God's free grace. Jesus promised the robber eternal life apart from anything

the man did or promised to do. Jesus did not say, "You will be with me in Paradise in 100 years, after the fires of *purgatory* burn off some of your sins." To hold to the doctrine of purgatory is to deny the gospel of God's grace as revealed in Scripture. James Stalker (*The Trial and Death of Jesus Christ* [Zondervan], p. 117) writes, "We may be sure that our gospel is not the gospel of Him who comforted the penitent thief, unless we are able to offer even to a dying sinner a salvation immediate, joyful, and complete."

Calvin (p. 314) wisely observes that what Christ promised the robber did not alleviate his present sufferings. The soldiers didn't come and take him down from the cross and nurse his wounds. Jesus didn't heal him or shield him from ongoing pain. Even so, when a sinner comes to salvation, God does not remove all his afflictions in this life. But he does promise us something better, namely, Paradise with Him throughout eternity!

We've seen that salvation is freely offered to any sinner who will repent and trust in Jesus Christ. But is it ever too late?

4. Salvation is available to any sinner right up to the point of death.

After death, there is no chance of salvation (Heb. 9:27). But before then, God can save him, even if he has a history of notorious sin. So the question arises, "Why not plan a deathbed conversion?" Why not enjoy the pleasures of sin now, but turn to God at the last moment? There are several reasons that this is *not* a wise plan:

**If you reject the light that you have now, your heart will be hardened toward the gospel later.* Esau could not find a place for repentance, even though he sought for it with tears (Heb. 12:17). Your heart does not remain neutral throughout life. If you hear the gospel but reject it, your heart grows more callous toward the things of God. Besides, it has been pointed out that this thief did not hear the gospel all of his life, and finally open his heart to it just before he died. This was his *first encounter with Jesus* and he grabbed it!

**A life of selfish, sinful living does not bring joy, either presently or in eternity.* While sin offers certain pleasures at the moment, it always takes a devastating toll on the person. Numerous sexual encounters with different partners may hold a certain thrill, but it cannot

offer the lasting joy of faithfulness and intimacy within lifelong covenant marriage. Such a life will leave you empty and perhaps infected with venereal disease. Drugs and alcohol may give a momentary high or a cushion against life's problems, but they devastate those enslaved by them. Only a life lived in submission to God brings solid joys and lasting pleasure.

**Not all dying people have an opportunity to repent.* Not everyone has adequate warning that death is just ahead. There are young people here today that will step into eternity sooner than some of those advanced in years. Some here in good health will die before others who are in poor health. The fact is, we all are dying people, and unless we repent now, we may easily perish (Luke 13:3, 5).

Conclusion

A wise Puritan wrote, "We have one account of a deathbed repentance in order that no man need despair; we have only one, in order that no man may presume." By all means, share Christ with those on their deathbeds, in hopes that God in His grace will save them. But also, by all means, make sure that you do not presume on God's grace by putting off repentance and faith in Christ for another time. You may not have that opportunity!

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it essential to emphasize that *all* of salvation, including repentance and faith, comes from God (Eph. 2:8-9)?
2. Why didn't Jesus witness to the other thief? Are there some to whom we should not witness (see Matt. 7:6)?
3. Where is the balance between a sense of urgency in witnessing versus the need to give the person time to learn enough about Jesus before believing?
4. How can we help a "good person" to see his or her sinfulness and need for salvation? (See Matt. 5:21-32; 19:16-26.)

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