



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

A dying man's acknowledgement of Christ's innocence



The conversion of the “dying thief” is a model conversion. It is like a series of still photographs which capture the dawn of heavenly light within the soul of the darkened sinner. The photographs are framed for us in his words to his companion in crime and to the Saviour. “But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou 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. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom,” Luke 23:40-42.

- The fear of God arises in his heart.
- A realisation of his own sinfulness.
- His acknowledgement of Christ's purity.
- His view of Christ as Redeemer, Lord and King.
- His simple prayer of faith.

He had been mocking Christ in unison with his companion just minutes before. “The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth,” Matthew 27:44. But now he has ceased such blasphemy and instead, rebukes his former companion and declares the innocence of Christ.

This man experienced the power and grace of God as he hung on the cross and he died with the blessed words of peace and pardon, which came to him personally from the lips of Christ, ringing in his ears. “To day shalt thou be with me in paradise,” Luke 23:43. This is how every true believer dies. It is not what the church says, or the minister says but what Christ in mercy says to the sinner that can lighten the dark valley of death and comfort the soul entering upon that last battle.

How quickly this work was done! He was nailed to the cross, defiant, foul-speaking, wretched and on his way to hell. But wondrous mercy providentially decreed that on the day of his death he was to encounter Christ and become the recipient of everlasting life. Before his body died, his soul received eternal life. Wondrous mercy indeed!

Please observe with me first of all that . . .

I. NO MAN CAN RIGHTLY KNOW HIS OWN SINFULNESS UNTIL HE HAS SEEN CHRIST'S PERFECTION.

The confession of the thief's own sinfulness is linked to the acknowledgement of Christ's innocence. As was the case with Daniel, in Daniel 10:4-8; Isaiah in Isaiah 6:1-5; John in Revelation 1:12-17, it took a sight of the sinless, crimeless, spotless Son of God to bring home to his heart his own impurity and corruption. “. . . we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss,” Luke 23:41. The eye that sees its own sinfulness has first seen the perfection of holiness in the Lord Jesus.



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II. THE THIEF'S KNOWLEDGE OF CHRIST'S INNOCENCE WAS BASED UPON HIS OBSERVANCE OF CHRIST IN THE MIDST OF HIS SUFFERINGS ON THE CROSS.

It is most likely that the thief had never seen or heard Christ before that day. How then could he speak of Him as he did? How did he form this assessment of the innocence of Christ? The matter is simple. No person was in a better position to evaluate Christ than this thief. He saw the Saviour in the midst of the most trying circumstances imaginable. The cross was the supreme test of our Saviour's love for sinners, patience, faith and obedience to His Father. The thief would have heard from the soldiers and others he had encountered that day, of the treatment Christ had received. He would have learned . . .

1. How Christ was treacherously betrayed. Irrespective of the animosity toward the Lord Jesus, felt amongst the people who gathered at His trial and crucifixion, I am sure that Judas and his actions would have been despised. No one honours a traitor! The thief, a man who would have done practically anything for money, would nevertheless have surely felt some sympathy for one betrayed by a friend, a disciple for thirty pieces of silver.

2. How Christ had been shamefully forsaken. The incident of Peter and his denial of the Saviour would have been common talk amongst the crowd gathered to see the trial and its outcome. His departure from the presence of the Saviour in broken-hearted weeping, would have surely been noted and the reason for it understood. Where were the disciples that had ever been in the company of Christ? They were all gone. The Saviour was alone. The loneliness of the criminal in the place of execution would have enabled the thief to understand something of the feelings of One utterly forsaken by His friends. Furthermore, the thief would have heard . . .

3. How Christ was wrongfully accused. The cells of a courthouse are always buzzing with court gossip! Every detail of the Saviour's trial would have been relayed to other prisoners and discussed in detail. The lying witnesses and their contradictory evidence would doubtless be analysed and its significance noted. Criminals, so quick to deny the validity of the evidence against them, would understand the cruelty of being convicted upon false evidence. Again, he would have known about . . .

4. How Christ was unjustly tried. He, along with others being processed by Pilate's court, would have heard about the Governor's attempts to dismiss the case against the Lord Jesus. He would have heard of the strange ritual in which Pilate indulged in order to attempt to disassociate himself from the verdict. "When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it," Matthew 27:24. Such an action, by a man renowned for his cruelty and harshness, would not have gone unnoticed and undiscussed by the criminal fraternity! He would have known . . .

5. How Christ was wickedly rejected for Barabbas. The healer rejected and the murderer chosen in his place at the instigation of the religious leaders would have been an irony not lost on such a man as the thief! He would also have known about and plainly seen the evidence of . . .

6. How Christ had been cruelly tortured. He would have heard the scourging and he may well have seen it. He could look still upon the mocking cruelty of the crown of thorns forced down upon the brow of Christ. The hardest criminal still has moments of sympathy



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with someone suffering at the hands of jailers. The thief would know just how cruel and unmerciful those jailers could be. He may well have felt something of their harshness himself, but he could plainly see that the treatment received by Jesus of Nazareth went beyond the bounds of the rough and uncouth soldiery's usual idea of sport. Was not the thief an eyewitness of . . .

7. How Christ was grievously taunted? He himself had joined in the ribald mocking. He had used his failing breath to hurl insults at the man on the middle tree. It was in the midst of these circumstances that the thief examined the Saviour and noted His responses and reactions. Did the Saviour spit back in rage and anger at those who treated Him so? Did He not endure all with impressive patience and longsuffering? Undoubtedly, the thief saw that to be so. He would have concurred with what Peter wrote in later years. "Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously," 1 Peter 2:21-23. Did he not hear the Saviour pray, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do," Luke 23:34? It was in the midst of the fire of Calvary's rejection and ignominy that the thief evaluated the Saviour and came to the conclusion — "This man hath done nothing amiss."

In Christ, at His trial and on the cross, the thief saw the perfection of the law of God displayed. He saw quiet submission and unquestioning acceptance of the providential will of God. Christ did not lift up His eyes to heaven and cry against God or rail against the dictates of providence. Instead the thief saw One Who in meekness "humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross," Philippians 2:8. He had witnessed perfect love for one's neighbour. He heard the Saviour make arrangements for his mother at a moment when the apostle John ventured near to the cross. "When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home," John 19:26-27. He heard the prayer of forgiveness, verse 34, the highest manifestation of perfect love for one's neighbour. None was in a better position to pass judgement on the demeanour of Christ than was the thief. None could have been less likely to favour Christ and less inclined to pronounce an approving sentence upon Him, than the thief. Therefore, there is weight added to his words of approbation. His verdict was one of complete innocence. The word "amiss" is a word which means "no harm" or "unreasonable." It is a mild term, is it not? It but highlights that in Christ there was not even the slightest stain of wrongdoing.

One final matter.

III. HIS PUBLIC DEFENCE OF CHRIST WAS IN RESPONSE TO HIS COMPANION'S ATTACK

1. Christians are defenders of Christ's honour. Christ could have spoken up for Himself, but instead, the thief was permitted the inestimable honour of standing for Christ. He had to rebuke his former companion. That is often the hardest thing to do, but it must be done for the sake of Christ's honour.

2. Even with our last breath, let us stand up for Jesus. He was dying. Who could



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blame him for remaining quiet? But he summoned up his strength and spoke up for Christ as life ebbed away. It is never too late to start speaking up for Christ. How marvellous that our last words should be uttered in praise of Him!

3. They who thus honour the Saviour will be honoured by Him. The conversion of this man and his witness for Christ are written up for all the world to see. This was all he said and yet it has been, and will yet be, honoured by the Saviour.

If you are not saved, then call upon Christ as did the thief. Rest in Him for He is the Lord of Glory and the King of Righteousness.

None of us knows how long we have to live. The thief was better informed on that matter than any of us here tonight. Be in time.

If you are a Christian, be sure that you are standing for Him in this day in which He is surrounded by many, mocking and sneering and deriding His person and claims, His Word and His glory.