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THE TWO THIEVES.

“ And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us. 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. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To-day shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke xxiii. 39—43).

DEAR READER, stop and think! Here is a history before you, of two thieves.—You may say, what does that matter to me? I have not been a thief: I have lived uprightly, decently, morally; never wronged my neighbour, done nobody any harm: I can defy any one to say a word against my character. Yes, it may be so: but stop and think—Where is one of these thieves now? In paradise. And where the other? In torment. And would it not be well if you could be sure of meeting one in paradise, even though he was once a thief?

Do not you desire, or hope to be there also? Well, then, if so, you must enter paradise upon the same terms as the dying thief did; and you must be content to have many who were once thieves, adulterers, harlots, murderers, as your companions there. You would be shocked to be found with such company here, because you are afraid of spoiling your fair name, of bringing disgrace upon your own reputation; and because you think you are better and holier than such. But remember, many, who were once ruined abandoned sinners, the very outcasts of the earth, accounted the very filth and offscouring of all things, will be bright with all the glory of Jesus, when He comes again to this earth.

Has God then got two ways of saving people? One
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way for the thief and adulteress, and another way for the good respectable person, like yourself? No: the word of God speaks of no other way; "There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved," but the name of Jesus Christ. Or are there two ways of getting to paradise; one which the dying thief found, and another and different one which you are treading? No: the Lord Jesus said there was but *one* narrow way leading to eternal life, and one broad way leading to destruction. And there are but two classes of people in the whole world, those that are saved, and those that are lost, just as there were two men dying by the side of Jesus, one that was saved, the other lost. Which then are you? With which of these can you class yourself? For you see, with one or the other you will be found in the judgment, either with the one saved and happy in paradise, or with the other, who reviled Jesus, and will be cast into the lake of fire. What profit then, as regards God, is there in your good name and fair character, when, by and by, one who has been a thief will be your companion either in heaven or in hell?

Now let us consider what was the difference between the two thieves. They were both alike malefactors; there was no difference as regarded their sins: indeed, the one that was saved said, "We, indeed, receive the due reward of our deeds." The state of one, therefore, was not better than that of the other, as regarded their guilt. One could not say to the other, I do not deserve to die, and you do; for the very one that was saved owned that he as well as the other was justly condemned. Neither was there any difference in their outward circumstances; both were in equal misery and pain; death was alike before both; the life of each was alike gradually flowing out in agony on the cross. What then was the difference? Why, one owned himself a sinner, receiving the due reward of his deeds, and had faith in Jesus: the other cared not for his sin, and did not believe that Jesus had the power to save him.

And now, dear reader, as you will through all eternity be a companion of one or other of these two, consider



which you are most like. One, you see, joined with those around the cross in railing on Jesus, saying, "If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us." He doubted whether Jesus had the power to save. It was not that he did not wish to be saved. He did not like the judgment and fiery indignation before him; he would gladly escape from the present pain of the cross, and the future torment of the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone. But he could not trust in Christ as his deliverer. He put in an *if*—he said, "If thou be the Christ."

And now, dear reader, no doubt you wish to escape hell; you have, I dare say, had many a thought of terror about death and judgment; and, it may be, you have heard and thought something about Jesus: but has it not been with an *if*? You have been thinking, Christ will save me *if* I live better; I shall go to heaven *if* I never wrong any one, and do my duty; God will perhaps have mercy on me *if* I pray to him enough; I shall have my sins forgiven me through Jesus *if* I live a righteous and godly life; I shall hope to be happy *if* I serve God and obey him. Now here is that little word *if*, which was in the thief's mind, and was the proof that he did not believe in Christ. And using this word *if* is said to be railing on Jesus. Now there is really no *if* at all in the case. Jesus is the Christ, the one sent by God the Father to die for (instead of) sinners: and a soul that believes *that*, is saved without any *ifs*. Neither does it depend upon a person's life or conduct, because if that had been the case, how could a THIEF ever have been saved?

Consider, then, that you are either doubting the *power* or the *will* of God to save. But can you doubt his power? Do not you think the blood of God's own Son is of value sufficient? Do you think there could be found a better sacrifice for sin? You surely must own that God has the *power* to save. Well, then, it must be his *will* to save that you doubt. What! when he has said he willeth *not* the death of a sinner? Dare you imagine, for a moment, that God is not ready and willing to receive all that come to him through Christ? It was his love that provided Jesus for poor sinners. It was

because of his love that he spared not his own Son. O do not doubt then his willingness to save! but believe that he is so willing, that he has himself provided the way, even his own Son, that *whosoever* believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life.

Now turn to the case of the other thief,—he rebuked the one that railed on Jesus, saying, “Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?” He did not say, Do you not fear hell? or punishment? but “Dost not thou FEAR GOD?” “The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.” Now no one in this world has naturally the fear of God. The scripture says of men, that “they have no fear of God before their eyes.” You may, perhaps, think you fear God; but the truth is, the only thing you fear is hell, and eternal torment; if there were no punishment for wickedness and sin in another world, you would have no fear at all. If you really feared God, of course you would not do that which you know God dislikes; you would serve him “with reverence and godly fear.” And if you really feared God, you would not fear hell. The first thing a person that really feared God would do, would be to believe his word. To believe that he has spoken the truth when he says, “He so loved the world as to give his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believed in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” To doubt or disbelieve his word, is a plain proof that you do not fear him; even as it would be clear proof that you did not reverence or fear a man on this earth, if you doubted every word he spoke.

The poor dying thief was so occupied by thoughts of God, and the fear of God, that he seems to forget the circumstances of guilt, and misery, and pain, in which he is alike perishing, and even rebukes his companion. Yes, one dying thief can rebuke another (though himself no less guilty, no less a sinner than the other) and that because the sense of God’s presence fills the soul; the fear of God overcame all other thoughts, feelings, and fears. And then he does not try to conceal his guilt, or to make light of his sin. He does not make excuses for being a thief, or say he could not help it—

that the temptation was great. He does not ask God to excuse him on that account. No: he owns that he and his fellow thief are both justly condemned. "We indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds." You, perhaps, when you have been conscious that you have sinned, have made some excuses for it, or have thought in yourself, "After all, it is not so very great a sin; I am not so bad as, or worse than, some that I see round me; this is but a little sin, and God is a God of mercy: I will try to do better in future, and I dare say God will forgive me." Now to be thinking or saying this, is to prove that you are quite ignorant of your own evil heart and of the holiness of God. The dying thief did not try to make any excuse, but on the contrary, owned himself a guilty, justly condemned sinner; neither did he try to make any bargain with God, by promising to live better in future if God would forgive him. Indeed, how could he? He had but an hour or two to live,—he was nailed hand and foot to the cross. It would have been no use for a dying man to make resolutions which he would never have time to perform. He felt and owned himself a sinner,—he did not attempt to justify himself, but he called on Jesus as the Lord,—on one that had done nothing amiss—one that was dying by his side, the just instead of the unjust; and paradise was opened to him.

And now, if you desire to be saved, you must take the same ground as this thief did. You must acknowledge yourself a ruined sinner, justly condemned, a child of wrath by nature; you must not shelter, or think to shelter yourself in being better than others; you must not think that good resolutions will save you, but own to God that your heart is altogether bad, deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked, and look to Jesus, who died on purpose for such ruined sinners, who have no power to help themselves, and have nothing good in them to which they can trust. I know people are ready to say, in a careless, heedless way, "We are all sinners;" as if it were just a matter of course, and of but little consequence. But remember, to own yourself a sinner, is to own that you are justly condemned,—it is

to own that if God were this moment to visit you with what you deserve, hell, with all its eternity of torments, would inevitably be your portion; it is condemning yourself out of your own mouth. Think then, that, if you stop there, the very confession that you are a sinner, is only adding to your condemnation: yes, that very word, that very thought, would fully vindicate the justice of God, were he on account of your sins to visit you with eternal punishment. The thief did not stop there. To know himself a sinner justly condemned, was agony to his soul; but he saw one in the same condemnation, even Jesus, who had done nothing amiss,—one who, though righteous, was numbered with the transgressors,—one who, though sinless, was made sin,—one whom he could look upon as his substitute before God, bearing his sins, dying under the curse due to himself. He did not say, "Save thyself and us." No: he knew that it was because Jesus did not save himself, that he, a poor dying thief, was saved. He saw that God had not even spared his own Son; and therefore, sinner as he was, he could fully rely upon the love of God as saving him. And looking through the sufferings of Christ to that which was the object of his sufferings and death, the thief thought only of the glory. His sins need no longer press on his conscience, there was a spotless victim by his side bearing them; no longer need he fear God's justice, *the blood of Jesus* was flowing to vindicate that: sinner as he was, he might fearlessly stand before the throne of God, because God himself had found the ransom for all his sins in the death of his own Son.

All, it was true, had forsaken the "Man of Sorrows," and all around were reviling him. But a dying thief, a poor perishing malefactor, dared to vindicate the character of Jesus against all the world. The High Priest had declared Jesus to be a blasphemer. The elders had judged him guilty of death. The multitude had preferred a robber and murderer to him. Herod and his men of war had mocked him. Pilate and the Romans had crucified him. Peter had denied him; his own disciples had forsaken him: but the dying thief gave the

lie to them all, and said, "This man hath done nothing amiss," and owned him as Lord, when all the world beside had cast him out and treated him as a worthless malefactor.

People are apt to say, they want evidences of salvation—they want to feel that they are saved; *but simple faith in Jesus, belief in God's word respecting him, is the only true ground of peace or of salvation.* What evidence had the thief that Jesus was Lord? All seemed contrary to it. The crown of thorns did not speak of much royal dignity. Being left to perish on a cross did not seem to point a person out as Lord; and yet, contrary to all appearances, the thief owned Jesus as Lord, and as one who would come hereafter in his kingdom. And this simple faith of the thief God reckoned to him for righteousness. The thief had no righteousness of his own; for he was receiving the due reward of his evil deeds; but he believed in Jesus, and *that* God counted to him as righteousness, and that fitted him for paradise. And you, dear reader, have no righteousness of your own. God cannot, does not expect to find any righteousness in you; for he says, there is none righteous, no not one; but if you believe, if you own Jesus as indeed your Saviour, God will reckon that to you for righteousness, and that will fit you for heaven.

And further, the thief did not trust in man's opinions. You perhaps say (what many others say), that some people hold one opinion about salvation, and some another, and you do not know which is right, and you dare say they may be all right in their way. Now to believe really, is to be able to say, "I know this is right; and whoever does not think this, that person is wrong, be he who he may.—Here is God's truth, and let men say what they will, and let them try to pervert it as they may, this is his truth, and must stand; yea, 'let God be true, and every man a liar.'" The thief boldly defended Christ, notwithstanding all man's opinions; and boldly owned Jesus as Lord, notwithstanding the shameful death Jesus was suffering. And the Lord therefore owned the thief as a fit companion for himself in paradise. He did not say, "You are too bold, too pre-

sumptuous; you have been too great a sinner to be saved; you must wait and see whether you live better." No: "Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To-day shalt thou be with me in paradise." This is the ready way in which God answers faith. The Son of God came into the world to save sinners; and here was a sinner to be saved. And when the soldiers came and brake the legs of the thieves, they found that Jesus was dead already; for he had poured out his soul unto death, on purpose that this wretched ruined thief might have everlasting life. And in all the fearful agony of that death, when all had deserted him, and when at last even God had forsaken him, yet it must have been great consolation to the soul of Jesus, that there was one dying malefactor by his side who still owned him. Angels had ministered to Jesus when he hungered in the wilderness: an angel had been sent to strengthen him when in the agony in the garden; but a dying thief was the one that had the honour and glory of affording him a little word of comfort in his death. For man he was dying, instead of man he was suffering; it was left therefore to a ruined man to refresh his soul in his last bitter agony and death.

And now, reader, "there is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth." You may be the source of joy even to God himself. Own his grace, believe that he is love, have faith in the blood of Jesus, own that name as alone precious, confess it before men; and yours will be confessed with joyful acclamations, even by the Lord himself, before the angels in heaven.

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