

Fulton County Gospel News

Good News About Christ And His Church For All Of The World

“. . . Christ is the head of the church: and He is the Savior of the body.” - Ephesians 5:23

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WHAT TO DO WHEN THE SKY IS FALLING

by Roelf L. Ruffner

We all took notice this month as the economy of our nation worsened. The stock market continued to tumble, banks began to gobble each other up, financial credit became almost non-existent and politicians ran around in a panic blaming each other for the state of the economy. It reminds me how **fragile** human society is and how things can change quickly from stability to chaos. Yet for Christians and the Lord's church these difficult times can also be an opportunity.

An opportunity to look inward

In the coming months our life may change dramatically. The job we depend upon, the way of life we have grown accustomed to and even the dwelling we live in may change. We may find fear growing in our minds. The Bible reminds us, "*Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away*" (James 4:14).

The child of God should use these times as an opportunity to grow **spiritually**. We can begin to draw closer to God by depending upon Him more and more. "*Give us each day our daily bread*" (Matthew 6:11) should truly become our prayer and anticipation. We can also seek the bread of life which comes from God – the word of God. It will give us the **hope** and **courage** we need face any situation. "*Let your conversation be*

without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leaven thee, nor forsake thee" (Hebrews 13:5).

Likewise the church can look to God's word once again and purge herself of sin and false doctrine. She can **repent** and become what God intended for her to be: "*a spiritual house, and an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ*" (1 Peter 2:5).

An opportunity to spread the gospel

For too long our nation has turned its attention to the material rather than the truly spiritual. Plenty and opportunity have spoiled our nation into thinking that God and the Bible do not matter. Instead, hedonism and apathy have ruled the day. But a change in one's financial situation can replace all that with insecurity and emptiness. Men and women may realize that their former lives were shallow and purposeless. "*And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger*" (Luke 15:16-17, emphasis RLR). Perhaps our countrymen will come to their senses and realize their need for their heavenly Father.

This is why every Christian should be prepared to feed hungry souls with the gospel of Christ. Let each of us be a **soul winner**! The church should not hide behind its doors but intensify its evangelistic efforts. This is the "work" of the church (Ephesians 3:10). Brethren, let us revive that one- to three-week Gospel Meeting of yesteryear! Preachers, let us preach the pure, **unadulterated** Bible to these folks. They don't need philosophy or psychological pep talks but a "*thus saith the Lord*" for their starving souls. Let us seek to have the gospel transform them from children of the devil to children of God (Romans 1:16; 6:17).

An opportunity to help others

In the future we may see a sharp increase in the truly needy and the homeless. What an opportunity to open up our hearts and wallets and show **Christian love** to our neighbor; especially if they are brethren! (Galatians 6:10). I heard the financial counselor Dave Ramsey once say that he believed that the sole purpose of money was to help others. I believe that the Bible teaches this as well: "*Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom*" (Luke 6:38).

Brethren, let us use the **opportunities** the Lord gives us in this life to serve Him. Life is too short and eternity is too long to do otherwise.

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“I WANT TO BE SAVED LIKE THE THIEF ON THE CROSS”

by Lee Moses

It is shameful when a beautiful Biblical portrait becomes warped into a grotesque aberration for the furtherance of false doctrine. Such is often done to the noble thief who stood up for Jesus as they and another thief were crucified together:

And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be 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 23:39-43).

Sadly, some pervert this blessed man's example into a defense of the unbiblical "faith only" doctrine. When advocates of this doctrine are presented with clear Biblical evidence of the need to be baptized prior to receiving salvation, they respond, "I want to be saved like the thief on the cross!" They reason that since the thief on the cross could be saved without being baptized, they can as well.

First of all, it might be worth noting that the Bible never states whether or not the thief on the cross had been baptized previously. When John was baptizing, "*there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins*" (Mark 1:5). Subsequently, "*Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John*" (John 4:1). Large numbers of people had been baptized upon hearing John's and Jesus' preaching. That the thief knew that Jesus was to "come into His kingdom" implies that he had heard Jesus and the kingdom preached at some time. Thus, it is entirely possible that the thief on the cross was one of the multitudes that were baptized. This is not to say that he **was** certainly baptized, but to note that those who have to resort to the thief on the cross to affirm salvation without baptism resort to an instance in which it is not known one way or the other whether or not a man was baptized. It is a rather weak leg on which they stand.

Second, the thief on the cross was saved under the Old Testament, as the Old Testament was the Divine law in

force throughout the life of Christ (Matthew 5:17-18; Galatians 4:4). The death of Christ was required before the New Testament could be put in place: "*For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth*" (Hebrews 9:16-17). And through His death, the Old Testament was taken out of the way, and the New Testament put in its place (Ephesians 2:15; Colossians 2:14; Hebrews 8:6). Now that mankind is accountable to the New Testament, one is saved by the means directed by the New Testament, which includes baptism (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4).

Third, the circumstances surrounding the thief's salvation were unique. While on earth, Jesus performed a number of works like none seen before, and that were not to continue indefinitely after His death (Matthew 9:33; John 9:32; 1 Corinthians 13:8). This included Jesus' varying determinants for bestowing the forgiveness of sins. Jesus affirmed that "*the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins*" (Mark 2:10). While on earth, He occasionally bestowed forgiveness of sins under unique circumstances. One such occasion was when He granted forgiveness of sins to a bedridden paralytic man who was let down through the roof before Jesus (Mark 2:3-5). The paralytic's faith was not even a factor; it was the faith of his **friends**, who let him down through the roof, that prompted his forgiveness (verse 5). (It might also be worth noting that Jesus never commended anyone's faith, neither upon this occasion nor upon any other, until He observed that faith in action.) Jesus' forgiveness of the paralytic and of the thief on the cross were similarly unique; yet there is not similar clamoring, saying, "I want to be saved like the paralytic man!"

Why? It is because the thief's forgiveness seems to justify the "faith only" doctrine, while the paralytic's does not. However, both situations were unique, neither delineating the necessary steps of salvation, especially not for men and women today under the New Testament.

Thus, one misleads himself when he seeks to be saved in the same manner as the thief on the cross. Yet there are numerous ways one **should** want to be like the thief on the cross:

"I Want to Stand Against Sin"

The first thief on the cross "railed," or "blasphemed," against Christ. The second thief knew that such words were spoken against an innocent man, and thus sinful: "*He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, even they both are abomination to the LORD*" (Proverbs 17:15). Not only were they spoken against an innocent man, but against a man that both thieves had at least heard to be the Christ, the Anointed of God. The Hebrews writer exhorts readers to "*consider him [Jesus] that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself*" (Hebrews 12:3). One such contradicting sinner was the first thief, and the second thief distanced himself from the sin of the first, and rebuked his error.

We should aim to take such a firm, resolute stand for the truth. And when one stands **for** the truth, he stands **against** all things opposed to it (Psalm 119:128; Proverbs 8:13; Romans 12:9). The second thief did not compromise with the self-seeking worldly mind of the first, and we can have no compromise with the world (Romans 12:2; James 4:4; 1 John 2:15). We must distance ourselves from sin, and rebuke it: "*And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them*" (Ephesians 5:11).

"I Want to Acknowledge My Shortcomings"

When the second thief rebuked the first thief's sin, he did not do so in an attempt to make himself look good. He admitted he was wrong and deserving of his punishment, while the first would make no such admission.

One cannot live righteously while refusing to acknowledge his sins. Solomon warned, "*He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy*" (Proverbs 28:13). One must certainly forsake the sins he has done, but he must also confess them. John speaks of the second law of pardon, "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (1 John 1:9). Some are too stubborn to admit they could ever be guilty of wrongdoing (compare with verses 8, 10). Some make a "confession" in which they actually attempt to **conceal** their sin (such as, "**If** I have sinned . . ."), even though their brethren know exactly what their sin is (compare with James 5:16). Even Judas made a far better confession than this (Matthew 27:3-4). How much better it is to be like the thief on the cross, who acknowledged his shortcomings!

"I Want to Acknowledge Christ's Superiority"

Not only did the thief on the cross stand against sin, he stood with Jesus. He acknowledged his own shortcomings while acknowledging that Christ had none.

Christ provides a way far better than any alternative. His way is better than any other religion, for no other religion looks toward the one true God (1 Corinthians 8:5-6). His way is better than any human philosophy, for all such wisdom is foolishness compared to the wisdom of God (1:19-20, 25; 3:18-20). Christ's way

is the **only** way; as He said, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me*" (John 14:6). How amazing it is that the Divine One of such perfection provides us access to God! "*For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens*" (Hebrews 7:26). We may as well acknowledge Christ's superiority while we are here on earth; for the day is coming when all will acknowledge his superiority—but an acknowledgment that waits until then will be too late to be of profit (Philippians 2:9-11; Romans 14:10-12).

"I Want to be Forgiven of My Sins"

The thief on the cross had committed heinous transgressions to be deserving of crucifixion. "Crucifixion was regarded as one of the worst forms of execution. Cicero calls it the supreme capital penalty, the most painful, dreadful and ugly."¹ Perhaps the thief's crime was accompanied by violence or insurrection against the government. Additionally, the thief may have gone beyond his capital offense to join the first thief in reviling Christ, before he changed his mind and his actions (Matthew 27:44; Mark 15:32). However, as he did change his mind and his actions, he could be forgiven of his sins—regardless of how atrocious they may have been. It may have seemed incredibly audacious for such a sinner to request, "*Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom*" (Luke 23:42). Yet Christ clearly conveyed that he was pardoned of whatever he had done.

If we will change our minds and our actions, we likewise can freely partake of God's forgiveness. And what a cleansing thing it is to have all guilt removed, to restore one's soul to fellowship with the One in Whose image it was created! As David exclaimed, "*Blessed is he whose*

transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile” (Psalm 32:1-2).

“I Want to be with Christ in Paradise Upon My Death”

Not only was the thief on the cross forgiven, but Christ also promised him, *“Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).* As soon as the thief would yield up his spirit in death, he would pass from indescribable agony to unspeakable joy. He was going to a place of desired comfort and delightful company. Paradise is depicted as a place where Abraham comforts his previously troubled descendants in his bosom (Luke 16:22-25; compare with Romans 4:11-12; Galatians 3:29). The thief was told he would be with **Christ** in paradise; and faithful Christians likewise *“depart . . . to be with Christ”* upon ending their mundane sojourn in the flesh (Philippians 1:23). What greater delight could there be, other than receiving one’s final glorification, entering into the city of God on the Judgment Day—a delight to be enjoyed by all inhabitants of paradise? (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17).

The thief on the cross provides a beautiful portrait of salvation, and of what we should all strive to become, regardless of what we have been before. No, we cannot expect to be saved in the exact same manner as the thief on the cross. But if we will stand where he did, acknowledge what he did, and submit ourselves to Christ as he did (according to the terms Christ gives to **us**—Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 8:35-38), we can be saved just as surely as he was. I want to be saved like the thief on the cross!

1 Johannes Schneider, *Stauros, stauroō, anastauroō*, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999 printing), 7:573.

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GOD’S PLAN OF SALVATION

1. Hearing the word of God (Romans 10:17; Acts 16:32).
2. Believing what is taught (Mark 16:16; Hebrews 11:6).
3. Repentance (Acts 2:38; Luke 13:3; Acts 17:30).
4. Confession (Romans 10:9, 10; Acts 8:37).
5. Baptism (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16; I Peter 3:21; Romans 6:3, 4).
6. After the above five steps, faithful Christian Living (I Peter 2:11, 12; Revelation 2:10).

THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

1. The Bible is its only guide (Romans 1:16; I Thess. 2:13).
2. Wears a Biblical Name (Romans 16:16).
3. Established at the right place (Isaiah 2:2, 3; Acts 2).
4. Established at the right time (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2).
5. Established on the right person (Matthew 16:18; Acts 2:36).
6. Saved are in it (Ephesians 5:23; Acts 2:47).
7. Its members are enrolled in heaven (Hebrews 12:23).
8. Membership in it is obtained by obedience to God’s commands including baptism (Acts 2:41-47; I Corinthians 12:13).

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