

Deathbed Conversion: Should You Risk It?

Steve Burchett

Two men lost their lives on the same day that Jesus died on a cross. They spent their final hours next to the Savior of sinners (Luke 23:32-33). These men were criminals, and they hated Jesus (cf. Mt. 27:44). But just before dying, one of these robbers began to trust in Jesus to save him. Recognizing his guilt for the crimes he had committed, and the judgment he deserved, he cried out, "Jesus, remember me when You come in your kingdom!" (Luke 23:41-42).

How did Jesus respond to this man who had wasted his life? How did Jesus answer this crook who would never be able to serve the Lord as a church member or a husband or father? "He said to him, 'Truly I say to you, today you shall be with me in Paradise'" (Luke 23:43). As the hymn-writer put it, "Oh the deep, deep love of Jesus, vast, unmeasured, boundless, free!"

If there is grace for somebody like this terrible sinner, the grace of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ could surely save a sinner like you. Jesus said in John 8:34, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin." Jesus indicts us all. We are all under the power of sin because we all sin. And left to ourselves and our sin, God's wrath rests upon us (John 3:36) and Hell will be our eternal dwelling (2 Thess. 1:8-9).

But there is good news. At the cross "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor. 5:19). Through His death, Jesus "purchased for God . . . men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9). Jesus paid for the deliverance of His people by giving His life in their place. We know God was satisfied in His Son's death, because Jesus was raised from the dead. As the angel declared in Luke 24:6, "He has risen!" God the Father's wrath *has* been appeased. He will not make believers pay the penalty for their sins because He was satisfied in His Son's payment.

The repentant criminal did not have all of the knowledge that we have about Jesus. He *did* hear Jesus' prayer for His persecutors: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). He *did* witness the sign above Jesus' head which, though meant to mock, actually proclaimed the truth: "This is the king of the Jews" (Luke 23:38). And ultimately, as God did a work of grace in his heart through the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, he began to piece all of this together. His response to what he knew about Jesus was to trust in Him to save him. He could look nowhere else. He could do nothing but hate his sin, confess it for what it was, and cry out for mercy.

So how should *you* respond to the knowledge that you have about the death and resurrection of Jesus? Perhaps you hear the story of the repentant thief and conclude, "I'll just wait until the end of my life to repent of my sins and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ." Here are three reasons to rethink your deathbed strategy:

1. You cannot assume that God will save you in the end if you ignore Him all of your life. Yes, Jesus *did* save a criminal at the very end of his life, but as far as I can tell he didn't know the truth all of His life. He only "saw" it and heard it at the end, and when he did, he believed *promptly*. This story is not calling upon us to respond to Jesus in the final hour of our lives, but to trust in Him for salvation *in the present hour!* The longer you reject the truth, the harder your heart becomes (cf. Eph. 4:17-19)

2. There is no guarantee that you will be able to think rationally at the end of your life. I spend several days each month ministering to people in a local nursing home. Some of the people have sharp minds, but a large number do not. I met a resident recently who was roaming the hallways with her toothbrush, towel, and teddy bear. She told me she was going somewhere, but she didn't know where. Her ability to think logically has faded away. That could be you someday.

3. Younger people than you, as healthy as you, have died suddenly. On a recent visit to my home state of Ohio, rain was falling and turning to ice as soon as it hit the ground. That night, in a tiny community, two different car wrecks happened within just a few miles of each other. Young people die every day unexpectedly. Even children. Therefore, "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts" (Heb. 3:15).

"There is one case of deathbed repentance recorded, that of the penitent thief, that none should despair; and only one that none should presume."
(author unknown)