

## The Repentant Thief

I have been allowed to speak to you from Paradise. I do not deserve to be here. But I discovered something by asking around. Nobody deserves to be here!

I was executed next to Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus Christ, the Son of God! I did not know much but I knew enough to reach out to Him. That knowledge was a gift from on high because I had not made a systematic study of religion, the law or righteousness.

I knew that I was violating the law all the time. I got started young by stealing from the markets, then from people's homes and even from people traveling on the roads. I sometimes had to threaten violence and several times probably came close to killing. But I do not think that any I left unconscious after beating and robbing them actually died. Of course, I did not stick around to make sure.

But I did hunger for righteousness. I heard that phrase when Jesus taught one day while I was mingling with the crowd looking for easy thefts. When people are listening intently to something, they don't pay close attention to their bags. Jesus also talked about those who mourn. I mourned! I wanted to change but just could not break free of my habits or my associations.

Once while working a crowd, I got to see a great miracle. Jesus fed the crowd by making food multiply. That convinced me there was something special about Him – he had to be a genuine prophet of God. I believed in God. I just did not seem capable of pleasing God.

I had been pretty clever in getting away with what I did. I guess you call it "street smarts," but finally the worst possible thing happened. I was caught in the act and brought before the authorities. Jewish law had serious penalties for stealing – repayment of about 7 times the value of that which was stolen. Roman law was brutal – death!

I guess you have something called "death row" in your day, although I understand it is not used as often as it was in my day. There was another thief, also sentenced to death, jailed with me. I had never met him before, but he had quite a reputation. Of course, so did I. He did not seem sorry for what he had done and blamed the system, the law and bad luck. I was remorseful, not only for being caught but for all that I had done. I was hungry for righteousness but now it was too late to reform.

We were marched to the place they called "The Skull" and soldiers fastened us to crosses. Crowds had already gathered, gaping at us. Why is it that people come to watch executions? Is it to convince themselves that they are better than the criminals? Anyway, despite the intense pain and humiliation, there is an amazing clarity when you know you are going to die. I glanced over at Jesus. He had been flogged almost to death before being nailed to the cross. I am amazed that he had even been able to walk from the prison to the hill of execution.

But then I heard something that suddenly got my total attention, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." He was calling on His Father, the One Who could forgive sins! He was forgiving the people who were unjustly executing Him! It proved that He was the Son of God! It also showed that He was merciful, and I longed for forgiveness.

Then my fellow criminal began to vent his anger and call on Jesus saying, "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" Again, it is amazing how many thoughts you can have in a moment that is also clouded by pain, but I immediately knew that it was absolutely the wrong way to ask. You don't make demands of a King. You ask for mercy not justice, and it has to come from a humble heart.

I said to that other thief, "Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then I said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." I was convinced there would be a kingdom some day. It crossed my mind that Jesus just might get Himself and me off the cross and go on to rule as the Messiah, but He did something even more wonderful, He said, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in Paradise."

And I was!! And on getting here, He explained everything to me including how He had allowed me to fall into a life of crime and be caught, in order to break my pride and allow me to repent and experience His love and grace. I hungered for righteousness, and I was filled to overflowing!

I hope it does not take as much to convince you of your need, but hope that you too will come to Him in humility and gratitude.

Luke 23