

**Words of Assurance**  
Part 2 - When Love Speaks  
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From time to time you hear a breaking news story that uses the phrase "saved at the last minute." For instance, in New Jersey there was a police force being eliminated due to budget cuts but a Federal grant came through hours before the cuts and so the headline read, "Jobs saved at the last minute." Another story I heard was about a yacht carrying five people that was sinking in the Caribbean but just at the last minute they were saved by a cruise ship that spotted them and was able to rescue them. Another story I read was about the Interpol in Europe. They had been monitoring the internet for terrorist activity and they discovered a suicide pact between two young teens and the teens were "saved at the last minute" by quick acting police. Another story I read was about an inmate on death row in the state of Texas, he was just about to be given a lethal injection when a stay of execution came from the governor and he was "saved at the last minute." These folks all became known around the world because they were saved at the last minute.

Today I want us to look at the most famous last minute save in recorded history. It's the story of the thief on the cross. This last minute save is recorded for us in the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Luke's Gospel. It says, *"One of the criminals hanging beside Jesus hurled insults at him. 'So you're the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself - and us, too, while you're at it!' But the other criminal rebuked him, 'Don't you fear God even when you're dying? We deserve to die for our evil deeds, but this man has not done anything wrong!' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.' And Jesus replied, 'I assure you, today you'll be with me in paradise.'"* (Luke 23:39-43)

Friends, this is an extremely important text in the Bible. It's one of the most important texts you can ever study because it tells you what you need to know to be saved. It tells you what you need to believe in order to receive salvation. It shows you how you can have assurance of your salvation. As you listen to what I'm about to tell you, I want you to listen as if your life depends on it—because it does. Your eternal destiny depends on knowing and believing what the thief knew and believed.

The story tells us what we must know to be saved, to be in God's kingdom, to be part of God's family, to have eternal life. There are a lot of things you can know but there are some things in life you must know. There are a lot of things you can learn about the Bible and about Jesus, but there are some things that are essential to learn in order to have salvation. They are necessary. They are vital. That's what I'm going to be talking about today.

In this story we have two guys, criminals, evil doers—two guys with two very different reactions to Jesus. The first guy hurls insults at Jesus. The word there in the Greek is the word blasphemo. We get the word "blaspheme" from it. It means to demean, to put down, to revile or degrade God. The first guy blasphemes Jesus. The second guy responds quite differently to Jesus. The second guy turns to Jesus. He's no theologian. He doesn't know a whole lot. He's lived a life of crime. That's why he's on a cross. But he knows enough to be saved. Here are five things he knew. These are five things we must know, too, in order to be sure we are saved.

**FIRST, HE KNEW THAT HE WOULD FACE GOD AFTER DEATH.** He understood the seriousness of his situation. He was about to die, a terrible death on a cross, and then he would pass through death's door into eternity where he would come face to face with his Creator and have to give an account for how he

had lived his life. When the other criminal starts hurling insults at Jesus, this man says, ***"Don't you fear God even when you're dying?"*** (Luke 23:40) He's asking the other thief, "Don't you realize you're dying and as soon as you do you will come before God to be judged for all that you have done. You're criticizing Jesus when you're about to pass from this world to the next and find yourself in the presence of God to be judged."

The reason why people treat God so casually, why they go through life ignoring God, why they disregard His commandments and neglect His teachings, why they refuse to get to know God and live as He has called them to live, is because they have accepted a lie that when you die, you die and that's it—nothing more to worry about—you simply cease to exist. That's a huge mistake with eternal consequences—a fatal mistake. Death is only the beginning. Death is only the passage from this world to the next where you will either spend eternity with God or be separated from God and all that is good for eternity. The thief may have made some bad decisions in his life time, decisions that ended up putting him on a cross, but he wasn't stupid enough to think that death was the end of existence. He knew when he died he would pass into the presence of God where he would have to give an account for how he had lived his life here on earth. And so will we.

The Bible tells us, ***"Everyone must die once, and after that be judged by God."*** (Hebrews 9:27) That's one appointment you won't be able to miss. It won't be canceled either, nor will you be able to be late for it. In fact, that appointment was set for you before you were even born. The Bible says, ***"All the days ordained for me were written in your book before even one of them came to be."*** (Psalm 139:16) In a conversation with the Almighty, Job says, ***"Man's days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed."*** (Job 14:5)

The mortality rate for Americans is the same as it is for everyone else in the world. Everyone's mortality rate 100%. Everyone is going to die and when they do they will find themselves in the presence of God to be judged. Only a fool would go through life unprepared for something so inevitable. The second thief was a fool, but the first thief knew what was coming and he took it very seriously. So should we.

**THE SECOND THING THE THIEF KNEW IS THAT HE HAD SINNED AGAINST GOD.** In verse 41 he says to the other thief, "*We deserve to die for our evil deeds.*" (Luke 23:41) That's called a confession. That statement is an acknowledgement of the life of sin he had lived and that he knew he deserves what he was getting. He doesn't make any excuses. He owns up to his sin.

Here's what the Bible says about confession: "*If we confess our sins to God, he is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from every wrong.*" (1<sup>st</sup> John 1:9) Our part, our responsibility is to confess our sins to God. God's part, his promise is to forgive us. The Bible also tells us that we all have sinned and fallen short of what God created us to be. We all have blown it; each and every one of us. We've all chosen to believe lies and to perpetuate them. We've all chosen to ignore God and we've even taught others to do the same. We have disobeyed God and deserve the punishment for our sins.

What is that punishment? The Bible says, "**The wages of sin is death....**" (Romans 6:23) You say, wait a minute. I'm not like the thief on the cross. I've never done anything to deserve the death penalty. God knew we'd think like that and that's why he inspired the apostle James to write, "*For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.*" (James 2:10) Just one sin makes us imperfect. God cannot overlook our sins. He is a holy God. He cannot allow us to enter into heaven with even one sin unforgiven

and un-atoned for. The thief knew he was a sinner and he confessed his sin. He acknowledged that he deserved death and we must too.

**THE THIRD THING THE THIEF KNEW IS THAT JESUS WAS MORE THAN A MAN.** He says to the other thief, "*We deserve to die for our evil deeds, but this man has not done anything wrong!*" (Luke 23:40) This is where the original Greek word for "anything" is important for us to understand. The thief is saying that Jesus is completely and totally without sin. Have you ever met anybody in your life you can say that about? No you can't because you're on a broken planet that is inhabited by broken and sinful people. Jesus was without sin and the thief knew that. He knew Jesus was more than a man—that he was the Holy One sent in to the world to save us from our sins by offering Himself up as the sinless sacrifice, the Lamb of God without blemish.

I went on the internet this week and I typed in to Google the question: Who has saved more people from death than anyone else? I found a name that I never heard of. This guy just died last year at the age of 95. He was an agricultural scientist in the twentieth century who invented **hi-yield draught resistant, disease resistant crops**. He's credited with saving the lives of over one billion people in China, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and many other countries who would have died from starvation. He won the Nobel Peace Prize, the Congressional Medal of Honor, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and yet the world has virtually ignored him. Hardly anyone even knows his name. His name is Norman Borlaug. When he won the Nobel Prize, the executive director of the UN food program at the time said this about him, "**Norman Borlaug saved more lives than any man in human history. His heart was as big as his brilliant mind. But it was his passion and his compassion that moved the world.**"

Even though Norman Borlaug is credited with saving more lives than any other human being, he was still just a human being. He was very much aware of that. He also knew that one day he would stand before the Lord and be required to give an account for how he had lived his life and he also knew that he was a sinner in need of a Savior. Norman Borlaug was a Christian. He put his faith in Jesus Christ to save him from his sins. His faith in Jesus Christ is what motivated his scientific efforts. The Bible says, ***"God had Christ, who was sinless, take our sin so that we might receive God's approval through Him."*** (2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:21) Norman Borlaug knew that. The thief on the cross knew. We need to know that too.

**THE FOURTH THING THE THIEF KNEW IS THAT SALVATION IS FOR THE ASKING.** In verse 42 the thief asks, ***"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*** (Luke 23:42) Salvation is something God gives to us. We must ask for. It isn't something we can do for ourselves. It is a gift from God. It is an act of God's grace. The thief doesn't try to minimize that he's a sinner. He doesn't try to rationalize that he's a sinner. He doesn't try to blame anyone for the fact that he's a sinner. He doesn't try to bargain with God. He doesn't beg God for salvation. He doesn't try to bribe God for salvation. He demonstrates to us that salvation is for the asking, to all people who will acknowledge their sin and ask Jesus for salvation. It is God who does the remembering, not us. We only must do the asking. The Bible says, ***"It is by grace that you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."*** (Ephesians 2:8-9)

When the dying man asks to be remembered, Jesus responds by saying, ***"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."*** (Luke 23:43) In the midst of his agony and suffering, Jesus offers the thief words of assurance.

Jesus' words of assurance teach us some important things about salvation.

First, salvation is **IMMEDIATE**. Jesus says to the man, "*Today you will be with me in paradise.*" He doesn't tell the man, "Let me think about it." He doesn't say, "You'll have to go to purgatory for a while first." The Bible doesn't teach that there is such a thing as purgatory, but if there was, this man would be a perfect candidate for it. He lived his whole life as a criminal and now at the last minute, while nailed to a cross, he slips into the kingdom of God. Saved at the last minute! He should have to go somewhere to prove he's really a changed man, and work off some of those sins, but that's not what Jesus says. Jesus says to him, "*Today you will be with me in paradise.*" Salvation is IMMEDIATE. When you confess your sins and turn to Christ for salvation, you are saved IMMEDIATELY.

Second, salvation is **CERTAIN**. Jesus says, "You WILL be with me...." God assures us, when we confess our sins and turn to Christ for salvation we WILL be saved. The apostle Paul tells us, "*For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.*" 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:3-7

Third, salvation is a **relationship**. When we are saved, we enter into a relationship with Jesus. He tells the thief, "...you will be with ME..."

Fourth, salvation is **forever**. When we confess our sins and turn Jesus, trusting in what he has done for us on the cross, we begin a relationship with the Lord that will last forever. Jesus says, "*Today you will be with me in Paradise.*"

Paradise is by definition a place where existence is positive, harmonious and timeless. Salvation is forever.

All this is yours for the asking. The Bible says, "***Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.***" (Romans 10:13) If there is anyone here today who has never asked Jesus for salvation, please do not delay. The Bible says, "***This is the hour to receive God's favor! Today is the day to be saved!***" (2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 6:2)

There were two thieves, one on each side of Jesus. One chose to confess his sins and turn to Jesus for salvation. The other didn't. Jesus gives you the choice. He's not going to force you into Paradise. He's not going to force you to turn to Him. He's not going to force you into a relationship with Him. It's your choice. Don't delay.