

## **Been Thinking About: Two Thieves** **(an article by RBC Ministries President Mart De Haan)**

Crucifixion was torture. Leather straps or spikes were used to hang a condemned man on a pole. Like a helpless animal tangled in a barbed wire fence, the victim could survive for days with excruciating pain. Death usually came by suffocation when, hanging by his hands, the victim lost the strength to draw another breath.

**Three men on three trees.** In the Spring of 33 AD, the crucifixion of three men, outside the city walls of Jerusalem, changed the course of world history. Roman executioners hammered nails through the wrists and ankles of three men and left them to die. The event itself was common in the ancient Mid East. And yet, 2,000 years later, the world still talks about those three deaths.

I found an explanation of the significance of those deaths written on the flyleaf of an old Bible. In words I have found memorable, someone had written, “One man died with guilt in him and on him. A second man died with guilt in him but not on him. The third died with guilt on him but not in him.” Since finding that quote, I’ve held on to it as a profoundly simple description of some differences we all need to understand.

**One died with sin in him and on him.** He was the first of two thieves executed that day. By the law of the land he was given the punishment he deserved. By a judge wearing the authority of the Roman Caesar, he was sentenced and condemned, like a house that is no longer fit to live in.

The first thief seems to have died an angry man. He was probably angry with himself for getting caught. He was probably angry with the judge who sentenced him. He was probably angry with all those who had let him down along the way. He seems to have been especially angry with the man named Jesus who hung innocently at his side.

The first thief wasn’t alone in his contempt for Jesus. Others shared his feelings. It was easy to be furious with someone who claimed to be the light and hope of the world – then hung like a common criminal, not even saving Himself from death.

Angry with Jesus for being unable to help Himself or anyone else (Luke 23:39), the first thief died with his own sin in him on him.

One died with sin in him but not on him. There was a second thief executed that day. At first he joined the others who ridiculed and insulted Jesus. For a while he too mocked Jesus with the challenge to save Himself and them if He really was the promised Messiah (Matthew 27:37-44).

As the darkness closed in, however, the second thief had a change of heart. Turning to the first thief, he said, “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 he said, “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your

kingdom.” Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:39-43).

That may be one of the most important conversations ever recorded. These few words show what the rest of the New Testament declares. Forgiveness of sins and eternal life is given to anyone who trusts Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins. Nothing more. Nothing less. Faith alone in Christ alone determines our eternal destiny (John 3:16-18; Acts 16:31; Romans 4:5; Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5).

The second thief had no time to clean up his life. He had no time to do anything but to believe in Jesus. In the process, he gave all of us a picture of what it takes to come into the eternal family of God.

In response to the simplest expression of faith, Jesus assured him of forgiveness. The second thief died with sin in him but not on him. The Judge of the heavens lifted the guilt from the second thief’s shoulders, placing it instead on Jesus, our sin-bearer.

**One died with sin on him but not in him.** Jesus shouldered the guilt of the world that day. He died with the weight of the world’s sin on Him but not the slightest wrong in Him.

Three days later He rose from the dead to show that His death, tragic as it was, was not a mistake. With a nail-scarred, resurrected body Jesus gave hundreds of His disciples all the evidence they needed to believe that He had taken their place in death. The judgment of God had fallen on Him instead of on us.

What I also find amazing is that this is our story. We were there. We were there because God was there in our place, bearing our sins. We were also there because all of us will respond either as the first thief or as the second.

The words don’t make the difference; the faith does. If you don’t have that faith, but want it, ask God to give it to you. You won’t be the first to cry out, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

Father in heaven, thank You for helping us to see that this is Your story. In the suffering of Your Son, we see Your suffering and Your love for us. In His death, we see Your payment for our wrongs, and Your offer of forgiveness. In His resurrection, we see Your assurance that You are completely pleased with the price He paid for us.

And Father, thank You also for helping us to see that this is our story. In the first thief we see our first inclination to hate You, to reject Your love, and to let our anger keep us from You and others. Thank you for softening our hearts so that we can also see ourselves in the second thief, who came to his senses before it was too late.