

³⁹ *One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”* ⁴⁰ *But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?”* ⁴¹ *And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.”* ⁴² *Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”* ⁴³ *He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”* Luke 23:39-43 NRSV

Some years ago, when I was in high school, I was part of a local history club whose advisor thought it would be good to expand our horizons by having us go on a trip to a major historic spot on that were on about a days drive from Rochester, N.Y. So the first year I was there he purposed a trip to Washington D.C. To afford the trip meant that all us had participate in some extensive fundraising. Part of it was to sell pre- made pizzas to folk in the area. Doing that sort of thing wasn't my talent. What made it worse was the neighborhood I lived in was not very receptive to anyone knocking on their doors to selling anything. With those two things looming before me, I decided I didn't want to participate, so I called the whole process stupid. I got involved in other activities in the high school too. But about a month and half before the trip, I began to desire to be with the group when they went to Washington D.C. By this time someone had dropped out, and there was space for me to go.

Talk about eating “humble pie”. I apologized in front of the whole group, and asked if I might join them even at this late date. After that a vote was taken, and to my recollection it was pretty overwhelming to let me go. I thanked everyone, relieved and surprised that everyone there wasn't real hard on me for my “last minute” change of heart. In fact when I went on the trip I was just as much a part of the group as anyone else.

Over two thousand years ago our savior hung on a cross. He was placed in the middle of two criminals. If you read any accounts on what crucifixion was like, it was a very horrible, painful way to die. One the taunts Jesus endured on the cross was that if he was the son of God, he should come down from the cross. After reading all accounts of the crucifixion, I think earlier on both of the criminals must have joined in. Luke I think takes us farther along in the crucifixion. Obviously, people in the crowd taunting Jesus surely continued, except something has changed with the two criminals on either side of Jesus. One of them, continues the taunting, and tells him to “save you and us”. The other, even though he is in the midst of agony and pain finally rebukes his partner in crime. He tells him that they are criminals and they deserve death. Jesus has done nothing wrong.

Then comes the request from that criminal that Jesus remember him when Jesus enters “his kingdom”. Jesus' reply is astounding. The criminal will be with him in paradise!

This act of Jesus is so wonderful, as well as amazing. But it tells us a wonderful thing about God's love. It is never to late seek God's mercy and forgiveness, no matter who we are. It is the devil that will always convince us that there is no hope. Perhaps most fitting is the words from one of the Wesley brothers: *“Amazing love! How can it be! That thou my God shouldst die for me!”*

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