

Three Men On Three Crosses

Crucifixion was a terrible 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 himself up for another breath. This Roman death was often used for many condemned individuals.

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.

Consider the explanation of the significance of those deaths as 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.**" What a difference between these three individuals. This is 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. He was guilty of sin and of transgression as all of us are and he received the just recompense of his deeds. (Rom. 6:23; 3:9-12, 23; Eph. 2:1-3) We are dead in our trespasses, iniquities, our sins. We are deserving of death, the judgment that is passed upon all who have sinned. (Rom. 5:12)

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 and on him.** He would have to bear the result of his unconfessed, unforgiven sins, his iniquity and transgression. (Rom. 5:12; Psa. 32:1-5)

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. (Rom. 10:13; John 1:12)

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. (Isa. 53:6; II Cor. 5:21)

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.** (Heb. 2:9; II Cor. 5:21; I Tim. 2:5-6; I Pet. 2:24; Rom. 5:12, 19)

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. We can be saved - born again -- because He was made sin for us. He became our sin bearer. ***And the depth of His anguish did not come from the physical sufferings of the cross, but because His soul was made an offering for sin. He was the ransom price paid for our iniquity, He was bearing the Father's judgment upon our sin, iniquity and transgressions in our place that we might be set free. Our Savior died with our sin on Him, but not in Him.*** He is the sinless, perfect, Lamb of God given for you and me. (John 1:29)

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*" Call upon Him today -- ask Christ to save you, take away your sin and give you His eternal life. (Mark 9:24; Acts 16:31; Rom. 10:9-13; John 1:12-13).