

HOW CAN I BE SURE ABOUT HEAVEN?

COLIN S. SMITH



How Can I Be Sure About Heaven

By Colin S. Smith ©Open the Bible, 2019 All rights reserved.

Printed in the USA.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV), copyright ©2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior permission from Open the Bible.

Design and typeset by High Note Design

HOW CAN I BE SURE ABOUT HEAVEN?

How can I be sure about heaven? It is hard to imagine a more important question than that. It is relevant to every person in the world. As different as we all are, we share one thing in common—sooner or later we will all die.

The day you die may come this week, this month, this year, or it may be a long way off, but nothing is more certain... it will come. One day you will wake up, and whether you realize it or not, it will be your last day on earth. What will happen to you then?

The story of the thief on the cross tells you how you can be sure about heaven. We find his story in Luke 23.

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him [Jesus]. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left (Luke 23:32-33).

Then we are told that one of these thieves said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" (23:42-43).

Its natural for us to think that people get into heaven by living a good life, but the thief had not done that. He was a criminal. He is described

in Mark's Gospel as "a robber," and the scale of his crimes were such that he was sentenced to capital punishment.

Whatever the circumstances that led to his sentence, this man had clearly not lived a good life, and he knew it. The thief did not dispute the justice of his sentence, in fact, he said, "We are getting what our deeds deserve" (23:41).

Here is a man who has not lived a good life, and he is out of time! He is in no position to turn over a new leaf. With his hands and feet nailed to the cross, he can't begin to do good works. And yet Jesus says to this man: "Today you will be with me in paradise!"

That is mind-blowing! It completely contradicts the widely-shared mindset that says, "Getting into heaven depends on how I live my life. In order to get in, I've got to live a good enough life to please God." The thief clearly didn't do that. So, how did he get in? That's the question.

And the good news is that if it was possible for this man to get into heaven, you can get in too. The story of the thief shows us how, and it can be summarized in three words – turn, ask and trust.

1. TURN

The thief was on the cross for at least six hours, and during that time a remarkable change took place in his attitude toward Jesus.

Matthew tells us that two criminals were crucified – one on either side of Jesus. "The robbers [plural] who were crucified with him also reviled

him in the same way (Matthew 27:44).

So here are two criminals, and at first both of them were hurling abuse at Jesus. But then while one continued, a change came over the other. The Bible calls this change repentance.

Repentance is *turning with as much as you know of yourself, from as much as you know of your sin, to as much as you know of God.*¹

So repentance gets deeper over time. The more you learn about who God is, and the more you discover who you are, and the more you grasp what sin is, the deeper your repentance becomes. But every process has a beginning, and the story of the thief shows us where repentance begins.

YOU BEGIN TO FEAR GOD

The thief had been hurling abuse at Jesus, but then a stillness came over his soul as he thought about what lay ahead. *Why am I fighting against God? What sense does this make when soon I will stand before Him and give account for my life?*

Turning to the other thief who continued to hurl abuse at Jesus, he said, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" (Luke 23:40)

The thief on the cross had some knowledge of God, but he had not given weight to God in his life. If he had, he would not have become a thief. Instead, he pushed away the claims of God on his life. He went his own way. And the further he moved away from God, the less his conscience bothered him.

¹ Adapted from J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step With the Spirit*, p. 87, Baker, 2005.

But now he was on the brink of eternity, and the fear of standing before God gripped him. Fearing God is the beginning of turning to Him and it leads to recognizing Jesus Christ as your king.

YOU RECOGNIZE CHRIST AS KING

Turning toward Jesus, the thief said, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42).

The thief recognized that Jesus is a king. *If He is a king and He is going into death, maybe when He gets to the other side, He can do something to help me.*

To the person who recognizes that He is a king, Jesus says, "You will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

How can you be sure of heaven? Turn! Fear God and submit yourself to Jesus Christ as your king.

2. ASK

The thief asked, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). It was an audacious request. A few moments before, he had been in league with the other thief, pouring out curses on Jesus. If Jesus remembered *this* when He came into His kingdom, the thief would be done for. So the thief asked.

ASKING MEANS THAT YOU DON'T PRETEND TO BE RIGHTEOUS

He did not say, "I know I've made some mistakes, but nobody's perfect, and I've done a lot of good things in my life." Instead he said, "We are receiving the due reward of our deeds" (Luke 23:41).

This man asked of Christ with honesty and humility. He faced the fact that he was a sinner. He had sinned against God and against his fellow man. And we are like him. We have failed to do what God has called us to do, and we have done what He has told us not to do.

We are sinners before almighty God. And that is precisely why Jesus went to the cross, where He become the sacrifice and the substitute for sinners. "The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). Jesus carried sins into His death, so that you would not have to carry them into yours.

ASKING MEANS YOU DON'T TRY TO MAKE A DEAL

We don't like to ask. We prefer to do deals instead. And we like to lead with what we have to offer: "Here is something that I can do for you. Now there's something I would like you to do for me."

But the thief had nothing to offer Jesus. He was empty-handed. All he could do was turn to Jesus, like a beggar, and ask. And that is what he did.

This is important, because our first instinct when it comes to God is to think in terms of a deal. *If I pray... If I go to church... If I'm generous... If I live a good life... God will get me into heaven.*

But here's what happens if you come to God that way: First, you go through life feeling that God owes you, and second, you hang your future on a deal that doesn't exist, because God doesn't make deals.

Asking means that you come to Jesus with empty-hands, knowing that there is nothing you can

offer Him. All you can do is ask. And in asking, you are casting yourself upon His mercy and looking to Him for grace.

What the thief did was deceptively simple. He began to fear God. He recognized his sinful condition. He asked Jesus to save him, believing in Him as the king, and leaving the rest in His hands.

3. TRUST

Imagine you have a serious heart condition and you need to have open heart surgery. You go to the surgeon and he says, "First, I am going to knock you out, and then I'm going to take a scalpel and cut you open."

He goes on to describe in gruesome detail what he is going to do, and then he hands you some papers and says, "Here are the papers for you to sign. Once I have your authorization, we'll schedule the procedure."

People sign these papers, because they know that the surgeon can do something for them that they cannot do for themselves, and if it is not done, they have no other hope. So they place themselves wholly into the surgeon's hands: "Do it. I trust you."

In the same way, the thief trusted himself into the hands of Jesus, and to the person who trusts, Jesus says, "You will be with me in paradise." This is the promise of the Savior to every person who places their trust in Him.

If you turn to Jesus and ask him to save you, what do you have? What you have is His word. You

have his promise. Jesus says, "Whoever comes to me I will never cast out" (John 6:37). So come to Him, ask of Him, and take Him at His word.

TRUSTING IN DARKNESS

Immediately after the thief trusted Jesus, "There was darkness over the whole land..." (Luke 23:44). This darkness came at the middle of the day and it lasted for three hours.

Try and put yourself in the shoes of the thief. You have just trusted your life and your hope of heaven to Jesus. Then you are plunged into darkness, and you hear Jesus crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

The thief must have wondered, *What in the world is going on?*

If you put your trust in Jesus Christ, there may be times in your life when you experience great darkness. Don't be surprised when this happens. You can depend on the promise of Jesus as surely in the darkness as you can in the light.

TRUSTING IN PAIN

Anyone who suggests that trusting in Jesus will lead to a pain-free life has not come to terms with what the Bible really says. Think about the pain the thief experienced *after* he trusted Jesus. The pain of crucifixion got worse by the hour, as wounds in the hands and feet widened, and as fever raged through the body. So the thief experienced more physical pain after he trusted Jesus than he did before!

You will have to trust Jesus in the darkness, and there

may be times when you have to trust Him in pain.

TRUSTING IN DEATH

You will also have to trust Jesus, as the thief did, when the moment of death comes for you.

Some years ago, an elderly pastor was seriously ill, and did not have long to live. A fellow pastor went to visit him, and getting straight to the point said, "I have come to tell you how to die. Forget about your Christian life."

"Forget about my Christian life? Really?"

"Yes. Really. And here's why: If you lie there thinking about what you have done for Jesus, it will not be long before you begin to see what you *have not done* for Jesus, what you *might have done* for Jesus, and what you *could have done better* for Jesus. And if you do that, soon you will find yourself surrounded by doubt and fear."

"So, what should I do?"

"Forget about what you have done for Jesus and fix your eyes wholly on what Jesus has done for you."

The way to die is the way to live. Forget what you have done or failed to do for Jesus and trust wholly in what Jesus has done on the cross for you.

Today the thief is in heaven and the reason is not that he was without sin or that he lived a good enough life. The thief is in heaven because Jesus paid the price for his sin and gave him a new and eternal life. What Jesus did for the thief, he is able to do for you.

THE DIFFERENCE

But remember that there were two thieves, and while one was saved, the other was lost. Both of them had the same need, and both of them had the same opportunity. Both of them were next to Jesus. Both of them heard him pray, "Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing."

But here was the difference: While one turned to Jesus in repentance and faith, the other remained at a distance.

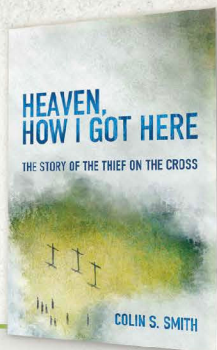
You may be thinking, *I don't want to make a commitment right now. I want to take my time.*

If you make that choice, one of two things will happen: Either you will come to repentance and then wish you had come earlier, or your heart will harden toward Jesus, and you will never come to Him at all. So come to Jesus in faith and repentance now.

Or maybe you fear that it is too late for you to turn to Him. Remember the thief on the cross. It was not too late for him and it is not too late for you. The time for you to turn to Jesus, ask of Jesus, and trust in Jesus is now. Early is better than late, but better late than never.

Here is a prayer you can use:

Lord, I confess that I am a sinner and that I do not deserve to enter your heaven. But I believe that you are the king and that you died on the cross for me. So I ask that you will remember me and bring me into your kingdom. And I trust your promise that those who come to you will never be cast out.



If you enjoyed this booklet, you can also get the book by Pastor Colin Smith called: *Heaven, How I Got Here*, a first-person retelling of the thief's story.

To get this and other biblical, gospel-centered resources for your growth in the Christian life, visit our website at openthebible.org.

Open
THE
Bible
with Pastor Colin Smith

PO Box 3454
Barrington, IL 60011
OpentheBible.org
1-877-OPEN-365