



WHAT THE THIEF
KNEW AND
BELIEVED

Throughout church history, the thief on the cross is often cited as someone saved “with no theology.” It is commonly argued that he had no real understanding of Christ or the gospel, only a desperate plea for help. But Scripture presents a far richer and theologically profound confession. Luke reveals that this dying man came to understand and publicly confess multiple core truths of the gospel — all while suspended in unimaginable agony. In mere hours, the Spirit of God opened his eyes to see more of Christ than many others saw who had walked freely beside Him. To uphold the integrity of the gospel itself, we must see what this thief came to know and believe; and that it was *by sovereign grace alone*.

He Acknowledged His Own Sin and Deserved Judgment

Both criminals were insulting Him at first (Matt 27:44). We all come to the cross as “children of wrath, even as the rest” (Eph 2:3). But sovereign grace began to break through one heart, and the insults stopped. “Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds...” (Luke 23:40–41)

This is the first essential of saving faith: *I deserve God’s judgment*. He no longer defended himself. He admitted guilt openly, before God and before men. There can be no true conversion without such humility. “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” (Luke 18:13)

He Recognized Jesus as Completely Innocent and Sinless

“...but this man has done nothing wrong.” (Luke 23:41). Now that understanding, perception, and faith has come, he recognizes what the religious rulers could not see: “Had they understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” (1 Cor 2:8). So, not merely innocent of this punishment, but truly so! A *sinless* substitute is the only hope for sinners. Jesus “has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15) This thief now saw what blindness in the rulers could not.

He Understood Jesus as Lord

“Jesus, remember me...” (Luke 23:42). His understanding illuminated by grace alone, now saw Jesus as so much more than mere man, even while Jesus appeared weakest and most humiliated. “...if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord...” (Romans 10:9). What a confession! From the mind-numbing agony of a cross!

He Believed Jesus Would Rise and Reign as King

“...remember me when You come in *Your* kingdom.” (Luke 23:42). Such a request presupposes understanding of and faith in:

Resurrection: Not only in a vague, general sense, but that Jesus specifically will not remain dead but will rise again.

Exaltation: Jesus will sit on a throne in a real Kingdom, over which He rules.
- He trusted a dying Savior to be a future resurrected, reigning Lord, pleading for a place in His kingdom. *That is faith.*

He Understood Salvation Is by Grace Alone

This thief had: No time for religious works. No righteous record to present. No rituals or sacraments. No morality to boast in. Yet he hoped to be received by the King. “For by grace you have been saved through faith... not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8–9)

Grace was his only hope. This confirms it was *saving* faith.

He Trusted in Christ’s Substitutionary Death

Everything the thief confessed presupposed substitution. Since Jesus was innocent, yet dying as criminal, required the Thief came to understand the truth of substitutionary atonement. Jesus’ death, therefore, was a death *for* others “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.” (1 Corinthians 15:3)

While the thief may not have been able to articulate the nuances of soteriology, everything he confessed presupposed that he came to understand and implicitly trust all this. *The thief may not have been able to explain atonement , but he laid hold of the One who accomplishes it.*

The Only Possible Explanation: Sovereign Grace

How did the thief come to see that this pulverized, bloody Man hanging beside him was the innocent Son of God, dying for others, who would rise and come again as the coming King, and was the only hope for salvation? Consider what did not happen at the cross: No apostle preached a sermon to him. No one read Isaiah 53 or Psalm

22 aloud to him. There was no doctrinal exposition from Jesus. No miracles were performed before his eyes.

Occam's Razor applies: There is *only one reasonable explanation* here - sovereign grace. "The wind blows where it wishes... so is everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8)

A supernatural work of God gave sight where there had been only mockery.

Jesus Confirms a Complete, Immediate Salvation

"Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43)

Not "Someday," or, "If you prove yourself," nor "If you make up for your crimes" ... But *today... with Me*. Salvation accomplished. Grace triumphant. Christ sovereign.

Conclusion: One Gospel Believed in Full

The thief confessed:

1. His sin and deserved judgment
2. Christ's innocence and sinlessness
3. Jesus as Lord
4. Resurrection and kingdom expectation
5. Trust in substitutionary death
6. Salvation by grace alone.

Not "bare minimum" saving faith. Not a theology-less conversion. But *the gospel* clearly seen and humbly believed. His story silences the notion that truth is optional. And it comforts every sinner who fears they are too guilty, too late, too lost: Jesus saved a dying thief, and did so "to the praise of His glorious grace" (Eph. 1:5)