

Words from the Cross: The Assurance of Jesus

Luke 23:32-43

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Several years ago, I went to Liberia in December. I was scheduled to come home a few days before Christmas. After being there nearly two weeks it had been a great trip but I was ready to be home and celebrate the holidays with my family.

In Liberia, there is only one flight that leaves Monrovia every three days bound for Europe, where you can then connect with a flight to the States. You don't want to miss your flight from Liberia to Europe or you are stuck there for three more days.

With an unreliable Internet, I wasn't able to confirm my return flight. I thought, "In a Third World country, how important can confirmation be?"

I told my host, Dr. Menjay, what time my flight departed and he told me what time we would leave the Ricks Institute campus. I trusted his judgment. He had taxied dozens of guests from Ricks to the airport over the years.

As we moved through Monrovia and passed the Capital, we were slowed by city traffic, perhaps a bit more than usual. We arrived at the airport with just a little more than an hour to spare before our flight was to leave. I felt a little anxious, because you are supposed to be at the airport at least an hour before your flight leaves.

The terminal in Monrovia is just a small building where your passport is stamped and your luggage is searched. You can park within a few yards of the building. However, before I was allowed into that room, I had to present my credentials to a woman in the office of Brussels Airlines, another small modest office.

When I went into her office and presented my ticket and passport, she said, "I am sorry, the gate is closed." Then she said, "You have to be present at the gate 90 minutes before departure."

I'd never heard of that rule and I'd flown out of Monrovia several times. Usually it's just an hour. We were about 20 minutes late. I pleaded my case. I begged. I told her about the traffic. I saw flashes of my family opening gifts, eating my mother's cooking, laughing with extended family, and my children saying, "I cannot believe Dad missed his flight."

I literally got down on my knees and pleaded with this woman to let me on that flight. All I had to do was walk through a gate, have my passport stamped, let them search my bags, and I could have been on that plane in ten minutes. It was still an hour before the plane departed.

I acknowledged we were late. I apologized for being late. I seemed to be making some headway with Ms. Gestapo when another man showed up and wanted to get on the plane as well. Any

empathy she may have been building for me suddenly vanished. She definitely did not have enough empathy for two of us. I left her office with little hope.

Meanwhile, Dr. Menjay was working his contacts inside the terminal. As he talked to them through the iron bar gate that separated us, someone asked if I had checked in prior to arriving. I explained that I wasn't able to because of the Internet problems I had at Ricks Institute, but then it occurred to me: maybe my wife did that for me.

As I stood outside the terminal looking through iron bars, I spoke with the agents on the inside and I said, "Hey, will you check your flight list? My name is John Michael Helms. My name should be on your flight itinerary," I said with hopeful confidence.

They looked and there it was. Thank you my dear sweet wife.

By this time, there was only about 20 minutes left before the plane was supposed to depart.

They said, "Mr. Helms. There isn't enough time to get your luggage on the plane. It will have to come on a later flight." I said, "I don't care. All I want to do is get on that plane."

When the man stamped my passport, that was the assurance I needed that I was going home.

I knew I was going to get on that plane and I was going to see my family and we were going to spend Christmas together.

None of my stuff mattered! What mattered was my family. Relationships mattered! People I loved mattered.

I walked across the paved area toward the plane feeling free. The noise of the plane was so loud I would not have been able to hear anyone had he or she spoken to me. But I could hear God's voice, gently reminding me that He was taking care of me.

Guess who was standing at the bottom of the stairs of the airplane to check my ticket. It was Ms. Gestapo herself, the lady from Brussels airline that had denied my pass to board the flight.

There was something inside of me that wanted to say, "Thanks for nothing," or "You have a nice day, too," or "You aren't God after all, are you?"

I wanted to say something like that, but I suppose my assurance of getting home wasn't so strong that I wanted to push my luck.

I had assurance, my ticket. I held it in my hand, and I didn't want to throw it away. It's difficult to have assurance about many things in life. You can't be assured that you will live another day.

You can't be assured you will live a life free of suffering.

You can't be assured you will always have money, if you have any now. Lisa Marie Presley inherited \$300 million dollars from her father, Elvis. Now she is broke.

You can't be assured of good health, or that you will not grieve the loss of a job, property, a child, or a spouse.

You can't be assured that you will be treated justly and fairly, or that life will always be fair to you.

You cannot be assured that you will not make poor choices, that you will not fall victim to temptation.

You cannot be assured that people who are close to you will not betray you or even abandon you.

You cannot be assured that your children will not disappoint you or live a life that is contrary to values that you have taught them.

When twelve men left their professions to become Jesus' disciples, they must have known there were some risks.

Jesus said to Simon Peter and Andrew, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men."

It's difficult to know what each man believed about Jesus as they became his disciples, but they followed him with some assurance that he was going to teach them how to be leaders of something new, different, and exciting.

As Jesus talked about establishing a New Kingdom, they clearly thought this New Kingdom was an earthly kingdom.

Once James and John asked Jesus if they could have positions of power beside Jesus, one on his right and one on his left when he came into his glory.

Eventually, it all began to unravel and it became apparent that the power they had seen Jesus use to heal, to raise the dead, to feed the hungry, to make wine from water for wedding guests, was not going to be used to defeat Romans. Because of this, any assurance they had that Jesus was the Messiah evaporated like dew in the hot morning sun.

Peter was so sure he was right about Jesus, he was willing to fight for him, but then when he saw that Jesus had no fight in him, he denied he knew Jesus.

Even after making the confession at Caesarea Philippi, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God," Peter misunderstood the kind of Messiah Jesus came to be, so when the Romans began their beatings and the threat came close to home, Peter said, "I don't know the man."

Is that still possible today? Is it still possible that people look for Jesus to assure them of things he never promised?

Do people still look to Jesus for things that are mostly tied to this world, a world that is passing away?

It is not by accident that Jesus began his beatitudes by promising the gift of the kingdom of heaven. He didn't promise wealth. He didn't promise land. He didn't promise comfort. He didn't promise freedom from Roman rule. He didn't promise a lack of suffering. He didn't promise a life free of struggle.

However, Jesus did promise that we could be assured of our salvation. He promised that we can live in such a way that we can be blessed by God, but those blessings are not always translated into health or wealth.

The beatitudes are about assurance. Jesus wants us to know that we can count on some things even in a world of uncertainty.

The most important thing Jesus wants us to be assured of is that death holds no claim on us. If we come to him with a humble spirit, filled with contrition, and place our lives in His hands, He wants us to be certain that we will be blessed with the kingdom of heaven. This is our passport to eternal and abundant life.

With this promise in hand, the things of this world begin to look strangely dim.

Without ever knowing anything about the first beatitude, "Blessed are the Poor in Spirit," or about any of the others that followed, the repentant thief that was crucified beside Jesus exemplified the kind of poverty of spirit Jesus speaks of.

Tradition has maintained that he was crucified on the right side of Jesus and he asked Jesus to remember him as he went into his kingdom.

The other criminal, the one to his left, maintained an arrogant, unremorseful, unrepentant, venomous attitude about life and his doubtful, mocking, insulting attitude toward Jesus prove this.

These men had committed crimes and the Romans wanted to make examples of them to put fear into the hearts of the people.

As the unrepentant thief hung on his cross, he managed to pull up enough hatred for Jesus to ridicule him. He obviously had heard of Jesus and knew enough about him to know he could ask for his help – but he didn't. Why should he? He was obviously dying, just as he was. Instead he just acknowledged what he had heard about him, he basically said he didn't believe any of it. "If you were really the Christ, you could save yourself and us."

This prompted the second criminal to rebuke the first one and he said, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned

justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong” (Luke 23: 40-41 NRSV).

This criminal on the right said to Jesus. “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

In Liberia, I stood outside an iron gate trying to make it home. My fate had been determined by things I had done wrong. It didn’t matter that I wasn’t driving. I could not blame being late on Dr. Menjay. It was my ticket and my responsibility to get to the airport on time.

I had demonstrated a poverty of spirit before Ms. Gestapo, but what I needed to get on that plane was a savior.

Later, just at the last minute, I heard the words, “Mr. Helms, we have your name on the list. You may come in.”

It was at that moment that I knew I had a savior. I knew I had done nothing to make it through that gate. Someone had done something on my behalf. I found out that my wife had called for me. She had saved me from my error and helped bring me home. Another person opened the gate and other stamped my passport. Then I had my assurance I’d see my family soon. I was leaving all my bags behind, but they didn’t matter. I just wanted to see my wife and the family.

It was the last few moments of this criminal’s life. Even though he could see Jesus breathing heavily, about to die as was he, he demonstrated a poverty of spirit. He acknowledged that he was getting what he deserved. He acknowledged that Jesus had done nothing wrong. He believed that Jesus still held the power to be something more, something beyond the cross and he asked Jesus to remember him.

Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43 NRSV). His passport was stamped. The last emotion that criminal felt on the cross was assurance. His sins were forgiven. The burden of sin was lifted.

He left all his baggage behind. He didn’t take any earthly possessions with him into eternity. None of that mattered. As he closed his eyes on the cross and died, that criminal made his way home.

Dr. Jon Appleton, beloved former pastor of First Baptist Church Athens and good friend to many of us, wrote these words while he was interim pastor of this church:

Three there were on crude crosses—
Each upon his own.
One dying in the place of the others;
Another dying, accepting the spoken grace;
The other died, favoring his solitary place.

There are not many things in this world that are for certain, but death is one of them. And after death we will either be with Jesus in paradise or we will favor the solitary place as did the criminal who mocked Christ as he died.

Which will it be for you? Have you accepted the spoken grace?
Or will you die in your solitary place?

You can have the assurance of heaven, the grace of God, His inheritance, mercy, and the right to be called his child, but you need a poverty of Spirit.

You need a Savior. You need to humble yourself and come to the Lord as did the one who died next to him, the one who asked, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Can I pray that prayer with anyone today?