

VOICES FROM HEAVEN AND HELL

by

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CHAPTER TEN

"I Was Saved At The Eleventh Hour"

by the Dying Thief

"I was saved at the eleventh hour. It is scarcely believable that GOD would save such a wretch as I was. Surely our GOD is gracious and powerful to save. I know that GOD saved me so that all might have hope. If GOD saved such a sinner as I, He can save anyone. But let me tell you my story.

"I was born in the city of Jerusalem in the land of Canaan. My parents were very poor. They had no interest in giving me an education. Of course, like all Jews I was exposed to religion. While my family did not attend the services of the synagogue very regularly they did partake in the religious feasts. Particularly they kept the Feast of the Passover. They felt that by so doing they fulfilled all the requirements of religion.

"Jerusalem was a city of great wickedness. Vice touched young and old. As a youngster I joined a gang that went about doing mischief of all kinds. Because I got into many scrapes with the authorities my parents drove me from home. This satisfied me because I could not tolerate restrictions of any kind.

"When I became older I joined a gang of thieves headed by Barabbas, a notorious robber of the day. He was hated by all the people and greatly feared. He would stop at nothing. He took part in a number of insurrections and did not stop at murder. It was our special delight to plunder the pilgrims who visited Jerusalem during the feast days. Generally they were rich and had much money on their persons. The Passover Feast brought many of them from all parts of the world to Jerusalem.

"Our great fear were the Romans who ruled our nation. We did not fear the local guard. We despised them. But the Romans would not stand for any nonsense. Anyone caught stealing was given the death sentence. He would be crucified on a cross. We took care that we would not fall into their hands. However, just previous to the Passover we grew too careless and were drinking too much. We had just made a rich haul when the Roman guard came upon us. Three of us were

caught including our leader, Barabbas. We were brought before Pilate. There wasn't much we could say for we were caught with the stolen goods. Pilate sentenced us to be crucified. And he ordered the Roman guard to scourge us first.

"Scourging is a cruel torture. We were stripped and bound to a pillar. Then one of the soldiers took a scourge of leather tongs to beat us. At the end of each tong was a piece of iron. This he lashed against our backs. The other two were scourged first and it made me sick to look at them. The instrument of torture tore out pieces of flesh and the veins were exposed. Then one of them started on me. How I cursed him for the suffering he caused. That made them all laugh and he increased the force of his blows. My whole back was a mass of raw and bleeding flesh. When they finished they flung us back into the dungeon and told us that the crucifixion would be the next day.

"Things looked very dark. It seemed as though all was lost and that we would suffer the torture of the crucifixion on the morrow. But while there is life there is hope. In spite of our weak condition we spoke of the possibility of escape. It seemed, however, hopeless. Then suddenly I thought of the custom of Pilate of releasing a criminal during the Passover. I told my friends about it. I told them how Pilate would give our countrymen the choice of the deliverance of some prisoner. We could hardly conceive of any of them asking for our release for we were hated by all. I even doubted whether my parents would ask for my release. Yet I felt that I had a better chance than Barabbas for the people hated him more than us all. Barabbas himself felt that his chance of deliverance was very slim.

"Early next morning there was a stir of excitement among the Roman guards. We heard them talking about the capture of a certain JESUS who claimed to be a king. It seemed to me that I had heard about him. There were rumors that he was a miracle worker and that he claimed to be the Messiah. I never paid much attention to such things for I felt that religion was a racket. I felt that the priests and the Pharisees were religious hypocrites. We wondered among ourselves what sentence this JESUS would receive.

"Suddenly the door of our dungeon was opened and one of the guards spoke to Barabbas and said that the Jews had asked for his release. Barabbas would not believe him for he could not conceive how anyone would ask for his release. But the guard insisted that it was true. He said that the people had been given a choice between JESUS and Barabbas and that they had chosen him. Pilate had given the order for his release. Barabbas was almost dazed with joy and walked out a free man.

"My friend and I looked at each other with amazement. Then we cursed our countrymen for not choosing one of us. Why did they not choose one of us rather than Barabbas whom they hated so violently? Nevertheless his release gave us hope. Perhaps some miracle would happen to us. But, alas, we seemed doomed. The guards came and told us to get ready to be taken to Calvary. They said as soon as they were finished scourging this JESUS they would start. I heard some of them planning to have fun with this JESUS because he claimed to be the king of the Jews. They said that they would make him a king by giving him a crown of thorns and a scarlet robe. They took him into the common hall and summoned the whole band of soldiers.

"After they had finished torturing him they came for us. They made us bear the crosses on which we were to be hung. With curiosity I looked at this JESUS who was also compelled to bear a

cross. His face was covered with blood from the thorns that had been pressed into his brow. I could well imagine that his back was covered with stripes from the scourging. He seemed weak and hardly able to bear his cross. As a matter of fact they compelled a country fellow to bear his cross for him.

"This JESUS seemed to be a man of importance for a great multitude turned out to see him and a number of women bewailed and lamented him. JESUS told them not to weep for him but to weep for themselves. No one wept for me. Not even my parents came out. Both my friend and I cursed the crowd and the soldiers.

"We arrived at the hated place of Calvary. They gave us a drink of wine mixed with myrrh. This was to deaden the pain. I drunk the stuff greedily. I noticed that JESUS refused to drink his. The fool, I thought. They began to nail my hands and feet to the cross. How I struggled. It took three of the strongest soldiers to hold me while a fourth did the nailing. They tore my flesh with the nails. This JESUS did not struggle. He prayed. He seemed like a lamb led to the slaughter. While they were nailing him I heard him pray: '**Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.**' I despised him for this prayer. The Roman brutes knew what they were doing. How could he pray for them after they had tortured us! I could not curse them enough.

"In spite of the wine and myrrh I suffered terribly. My bones seemed to separate one from the other and the pain from the nails was indescribable. I was placed on the right of JESUS and my friend on the left. They had made a sign and placed it on the center cross. It read: '**This is, JESUS the king of the Jews.**' Evidently this JESUS: thought that he was the King prophesied in our Scriptures. He thought that he was the Messiah. A cross was a very poor substitute for the throne of David.

"JESUS remained the center of attraction. The crowd paid no attention to us. The people that passed by stuck out their tongues at him and mocked him. The chief priests along with the scribes and elders cried out to him: '**If thou art the Son of God, come down from the cross.**' Then they laughed at him. They cried out: '**He saved others; himself he cannot save. He is the King of Israel; let him now come down from the cross, and' we will believe on him. He trusteth on God; let him deliver him now, if he desireth him: for he said, I am the Son of God.**'

"I must confess that we joined in the mockery. We railed at him and challenged him to perform a miracle and release us from our crosses. Surely the Messiah would be able to do this. Surely the Messiah would not die the shameful death of a crucified criminal. But though we reproached him he did not reproach us. Although he was reviled by the religious leaders he did not revile them. This amazed me.

"What if this JESUS were the Messiah? He did not seem like an ordinary man. What if he were the King whom GOD said would deliver us? Perhaps this man will rise from the dead and establish the promised kingdom. I can scarcely explain how I began to think differently about JESUS. I know now that it was the Spirit of GOD who convicted me. JESUS seemed so noble and righteous. I felt so vile. My soul was black with sin but JESUS had committed no crime worthy of death.

"My friend continued his railing at JESUS. He cried out: '**Art not thou the Messiah? save thyself and us.**' But I rebuked my friend and said: '**Dost thou not even fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? and we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.**' Ah yes, I realized suddenly that I was not only under the condemnation of man but also under the condemnation of GOD. Fear filled my heart at the thought of the judgment of GOD.

"I came under the firm conviction that JESUS was the Messiah. I believed that He was truly the Son of GOD - the promised King. Surely He could save me. I cried out to Him: '**Jesus, remember me when thou comest in thy kingdom.**' Yes, if He would only remember me when He entered into His glory. But how could I expect that? I had railed at Him. I was vile. I was a thief. I was a blasphemer. I was guilty of a thousand sins. How could I expect the Messiah to remember me? Yet had He not prayed for the forgiveness of the Roman brutes? Would He not do the same for me?

"Then I heard Him speaking these wonderful words: '**Verily I say unto thee, To-day shalt thou be with me in Paradise.**' I was more than to be remembered. I was to be with the Messiah in Paradise. Paradise! I was suffering the pains of hell and death. The scourging, the nails, the racking pain of body was but a foretaste of hell. And even more painful was the realization that my soul was vile and that I was condemned before the Holy GOD. And now Paradise. The Son of GOD assured me that even today I was to be with Him in Paradise!

"Somehow I forgot the nails, the cross, and the tormenting crowd. Peace Hooded my soul. JESUS the Messiah, the Son of GOD, the King of Israel had given me the promise of Paradise. It seemed even at the moment that I had been translated into Paradise. I was no longer under condemnation. The gates of Heaven beckoned me. Yes, I still suffered; but in a few hours I would be in the presence of GOD with my Saviour. My sins were forgiven. In a few hours indeed I entered into Heaven. It is Paradise.

"And now as my voice reaches across the generations I would testify of the love of GOD and the compassion of the Saviour. JESUS is the Son of GOD. JESUS is the Messiah. JESUS is the King of kings. Oh, that all would turn to Him. I was saved at the eleventh hour. My friend on the other cross died under condemnation. Hearken to the voice of JESUS now. Cry out to Him for salvation. Then you, too, will hear the most wonderful words ever spoken: '**Verily I say unto thee, To-day shalt thou be with me in Paradise.**'

~ end of chapter 10 ~
