

The Good Thief

by James Como (March 2016)

“When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him and the criminals there, one on his right, the other on his left.” – Luke, 23:33

“Today you shall be with me in paradise.” Today, he said, he promised. And I believe him. I do.

I can barely breathe. My chest is ripped as though two jackasses were pulling it apart, and my shoulders are coming loose. “Please, Jesus, take me with you now.”

He didn’t hear me. How could he? That devil over there, and me neither, have not been tortured. Flogged, pierced, our bones broken, starved and Nailed. How could he have heard me? I could barely whisper. “Jesus,” I said, “remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

But he did hear me, even with his blood running to the ground. I don’t know why I said that. I cannot say why I believe him.

I do know I had to say something when that murderer insulted him, so I put him in his place and it shut him up. Jesus had to know he was not alone up here. But then I added that favor, to remember me, as though he knew me.

I had not seen much of him. I did see the lame man walk, and when he stopped the Pharisees from stoning that woman. That was brave. I was there in the crowd. You really don’t want to cross them, the leaders. And I heard about the demons and those swine and about the dead man, his friend, walking right out of the tomb. That’s all everybody talked about. I wish I had been there.

But I’m no follower. I was always going here or there to find work. If I were nearby when he arrived I would stop to see him, but I never got close. There were so many. And if I had? To what end? He would not have known me. I was not

afflicted. I was a thief, yes, and I had heard that he associated with sinners. But there could be danger. I've never been brave.

Anyway, I stole only what I needed, what my family needed, and only from those who had enough – more than enough.

That's not true. I was greedy. See, I'm here, right next to him, and I still lie! I deserve this. "Jesus, I deserve this. You don't but I do."

Maybe if I had gotten closer I wouldn't be up here now. Maybe. He might have known me and spoken to me. But I didn't. And yet today I am to be with him in paradise. Imagine that. Paradise! I've read my scripture.

So is that his kingdom? I didn't know that. I didn't know he would say that to me when I asked his favor. How could I? So why did I ask? Pity? For him? For myself? I just don't know.

He did no wrong and yet he pays. "I am sorry Jesus! I am so sorry for you. I am sorry I didn't come closer."

But you know, here on my own wood I am closer. Did he hear me? His head is turning. He . . . he's looking at me. At me. I cannot...

. . . Ahhh. I cannot feel my legs. My tongue swells. I can barely speak. "Jesus Jesus, do you look at me? Do you see me? Do you hear?"

He has already forgiven them, and I cannot understand that. Must I do that too? I've already confessed to one lie. Here is another. In truth, I don't deserve this. Not this. This is not justice, this . . . but a person doesn't forgive justice, right? Only injustice.

"Rabbi! I know you could climb down if you willed it. I know that! Then why do you not? That other man, they say, is a murderer. Are you? Am I? Save us from this, Jesus! Save me!

Again he looks at me. Such a look! My pain – my pain is lifting. My thirst . . . is gone! Replaced by sadness, and I do not understand. If I cannot die yet, can I at least sleep?

Yes! Yes, I do understand! He – he does not look at me. He looks into me. My

soul. My past. "Jesus, please, do not...

"No, Jesus, do look. Please. Show me. Make me see. Help me to not look away. Show me why I am here." I know – he's turned away again! He speaks to his mother. Why must she watch this? Why does she look?

I've heard about the wine at Cana. Those stewards did not go to him, they went to her. She is with him to the end. And those with her will not be alone.

"I see Rabbi. I see. Like my own mother, who died so early and yet has always been with me." And yet . . . not now. Where is she? Where are you mamma?

Again he turns to me. Alright alright yes I know I know I know. This time I must look back. It hurts to turn my head. I cannot. I will not.

I do. No, no I don't know why I'm here. "I look, Jesus. Why do you compel this? What possibly can I see that I do not know? But I . . .

No. He did not say that. Forsaken? Asking why? "Yes yes you did. You cried out in despair. Oh, I . . . Jesus . . ."

Hah! No. I see. It is not his despair but my own. "Are you rebuking me, Jesus? Is that it? You are knowing me! I see. As you said – and this I did hear – you are the son of man and you are with me."

I know now that I am not forsaken. I know that. "Is that why I am here, Jesus? Because you are here?"

I will not be distracted, not even by the pain. It's back, though not as bad. I must have slept. I think now I'm bleeding on the inside, in my stomach. It's torn, I think, from stretching.

"I can barely whisper, Jesus, but I will tell you . . ." Again he turns to me. "I know you know. I've read my scripture. Did you know me when my bones were knitting in my mother's womb?

"I was unfaithful. I stole. I blasphemed. I coveted. I did violence, but I did no murder, nor did I worship anything or anyone – not even Caesar! – except for Yahweh. And I did some good. I gave to beggars, to the temple. Once I visited a sick old lady. I am not prideful, Jesus. I am not...

"I was not always a sinner. I fell in with the wrong crowd. But until then . . . I can't remember. I am forty years old now, so I think that for twenty-five years I've been a sinner. That's when my mother died.

"No, that's just another excuse, Jesus. I'll try to remember. I must remember..

"My father died when I was a child. I was seven years old. He fell, I think. I've put that out of my mind. How you look at me! Please, do not force me to remember that, I loved him so.

"I came home – with all the sheep, every one of them – and found my mother weeping. She told me everything. I had not come home for days. I threw myself to the ground. I wanted to follow him. I had been so happy. So happy." More than usual. "I don't remember, Jesus, I don't . . .

"Yes I do. When you look at me, I do. There were stars, so many stars, Jesus, and strange animals, at peace with one another. I was just following my sheep. They were leading me! Can you imagine? Others came later. I was the first..

"I don't remember the town. It was small. I'd never heard of it before. I still don't know it's name, but there, in an open barn, the sheep stopped. They didn't even bleat. There was no noise. I was so small – even now I'm small – so I could squeeze between the legs of the people and the beasts. And there I saw a woman.

"She was so young, Jesus, younger than my mother, and so pretty, though not as pretty. And she began to moan. But she didn't cry, and I didn't know what was happening. I couldn't see it all. But then I did hear a cry, a baby. A baby, Jesus. And I heard singing that seemed to come from the sky.

"And then a voice. It spoke of the baby. He would be a king, a savior, a . . .

"Finally I saw him. And I knew. I knew, Jesus. He was the messiah. I knew it in my heart, in the deepest part of my soul. That little baby. Can you imagine? Can you..

"Everyone stayed, as though they were waiting. So I did, too. I should have gone home. I knew my parents would be worried. But how could I leave? That's why I wasn't at home when I should have been. I had left my mother and my father for that little baby

"After many days some men came. Great men and good. I don't know who they were but they gave this baby gifts. All of us felt such . . . such assurance.

"I remember now! Jesus rabbi Lord! Yes! I remember now!"

Then why did I forget? It was all so clear, so simple. And I forgot. I forgot I forgot. "How could I have forgotten that joy, Jesus, my Lord? I'm so sorry. So sorry for forgetting. I am so ashamed."

Is he smiling? Can he be smiling, just the smallest grin? I can't see well through the blood. Yes, yes he is smiling.

"Why do you smile, Rabbi. I can't hear. I can't . . ." Oh no no. What is happening? That darkness is no eclipse.

The sky itself is being ripped in half. What...

He has commended his spirit to his father. I heard him clearly. "My good Lord Jesus, don't go yet. Don't leave me yet. Take me with you, please."

What is that in the sky, in such light of the sky? The town . . . A barn . . . and sheep . . . that little boy – that's me! . . . the baby and his mother . . . the voice . . . the...

"Thank you, Jesus. How sweet it is to remember you. How could I not have known that you were always with me, from the beginning! Oh sweet Lord Jesus, I'm so sorry. Oh, Jesus, thank you for bringing me to this cross next to you, Jesus, Jesus...

Finished, did he say? "Jesus, please, not yet. Take me with you, Jesus..."

"No. It is your will be done, my lord. Your will."

His head drops. That soldier there pierces His side, and He bleeds. No. No, He bleeds water! He is gone.

My sight fails. There is darkness and rain and thunder and that . . . lightning.

The day is not yet done. Paradise awaits me, but first I must hang a bit longer, to remember, and to repent my forgetfulness.

But now a brightness. The sky comes closer and closer. The heavens are ablaze and I am off the wood, free. My soul is like a feather, and I can see him. He is laughing?

“Jesus! Jesus! I follow. In the way you’ve made . . . almost too bright to see. But I can see the colors. I cannot name them all. Some I have never known before. You have brought me to this, lord..

“You, Jesus. You came all the way to us in our sin and confusion and fear and pain and you lived it all and suffered it all, all of it, from the beginning and to the end of time and you died and now..

“You are risen, from the depths to so, so high, the highness of joy! You have opened the way to paradise. You have saved all of us!

“And you do call me by name, Dismas, even when I had forgotten you. I was there with you at the beginning and all my life you were bringing me to the cross with you, and you filled my heart with . . . yourself . . . and today you bring me to this glory, with you. To forgiveness. To light. To love. To the Father..

“The world was all. Now it is so small, down there . . . Down there in time.

“I can see time, in all its swirling mist, getting colder and harder in the kettle of space. All of it. Now I see it whole, for I am whole now and . . . and for eternity.

“All of you, all creation, look! Before I follow on my way, I beg you look up. Look at Him there just ahead of me, calling to you. You too know Him, and he is calling you now by name. You. For when time is ice he will break it to pieces and shatter the kettle of space, too. Turn to him now from your cross, as I did, and only ask..”

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