

IN NOMINE JESU

There are no atheists in foxholes

Grace, Mercy, and Peace be unto you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Have you ever hear the phrase, “There are no atheists in foxholes”? If you’re not familiar with military jargon, a foxhole is a hole that is dug in the dirt, and often fortified with sandbags, or anything sturdy. It’s meant to protect a soldier when there are no bunkers around.

Often when someone is in a foxhole that means they are in a very dangerous place, and the area around them is treacherous. Their health and life may be at stake, and as follows naturally, it can be a terrifying place to be.

When someone says, “There are no atheists in foxholes,” what they are saying is that in times of the greatest stress, the greatest fear, the greatest hardship, even the most God-hating, hard-hearted pagan will fall on his face to beg God for mercy.

Think about that for a moment. Certainly there are people who will reject God regardless of their situation, but there is some truth to that phrase. Sometimes when all things seem hopeless, and the whole world is against us, sometimes the only thing that makes any sense, gives any comfort, is a God who loves us. It’s hard to pass up that opportunity when you are in a foxhole.

“There are no atheists in foxholes,” means that faith thrives in times of need.

Let’s look at the account given in Luke chapter 17. The story starts out like this:

While He was on the way to Jerusalem, He was passing between Samaria and Galilee. As He entered a village, ten leprous men who stood at a distance met Him;¹

¹ Luke 17:11-12.

So Jesus is traveling and he comes upon a group of 10 lepers. Lepers were people who suffered from a horrible, contagious disease that got worse and worse over time, breaking their body down until, ultimately, the person suffering the disease would die. While someone suffering from a different problem might be able to find comfort by staying with family and friends, this disease was so contagious and so deadly, that there was no option but to keep your distance from everyone, even those loved ones. Not only was this a death sentence, but it made you ritually unclean; in other words, completely cut off from all help.

These 10 lepers were “in a foxhole,” in other words. Regardless of what they believed or how they acted before they got into this situation, they were all currently huddled in a terrifying reality where death was creeping closer and there was nowhere to hide and no one to help.

So what did these lepers-in-a-foxhole do? Luke continues the narrative:

and they raised their voices, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”²

Just like an atheist in a foxhole who seeks the help of God for the first time, these lepers see Jesus and cry out to Him for help. “Master have mercy on us!” They shout.

Note that they didn’t call Him “Messiah” they didn’t even call Him “Rabbi,” like you see in other places. They use the word “Master,” and they specifically ask for mercy. They aren’t referring to Him being God, or even His teachings, but they likely heard somewhere that this guy can heal the sick.

We can’t look at this and say, “Look at the faith of these good Christians! They surely believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God!”

These people were hurting, they were terrified, and regardless of if they thought Jesus was God, or Jesus was a prophet, or Jesus was just a miracle worker,

² Luke 17:13.

they at least felt that He could help them. Just like an atheist in a foxhole, he might not believe anything about the Christian God, but he has nowhere else to turn, and he's heard before that there is a God out there who can do miracles, who can save people from even the most dire circumstances, and has mercy on even strangers.

Faith thrives in times of need, even among those who would reject God in any other circumstance. But what about times of comfort, does it remain the same?

The truth is that Faith is often more tested in times of comfort. Luke continues with Jesus' response to their cries for help:

When He saw them, He said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they were going, they were cleansed.³

Jesus answers their cries for help with a word of healing. They had faith in the power of God, and were given an amazing demonstration of it in response. Their situations were suddenly changed, the death sentence hanging over their heads was removed; they were no longer in the foxhole!

So here is a question for you to consider, if there are no atheists in foxholes, if even the most stubborn man has to beg for the mercy of God, what happens to that new convert when he survives? Faith thrives in times of need, but what about that same faith of that same person in times of comfort? Once the lepers are healed, what did they do?

The story concludes with this:

Now one of them, when he saw that he had been healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice, and he fell on his face at His feet, giving thanks to Him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered and said, "Were there not ten cleansed? But the nine—where are they?"

"Was no one found who returned to give glory to God, except this foreigner?" And He said to him, "Stand up and go; your faith has made you well."⁴

³ Luke 17:14.

⁴ Luke 17:16-19.

What happened? What was the difference between the nine lepers and the one who returned? Didn't they all have faith? Didn't they all receive the same blessing from the same God?

A lot of people think that faith is tested in difficult times in life, but look how faith can be harder to hold onto when things are easy.

A person who is in perfect health; will they wake up every day and say "Thanks be to God, I am alive and well?" What about someone who is free from debt? "Thanks be to God I am financially stable?" What about someone who has "food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, a devout husband or wife, devout children, devout workers, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, self-control, good reputation, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like"?⁵

Will they continue on their way, living their life, happy with what they have, but forget that it was all given to them? Or will they return to God, the provider of all good things, and fall on their face praising Him?

The fact of the matter is that if you have real faith, if your faith is alive, if your faith is not just something that appears when you are in a foxhole in your life, but is something that lives in you every day, then you will be like that one leper. And if you aren't like that one leper yet, then your faith will make you desire to be as thankful as him.

After all, what other response would be appropriate to the healing power of Christ's death and resurrection? To the forgiveness of all of our sins?

It's a fact that everybody is going to be in a foxhole in their life at some time or another. Every check that bounces, every sickness of a child, every loss of a friend, and every time you have to sit in a doctor's office, waiting for the results of

⁵ *Luther's Small Catechism*, The Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer.

that test. You could be in the same foxhole for the rest of your life. But at the end of it all, God *will* pull you from it, He *will* rescue you from it, He *will* bring you peace. It could be through charity, through healing, through the comfort of knowing that He is in control, and it could be through bringing you home to be with Him.

We were all in a foxhole with our sin. God has already saved us from the greatest foxhole of the punishment of sin by sending Jesus to die in our place. Everything else is only temporary, a flash compared to eternity in heaven.

Let me re-read verse 19 for you again. This is what it says in the ESV translation:

He said to him, "Stand up and go; your faith has made you well."

"Your faith has made you well"... that's alright, but that's not exactly what the Greek says. The Greek word used is "sesōken," that doesn't just mean to be healed, it means to be *saved!* It means to be *delivered!* "*Your Faith has saved you!*"

The faith of this man was so great, not because the man was so great, but because the gift, and the one giving the gift was so great. His thankfulness took into consideration that he was absolutely helpless, in his leprosy he was as good as dead, and the LORD and master of the universe had pity on him and saved him!

You have just as much to be thankful for, God has given you just as much as this Samaritan. You suffered from a deadly disease as well, but instead of leprosy, it was called sin. You were unclean, just like this Samaritan, and you were incapable of getting out of your situation, and God saw you, and God had pity on you, and God *saved* you!

With His words "It is finished," LORD and master of the universe completely cured you of your deadly sin! He pulled you out of that foxhole, he pulled you out

of that pit, and He brought you into His presence. He cleansed you with the water of Baptism, and feeds you with His life-giving Body and Blood.

Praise be to God that we, who were dead in sin, who were lepers, unclean and hopeless, who were terrified, alone in a foxhole with no one to turn to but Him, praise be to God that He had mercy on us! Praise be to God that He continues to shower us every day with blessings. That whether we are going through struggles, or whether we are living a comfortable life free of worry, that He is still there, and He is still our master, and He has still saved us!

Praise be to God that in addition to saving us, that God has given us the faith that we can see how much He loves us, and we can fall at His feet in thanksgiving and worship!

The atheist in the foxhole might see God for a moment, he may be saved, and quickly forget the mercy of God, but as Christians that salvation is eternal. Praise be to God, your faith has made you well!

**And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.**

Trinity XIV (Historic One-year series)

Psalm 119:9-16; Proverbs 4:10-23; Galatians 5:16-24; Luke 17:11-19

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