

Good Friday

I Tell You the Truth . . . Today You Will Be With Me in Paradise

Text: Luke 23:39-43

³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

It is a phrase that is used to describe a critical moment of importance or decisive time when much seems to hang in the balance. We may call such a time 'the moment of truth.' A young man digs into his pocket pulls out a ring, bends to one knee and with heart pounding in his chest he asked that crucial question. Will she say, "Yes?" After what seems like an eternity sitting in that small room, the doctor enters; the test results are in, the file is opened. What will the report be? It's the moment of truth.

We have all gone through such moments of truth in one form or another. During those crucial moments we have been, in a way, suspended in the minutes and the seconds of these anxious instances. With bated breath we wait and our lives may even seem to hang in the balance during such a moment of truth. Yet there is no moment of truth greater than when our very lives do actually hang in the balance. Such was the case with the criminal whom we see hanging on the cross. He is about to die. As his life slowly flashes before his eyes, he is ashamed by what he sees. Frame by frame of his life would reveal crime after crime, sin after sin; and so he knows the nails were pounded through his hands and feet with justice. ***"We are getting what our deeds deserved,"*** he openly admitted. But it wasn't only the pain in his hands and feet, or the burn in his lungs, or the blood trickling down his arms that brought him to this moment of truth as he hung suspended on Golgatha. It was that question that confronted him, that confronts all of us eventually, the question that he in no way now could avoid, "What happens next?" "What happens when I die?" And so he asks, he pleads to the One hanging next to him, ***"Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom."***

And in that moment of truth, Jesus responds with a truth that brings sweet relief to this dying man and to hearts troubled by sin ever since, ***"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."*** Every segment of this sentence has soul lifting capability. Instead of getting what he deserved this man was assured of grace and salvation. Instead of punishment there would be paradise. Instead of being forgotten or forsaken by God he would be remembered. This was promised and true and it would all happen so soon. There would be no lengthy probation period, no further sentence served, rather Jesus said

to him in all truthfulness, *today*. His sins were being paid for in full. Paradise would stand open for him. Before the sun would rise again, this man could be assured his suffering would be over. And because of the living Word of God that was right to his left the Holy Spirit had worked in his heart and given him the gift of faith and that faith in Jesus meant that eternal peace and perfect paradise would be his.

Notice, that were no ifs in Jesus statement, there were no conditions, no words of perhaps, or someday - the type of interjections that we add so often to our promises - there was only the promise of today. When we're lying on own deathbeds, Jesus holds out the same type of comforting certainty. For the one who looks to Jesus in faith this blessed unconditional truth applies: death is not just the cessation of breath, it is also the end of suffering. No more hunger. No more pain. No more tears. No more guilt. No more anger. No more envy. No more sin... And that promise is so exquisitely immediate... *today*. I tell you the truth, *today* you will be with me in paradise.

But Jesus promise is more than just a promise of time. It's also a promise of companionship and of paradise. Imagine what that must have meant for this criminal. More than likely, a lifetime of crime did not land him in the nicest company of people or the most reliable of friends. Now, in the waning hours of his life, he saw people at their worst. As those who passed by spit at him and shook their heads in disgust, imagine how alone this criminal must have felt. Even though he was out in public for all to see, even though he was crucified with two others; how alone, how exposed, he must have felt.

Our sin has a tendency to do that to us as well. When we fall into sin, when we stumble or maybe even race into temptation, there are those awful moments of truth that we must face. When we consider what we have done, when we consider how we have sinned against others, when we consider how we have offended a holy God, when the harsh light of God's law exposes our sin there is often this terrible feeling of loneliness. The righteous judgment of a holy God hangs over us. The disappointment and the disgust of others surround us. We are alone, exposed, and worthy of the punishment that our sins deserve, and yet in the darkness of this distress our Savior speaks to us with words of explicit grace and undeserved kindness. ***You will be with me.*** In these words Jesus would assure this criminal, that instead of dying in his sin and being surrounded by shame and suffering for all eternity, instead of suffering the torments of hell for all time, and being alone and separated from God forever, this man would be with him in paradise. ***I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.***

Paradise; what would that paradise be like? What would it look like? The bible uses both the picture of simple pastures and a rich city built with a variety jewels to describe the paradise of heaven. It speaks of crystal clear streams and lush vegetation. It also

speaks of heaven as a magnificent banquet hall, a mansion with many rooms. Yet those detailed descriptions are not given to this man, but simply a word that drips with peace and promise: paradise. Whatever that place will be like, it was going to be beyond this thief's imagination. It will be beyond our imaginations. The paradise of heaven will be glorious, it will be completely undeserved, and most importantly it will be a place where we are with Jesus. That's what makes this paradise so wonderful.

The promise that Jesus gives is not only a promise of location, but it is ultimately a promise of companionship and love. Think about it this way: That place where that young man got down on one knee, that place where that young woman said yes, might be a nice spot. It might be a quaint little park with the gorgeous view of the lake. But it is special not simply because of the location, but its special and wonderful because that's where he was with the love of his life.

In heaven—in paradise—it will be a lovely location, but most importantly in this paradise you will be with our God who is love. You will be with the Son of God who loved sinners so much that he spoke words of forgiveness and love even when he was being tortured to death. In the paradise of heaven you will be with the Son of God who loved you enough to leave heaven and be with us here on earth. You will be with the Son of God who loved you enough to die for you, so that you might be with him, forever. Not alone, or forsaken or abandoned because of your sins, instead you are forgiven, with your friend, your brother, your Savior and God, Jesus, forever in the paradise of heaven.

But how do you know for sure? How do you know that this is what's in store for you? Well, let's look at those words of assurance that Jesus speaks one last time before his death. Jesus says those words that have grabbed our attention this entire Lenten season. The one word that he goes back to time and again when he wants to really drive a point home; the one word that is translated "***I tell you the truth***" is the universal word *amen*. And Jesus' "amen" for you today is a truth that he wants you to know and lean upon. It is a truth upon which you can always rely. Our Savior left no room for doubt about whether or not that thief would be in heaven, but rather he said with all certainty, "***I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.***" Through his Word, he leaves no room for doubt whether or not you will be in heaven. Jesus makes it clear that when your moment of truth comes, it doesn't matter what we've done in the past, but through his Word we can know and lean on and rely on his word of truth. Those who look to Jesus in faith will always have this word of truth that will hold them fast. "***Today, you will be with me in paradise.***" To this wonderful truth, let all God's people say, "**Amen.**" Yes it shall be so!