

Today in Paradise

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[0 : 00] And as we begin this morning, we are continuing on our trek to the cross. As we remember what Jesus Christ did for us last week, we heard Jesus' words from the cross, Father, forgive them.

These words should make us forgiving. These words should help us to be forbearing. Because if Jesus, hanging there on the cross, having been brutally beaten, one who had never sinned in his entire life because he was God in the flesh, could say that to those who were crying, Crucify him, crucify him.

And if he could hang there in pain saying, Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing, then I believe we can be forbearing as well. And this morning we're going to hear Jesus' second words from the cross, where he says, Today you will be with me in paradise.

Now these words were words of assurance, words of personal assurance to the criminal that was just on his side. And I believe to us this morning it's also a challenge.

Let's look this morning in God's Word. Luke chapter 23, and we're going to read verses 39 through 44, but paying special attention to verses 40, 41, and 42.

[1 : 24] Beginning in verse 39 this morning, Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed him, saying, If you are the Christ, if you are the Anointed One, if you are the Messiah like they say you are, save yourself and us.

But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds.

But this man has done nothing wrong. Then he said to Jesus, Lord. So the criminal turns to Jesus and says, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

And Jesus said to him, Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise. Now it was about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour.

Now what do these words say to us? Well, first, I believe these were words of pardon. These were words that were spoken to a man who was fully aware of his sin.

[2 : 41] Now we see that in verses 40 and verse 41. One of the criminals said, If you are who you say you are, he appealed to Jesus, he prayed to Jesus, so to speak, and he says, But if you are who you say you are, then get us out of this mess.

And the other says, Wait a minute. Don't you believe in God? And don't you know that we're under the same condemnation? We're dying for our sin.

But this man has not sinned. So there are many things that we don't know about this thief. We don't know his name. We don't know his background. We don't know his age.

And we really don't even know his crime. But you know what? We don't need to know any of those things. All we need to know is, just like us, he was a sinner.

And he appeals to Jesus. He believes that he is a son of God. We know that by what he calls him.

And he appeals to Christ, knowing that he is a sinner.

[3 : 43] And what we see in verse 41 is there's evidence of God working in his heart. He says, I admit my problem. I admit my guilt.

And there are many people that we rub shoulders with day to day that don't even admit their own guilt. And don't even realize that we are separated from God.

And we have a need, or we have the need, to accept that free gift of eternal life. But he knows it. There's evidence in his heart that he knew that he was a sinner.

He was aware of God's knowledge of his heart. And he became reverent toward God. Let's look back at verse number 40. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation?

And then in verse 41, he sees himself as guilty. And we indeed, justly, we went through the trial, they found us guilty, and oh, by the way, dude, we are guilty.

[4 : 55] And he says, he says, with me, he says, we know that we are guilty. So this word gives assurance that sins are forgiven.

He says, today you will be with me in paradise. So what we see on the cross is, we see this man who admits his guilt, who admits his sin. And he turns over to Jesus, and he says, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

And so the words that Jesus say to him are words of pardon. They let us know on this side of the cross that sins are forgiven.

But the reality is, this offer of pardon must be received. We can go around and we can tell people what God has done for them. And we can tell the story of our own salvation.

We can tell them what God did in our life, in our heart, and how it's changed us, and how we are looking forward to spending eternity with God in heaven.

[6 : 02] But if people do not believe it, and here's the thing, there are many people who believe what we say. There are many people who believe that Jesus is God. There are many people who believe that Jesus died on the cross for us, but have yet to receive that pardon, have yet to appropriate that pardon in their own life.

Back in 1830, a fellow by the name of George Wilson was convicted of robbing the U.S. mail, and he was sentenced to be hanged.

But President Andrew Jackson issued a pardon for Wilson, but Wilson refused to accept the pardon. Well, the matter went all the way up to the Supreme Court.

Chief Justice Marshall concluded that Wilson had to be executed. Well, we thought, we think we would say, well, we thought the president issued a pardon.

And if the president issues a pardon, well, you're pardoned. But what did Wilson do? He did not accept it. He did not accept the pardon.

[7 : 15] So here is what Chief Justice Marshall concluded. He says Wilson would have to be executed. And I quote, he said, this was his judgment, A pardon is a slip of paper, wrote Marshall, the value of which is determined by the acceptance of the person to be pardoned.

If it is refused, it is no pardon. George Wilson must be hanged. Think about it. Over 2,000 years ago, Jesus issued a pardon.

But that pardon is determined by our willingness to accept it. And so when we say that Jesus died for the whole world, what we mean is that Jesus died for everyone.

But the fact is not everyone will accept that pardon. Just like George Wilson. He was pardoned. The pardon was given. It was written on the paper.

It was signed by the president. He had the pardon. All he had to do was say, okay, I'll accept it and I want to go free. But do you realize there are many people today who are not free because of their refusal to accept the freedom that God offers, the forgiveness of sin, a brand new life, a brand new lease on life, a brand new, the Holy Spirit comes into us.

[8 : 40] And so there are many today, even though they have been, the pardon has been offered, they have been pardoned, just like Wilson. they have not accepted the pardon and want to go or at least choose to go on with their own life, trying to work their way and try to pay their own way, pay their own debt.

And we know that it can't be done. So if it is refused, it's really no pardon at all. But this, these words of Jesus, today, you will be with me in paradise was an answer to a prayer, an answer to a prayer that was breathed out by the criminal next to him.

And it was a promise of life. It was a promise of life from the Lord, the promise that he gives to each and every one of us. All who call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

I don't care who's listening to this today, whether you're sitting here in the auditorium, whether you're watching us on the internet this morning, you can receive that pardon. It doesn't matter what you've done.

It doesn't matter what your sin is. It doesn't matter your background. It doesn't matter your life. It doesn't matter what anyone has done to you. Jesus offers you a pardon today.

[9 : 56] And all you have to do is accept it. So Jesus is offering the gift of life. And it was a promise from the Lord. So not only was it a word of pardon, but it was a word that is personal.

Because he is speaking directly to the one who appealed to him. It's a word that is personal. He says, you will be with me in paradise.

The thief cries out to Jesus for salvation. Then he said to Jesus, Lord, verse 42, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Lord, remember me. These were personal words. This was a prayer of faith. What did he call him in verse 42? He turns to him and says, Lord, Lord.

He didn't say, sir. He didn't say, hey man. He didn't say in his vernacular of the day, you know, hey bud. He said, Lord. And it was a reverential acknowledgement that Jesus was the Messiah.

[11:04] And I really believe that this is the case because of what he asks. Because Jesus, he knows that Jesus is about to die. Think about that.

There were so many executions by crucifixion in Rome during that day. There are many people who had, just like people or just like a moth is drawn to a flame.

People are drawn to macabre things. And so I probably would venture to say that people would gather around just to watch somebody die.

I mean, human nature is still the same today as it was back then. And so there are many people who had seen crucifixions. And there's one thing that if someone survived too long and they got tired, they would break, the soldier would break their legs so that they could not push themselves up in order to be able to continue breathing and so they would die quicker.

And so the thief on the side, the criminal on the side knew that this guy is going to die no ifs, ands, or buts. So what does he ask? Remember me when you come, when you come where?

[12:16] Into your kingdom. So he believes that Jesus Christ is going to live after he dies. And so I believe that was an acknowledgement that he was the Messiah, he was God in the flesh, and he appeals to him, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

He may have never seen one of Jesus' miracles. He may have never heard one of Jesus' sermons, but he had obviously heard about who Jesus was.

And he looked to the man next to him and calls him Lord. A fellow by the name of J.C. Ryle years ago said, surely such faith was never since the world began.

The faith that was shown or evidenced by this criminal on the cross. Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Not only was this a word of pardon from Jesus, not only was this a word that was personal, but it was also a word about paradise.

It was a word about what happens after this life. This life is not all there is. We may be here for 70, 80, 20, 30, however many years we live on this earth.

[13:33] You may live to a century. But the reality is that this life on earth is not the whole point of life because God created mankind to have an eternal relationship with Him.

And so it was a word about paradise. Jesus said, Today you will be with me, where? In paradise, in heaven, in glory.

Verse 43, so Jesus says to him, Assuredly, I say to you, Today you will be with me in paradise.

paradise. So as followers of Christ, we will be with Jesus in heaven when we die. We know that that is where we are headed.

Now things have changed somewhat. Probably a century ago, probably even up to three generations ago, people thought about life after death quite a bit.

[14:42] And so talking about heaven was a very effective tool, so to speak, at helping someone think about their eternity.

Well, when we die, you want to be with God, do you not? Well, the thing about what has changed in the past generations is most people today, especially the younger generations, the baby boomer generation, the millennials and Gen X and Gen Z and whatever alphabetic letter you want to put on whoever you are and wherever you end up, not many people are thinking about life after death.

They're thinking about today. They're not even thinking about tomorrow. They're thinking about today. And so, for some, being with God in paradise is really not a big draw.

So we can talk about this is what God can do or this is what God will do in your life today. But to this thief, what was he thinking about?

He was thinking about life after death. Hopefully, there was going to be life after death because he knew that he might have had maybe an hour, but he might have had minutes.

[16:11] And so, for this criminal on the cross, paradise was what was on his mind. And so, he says, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Jesus says, assuredly, I say to you,

today you will be with me in paradise.

Now, think of heaven. What are some of the problems that heaven will solve? Let's say you owe money. on your credit cards.

Guess what? Heaven will solve all those problems. Jesus Christ will come back in the clouds. He takes us up. Guess what?

You owe money on your house. Who cares? Because we're in heaven now. Banks will have to worry about that. They'll only have seven years to worry about that after all, right? And so, that will take care of a lot of problems.

Well, what if we have aches and pains? No more aches and pains in paradise. And so, heaven solves a whole lot of life's problems. And eternity, whether we realize it or not, is really just a step away.

[17:17] Might live another 30 years, 40 years, 50 years, 80 years. But heaven, or two or three, or Jesus might return before we're done.

Do you believe that? He may return before we say amen after the message. If He does, heaven is just a step away.

There's no such thing as soul sleep. There's no such thing as an unconscious state. There are some who would deny the existence of heaven, that when we die, we breathe our last breath, we just cease to be.

Well, the Bible teaches us that there is life after death. We go to the Old Testament, the New Testament. We look at the story of Lazarus and the rich man, that once they died, one went into torment, one went into Abraham's bosom, or that place of peace and comfort, or paradise.

And so there's no such thing as soul sleep, or we just cease to exist. Salvation also is not by works. It's not by religious acts.

[18:25] As followers of Christ, Christ, we are going to be going to a much better place. It doesn't matter how good earth is for you.

We enjoy family, we enjoy our time together, we enjoy everything that is for many of us, there are some, that life on earth is not all that great. So wherever we are on the spectrum, no matter how bad life is, heaven will only be better.

For those of us who may be thinking that we are living heaven on earth because everything is going well, heaven can only be better. And that is what we have to look forward to as followers of Jesus Christ.

So my question is, what does the prospect of heaven mean to you? What does heaven mean to you? Think about that. It ought to have, I believe, a prominent place in our thinking because it's where we're going to spend the rest of eternity.

Some of you who are still in the workforce, depending upon where you are in the workforce, may be thinking about retirement. And the closer you get, the more you're thinking about have I put enough money away, have I put enough aside, and are maybe looking forward to being able to do the things that you really want to do and have the freedom to do.

[19:50] And there are those, depending upon what type of work you're doing, if you have maybe a good retirement, there are some who start thinking about retirement the first day on the job. I'm serious because they say, you know what, if I put \$50 a paycheck, if I put \$100 a paycheck, if I do this, if I do that, then I'm going to have this when I retire.

And so thinking about retirement is not a bad thing because it's preparation. And I believe the moment we trust Christ as our Savior, I think we ought to be thinking about eternity.

Because if we think that Jesus Christ could come back at any moment, it's going to affect the way we live. It's going to affect the decisions we make. It's going to determine how we treat others.

It's going to determine how we forgive. Jesus says, if you don't forgive someone else, I won't forgive you. And so it's an encouragement for us to realize that we need to be living for Him.

If we're sending up to Heaven, as the Bible says, wood, hay, and stubble, or in other words, just things that we do for ourselves, then we're not preparing for eternity in Heaven.

[21:02] But if we're doing everything under the power of God's Holy Spirit, we are preparing for our eternity in Heaven.

God's Now, there are many who have their petty excuses for not reaching others. I'm too busy. I'm too tired. I'm hurting. There are many reasons that people might use for not reaching others for Christ. Now, this is something that we ought to be doing whether we are thinking about it or not by

the way we live.

Think about this. Jesus, in all the discomfort and in all the agony of the cross, Jesus wins one more for eternity.

In His agony on the cross of Calvary, Jesus wins just one more. You know, there are a lot of ways for us to segue into talking about Jesus, depending upon who we are.

[22 : 14] There may be, depending on how young you are, depending upon there are some who might think, well, you know what, the younger generation is really not thinking about God. And they may be surprised when you say, well, you know what, I lead worship at church, or I teach Sunday school, or I've got to get ready because I'll be in church this weekend.

and they go, church? What does that do for you? You know, maybe that's, I don't know about me, church is not something that I'm really into.

Or maybe they're surprised that maybe a young person would be excited about going to church. Now, these are three things that I believe that you might use, and this is just an example that you might use to help segue into helping a person to think that maybe I need to consider the same thing.

It might be, you say something like, you know what, I believe I was put on this earth to make it a better place. No one can argue with that. And I believe that the best way we do that is through love. Okay? Can't argue with that either. And then maybe you could go on to say, you know what, and I believe the best example of sacrificial love is Jesus.

[23 : 39] Or the best way that I know to love others is through Jesus. So we talk about our purpose. You know, we're here to make earth a better place.

Because who are we as followers of Christ? We're salt and we're light. We are here as preservatives. We are here to shine the light of the truth of God's word into a dark world so that people can see the light of Jesus Christ.

And so we are here to make the world a better place, to point them to Jesus. And the way we do that is how will they know that we're Christians? By our love.

And then who's the best example of love? It's Jesus Christ. So what have we done? We've brought them all the way full circle to Jesus. You know, most people, whether they think about Jesus or not, especially the green crowd now and others, they believe they're put on this earth to make it a better place.

They believe that they're to love others. But then when we say, I believe the best example of love is Jesus, and you go like, whoa, wait a minute, put on the brakes.

[24 : 53] But we say, when I think of sacrificial love, when I think of putting ourselves last, I think of Jesus. And that can be, I think, a great segue into the gospel and what Jesus Christ has done for us.

So a very, very simple way. Jesus, in His agony on the cross, won one more into the kingdom, reached one more for the kingdom of Christ.

So, my question to us here today, my question to anyone who is watching or hearing this message, do you have the sure hope of that dying thief, that you will be with God, with Christ in heaven one day for sure.

So my question as we close is, which thief are you? The one who was still negative and saying, if you are who you say you are, get us down from here, get us out of this mess?

Or the one who admitted his guilt and said, Jesus, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Pardon is available for us, for you today.

[26 : 11] Let's pray. Father, this morning we are so, so very thankful that you've offered that pardon to all of us, to each of us. And we must simply accept it, accept that free gift of eternal life, realizing that Jesus is God, realizing that you love us so much that you sent your son Jesus Christ to die on the cross in our place, and that through simple faith and trust, we accept that pardon, the forgiveness of our sin, and you become in control of our life, and we receive your Holy Spirit.

Father, we thank you for all of this, and I pray, Lord God, that anyone listening to this message would be willing to accept freely that gift of life, a brand new start, because you love each one of us, and we are important to you.

I thank you, Father, for what you're going to do. I pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.