

WORDS FROM THE CROSS - PART 2

Paradise Promise

Dr. Derek Morris

Preaching passage:	Luke 23:42-43
Subject:	How Jesus responded to the thief on the cross next to Jesus who said to Him, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom"
Complement:	Jesus promised that thief that day that he would be with Him in paradise
Exegetical idea:	When the thief on a cross next to Jesus asked Jesus to remember him in His kingdom, Jesus promised that thief that he would be with Him in paradise.
Preaching idea:	Jesus wants you to be with Him in paradise.
Purpose	To encourage my hearers to let Jesus save them so they can be with Him in paradise.

I am always amazed when I hear the testimony of a person who has been radically transformed by a life-changing encounter with Jesus! The apostle Paul describes that transformation with these words: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor 5:17).

The apostle Paul knew first-hand what he was talking about. He himself had experienced a radical transformation as a result of his own life-changing encounter with Jesus. In fact, Josh McDowell, in his powerful book about Jesus entitled *More Than A Carpenter*, maintains that the radical transformation of Saul of Tarsus into the apostle Paul is one of the greatest evidences of the truth of the claims of Jesus. Listen to Paul's own testimony before King Agrippa, recorded in Acts 26:9-19: "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them. If you read on in this same chapter, you will hear Paul's remarkable testimony of a life-

changing encounter with Jesus. Saul of Tarsus was so radically transformed by a life-changing encounter with Jesus that he became Paul the apostle. No longer a persecutor, but a preacher! Yes, Paul knew what he was talking about when he testified to the Christians in Corinth, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”

Today, in part 2 of our 5-part series on Words from the Cross, we are going to consider the story of another individual who was radically transformed by a life-changing encounter with Jesus. I’m praying that, as we study God’s Word together, someone listening to this message would also have a life-changing encounter with Jesus!

Only Dr. Luke records this second saying of Jesus from the cross, though all four Gospel writers record the setting for these words from the cross. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John testify that two robbers were crucified with Jesus, one on His right and one on His left. Two of the Gospel writers, Matthew and Mark, tell us that both of these robbers heap insults on Jesus! (Matthew 27:44, Mark 15:32). But only Dr. Luke records a life-changing encounter that one of those criminals had with Jesus—an encounter that radically transformed his life!

Let’s pick up the story in Luke 23, beginning with verse 32. “Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals, one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’” If you were with us for part 1 in this series on Words from the Cross, you’ll remember the important insight that we gained from Luke 23:34. The text literally reads, “Jesus kept on saying...” When the cold, calloused Roman soldiers pounded the huge metal spikes into His hands and feet, Jesus prayed for them, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” When the rulers, chief priest and teachers of the law stood at the foot of the cross and mocked Jesus, Jesus prayed for them:

“Father,forgive them!” When the two thieves, crucified on either side of Jesus heaped insults on Him, Jesus prayed for them: “Father,forgive them.”

We don't know all of the insults that those two thieves heaped on Jesus, but at some point in the events of that day, Luke records that one of the thieves accosted Jesus with these words, recorded in Luke 23:39. “Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” We can't hear the tone of voice that this thief used, but from the context it is clear that this thief is not humble and penitent. He is not saying, “Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” (in a warm and tender tone of voice). Rather, this thief is snarling, “Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” (in a harsh, bitter tone).

How do we know that? Well look at the words that precede his comment, and the words that follow. At the beginning of Luke 23:39, Luke records, “One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him.” And then notice what follows, in Luke 23:40. “But the other criminal rebuked him. Apparently, these two robbers knew each other. Maybe they were partners in crime, or at least they had become acquainted while awaiting execution. “Don't you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence. We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve.” No excuses now. No lies about it being someone else's fault. This one robber is under conviction that he is a sinner and he deserves the penalty that has been passed against him.

But then this penitent thief utters a word of faith. A confession. Notice what he says, recorded at the end of Luke 23:41. “But this man has done nothing wrong.” This penitent thief has been listening and watching for the past several hours. He has noticed the purity of Jesus in the way that Jesus has responded to His violent accusers. And this penitent thief has heard a simple prayer repeated from the lips of Jesus. What was that prayer? “Father, forgive them.”

“Father, forgive them.”

As the penitent thief rebukes his fellow robber, and makes the confession that Jesus has done nothing wrong, where is Jesus? He is right between them. In the middle. The penitent thief has to look right past Jesus to rebuke his fellow robber and to make his confession. Luke doesn't tell us at what point Jesus and that penitent thief made eye contact. That was a life-changing moment for that penitent thief. You see, my friends, when you turn your eyes upon Jesus and look full in His wonderful face, the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace.

Deep in his heart, this penitent thief begins to pray a prayer. Before we read the words of that prayer, I want you to notice the first three words of Luke 23:42. “Then he, the penitent thief, said...” I was surprised to discover that this verb is also in the imperfect tense. Literally, “the penitent thief kept on saying, ‘Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.’” Why did this thief have to repeat himself? Wasn't Jesus listening? Were the shouts of the crowd too loud? What do you think?

I want to suggest to you that this penitent thief prayed silently in his heart before he ever opened his mouth to speak. His silent heart cry to Jesus was, “Jesus, remember me when you come into Your kingdom.” “Jesus, remember me when you come into Your kingdom.” While the penitent thief was praying this prayer, the rulers were still sneering, the chief priests and teachers of the law were still mocking, his own friend was still heaping insults on Jesus. It wasn't easy to publically confess faith in Jesus. But as this penitent thief turns his eyes upon Jesus and looks full in His wonderful face, the things of earth grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.

And finally, the penitent thief verbalizes his silent heart cry. “Jesus, remember me when

you come into Your kingdom.” He didn’t know much about that kingdom. He didn’t know much about what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus. But this penitent thief cried out in simple faith. And notice the response of Jesus, recorded in Luke 23:43, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” At least, that’s the way that it is translated in my NIV Bible. “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” There have been some lively discussions about these words of Jesus from the cross. Did Jesus really promise the thief that he would be in paradise that day? Today? Or was the paradise promise given that day?

Well, let’s examine these words from the cross more carefully. The first word that Jesus utters is “amen”. My NIV translation translates that word as “I tell you the truth.” The KJV says “Verily.” The NASB says “Truly.” Now Jesus always speaks the truth. He IS the Truth. So why does Jesus use this word AMEN at the beginning of these words from the cross? Jesus is emphasizing the truth of what He is about to say. On occasion, Jesus even says, “Amen, Amen, I say to you!”

So Jesus is emphasizing the truth of what He is about to say. Amen, I say to you, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” Now many of us are familiar with the word “paradise” but it was not a common word in the New Testament. In fact, it is only used two other times besides in this saying of Jesus from the cross. In 2 Corinthians 12:3-4, Paul says, “And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise.” Someone, and most scholars believe that Paul is referring to Himself, was caught up in vision into the very presence of God, to paradise.

Now look with me at the third use of this word paradise in the NT, found in Revelation 2:7. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” The

author of the book of Revelation has more to say about this tree of life which is in the paradise of God in Revelation 22:1-5. “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.”

Where is this CITY that John keeps referring to? John gives us the answer in Revelation 21:1-5. “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’ He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’” So where is Paradise? Paradise is the place where God dwells, and when God creates a new heaven and a new earth and makes His home with us, Paradise will be right here on the earth made new.

Someone might be thinking, “Well, was the dying thief in Paradise that day? In order to answer that question, we need to look more carefully at the words of Jesus from the cross. In Greek, the words of Jesus are literally translated as follows: “Amen to you I tell today with me

you will be in paradise.” Let me read that again. “Amen to you I tell today with me you will be in paradise.” In the Greek text there is no punctuation. That is supplied by the translators. It simply reads, “Amen to you I tell today with me you will be in paradise.” So is it, “Amen to you I tell, TODAY with me you will be in paradise”? Or is it, “Amen to you I tell today, with me you will be in paradise”? Which one is it?

We don't have to guess. The Word of God gives us the answer in John 20:10-17. John records the meeting of the Risen Christ with Mary Magdalene: “Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, ‘Woman, why are you crying?’ ‘They have taken my Lord away,’ she said, ‘and I don't know where they have put him.’ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. ‘Woman, he said, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?’ Thinking he was the gardener, she said, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’ She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, ‘Rabboni!’ (which means Teacher). Jesus said, ‘Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

What day is this? Sunday. The first day of the week. The day that Jesus was raised from the dead. What day did Jesus die? Friday, the preparation day. And what was Jesus doing between his death on Friday and His resurrection on the first day of the week? He was resting in the tomb. On Sunday, He testified to Mary, “I have not yet returned to the Father.”

If you believe the words of Jesus recorded here by John, and I do, then Jesus could not possibly have been promising the penitent thief on Friday that he would be with Him in paradise

that day? Jesus wasn't even in Paradise that day. He was on the cross, and resting in the tomb. He did not ascend to His Father until after His meeting with Mary Magdalene on Sunday.

So what did Jesus promise to the penitent thief as they were both hanging on crosses on Friday? Simply this: "Amen, to you I tell today, with me you will be in Paradise." Because whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved! Whoever cries out in simple faith to Jesus, like this penitent thief who cried "Lord remember me when you come into Your kingdom," whoever calls upon the name of the Lord, can claim that paradise promise "you will be with Jesus in Paradise!" You will be with Jesus when God makes all things new! You will be with Jesus when there is a new heaven and a new earth. You will be with Jesus when there is no more death. You will be with Jesus when there is no more sorrow. You will be with Jesus when there is no more crying. You will be with Jesus when there is no more pain. For the former things have passed away!

Charlie Weider's father was dying. Not on a cross, but his days were numbered. Charlie was an elder at the Allentown church, and he asked me to visit his father. Charlie told me that his dad would have thrown me out of the house a few months earlier, but now his heart was open. Charlie's father was afraid to die. So I went to the Weider home and Charlie's dad greeted me. I still remember his first words: "I need help!" "What kind of help do you need, Mr. Weider," I asked. "I need help from up there." It was the same heart cry as the dying thief. Lord, will you remember me when you come into Your kingdom. That day, Mr. Weider accepted Jesus as His personal Savior, He claimed the paradise promise. Ten days later he fell asleep in Jesus, but his family told me that those were the most peaceful 10 days of his life. That's what happens when you claim the paradise promise.

Violet Bauman was also dying. But she was not afraid. She had already trusted in Jesus

as her personal Savior. She had already claimed the paradise promise. As I stood by her bedside in the Intensive Care Unit, she whispered to me in tones that were barely audible, “The Lord has me in the palm of His hand and no-one can snatch me out!” Hallelujah! That’s what happens when you claim the paradise promise.

Have you claimed that paradise promise as your own? Have you looked to Jesus in simple faith and asked Him to remember you when He comes into His kingdom? Have you asked Jesus to save you? I invite you, like that dying thief, like Mr. Weider, like Violet Bauman, to turn your eyes upon Jesus today, look full in His wonderful face, and let the things of earth grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.