

Luke
The Promise of Paradise
Luke 23:39-43
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As we have the opportunity this week to contemplate the death of Christ, I thought it would be good for us to turn to one of the events in the last week of his life. I'd like for us this morning to consider the amazing encounter that occurred on the cross, just a few hours before God's Son died. It's for us in Luke 23. Let's turn there together, Luke 23:39. It's the familiar account of the thief.

One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself And us!" But the other answered, and rebuking him, said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he was saying, "Jesus remember me when you come in your kingdom!" And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."

That brief paragraph illustrates in brilliant living color that no one is ever beyond the reach of the grace of God. What stirs my own soul about that passage as I read it, is that Christ says to this thief exactly what I want to hear from Christ, and if you're honest in your own heart, what you want to hear from Christ. Listen again to what He says to this man, "Truly, I say to you, you shall be with Me in Paradise."

What qualified this man to join Christ in Paradise, or more to the point, each of us will someday die even as this thief died on that Friday, now almost two thousand years ago. We may not know the day or the hour like he did, but God does. God knows the year, the month, the day, the hour when our life will end. How can we be sure that these same words from Christ will come to us on the day of our death? "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

Well, I think as we look at this text together, we'll see that there are four conditions laid out in this passage. Four conditions that this thief met, and that we must meet as well if we want to be with Christ in Paradise.

The first may seem a bit unusual to you, but it's this, this is the first condition: a sinful life.

Notice how he begins in verse 39, “One of the criminals who were hanged there”, verse 40, “But the other criminal answered.” You see, two men were selected to be crucified with Christ back in verse 32, Luke makes this point, two others also who were criminals, were being led away to be put to death with Him. Apparently, these two men accompanied Christ beginning at the praetorium, there at Pilate’s judgment hall, and they were led with Christ to outside the city walls. Verse 33 continues to say, “When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left.”

Did you notice that every time Luke refers to these men, he simply calls them criminals. This is a general Greek word that refers to those who have broken the law in some way. But both Matthew and Mark, when they speak of these men, are much more specific. Both Matthew and Mark used the word robber, these men were robbers.

The Greek word refers to a collection of the worst kind of men. It refers to plunderers, highwaymen, bandits. But what I find interesting is that wherever this word is used, there is always one common denominator. Wherever this word robber is used, it always describes someone who is willing to be absolutely ruthless in the use of violent force to get what they want.

For example, you see a picture of this word used by Luke himself, back in Luke chapter 10. In Luke 10:30, Jesus begins to tell the story of the good Samaritan, and He says, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.” This is a lonely desolate road, I’ve had the opportunity to be there myself, it still is. And as he was going down He “fell among robbers,” there’s our word. Notice how these robbers treat this man, “they stripped him and beat him and went away leaving him half dead.”

They weren’t content simply to take his belongings, to take his property, but they took some sort of perverse delight in being violent, in leaving this man near death. These men, crucified with Christ, were not burglars. They were violent, sadistic bandits, who absolutely loved and delighted in hurting others. And they had been sentenced to crucifixion.

I’ve told you before that in the Roman culture, there were various means of executing the death penalty, but crucifixion was normally reserved for the worst of criminals. In fact, a Roman citizen couldn’t be crucified. It was reserved for the absolute worst of the culture, it was reserved for terrible murderers, for terrorists, for criminals, like in our day, the terrorists who took over

that Russian school and massacred several hundred children.

That's the kind of person that was normally crucified. When we hear about acts like that Beslan school massacre, when we hear about horrific acts of violence like that, we say something like this; "Those people ought to die a long and terrible death."

That's who faced crucifixion. That's the kind of men, and the kind of offense, that crucifixion was usually reserved for, and that's the kind of men these were.

It's even likely that they were compatriots of Barabbas. Barabbas is also called a robber, and it is even possible that Barabbas was originally intended for that center cross between his two compatriots, that now has Christ because of Pilate's offer to the people, to let one prisoner go free, and of course they chose Barabbas.

These were vile wicked men, who deserved to die the worst possible death because of the absolute perverse violent nature of their crimes. But if their crimes against man were bad, their crimes against God were even worse.

We're told that they blasphemed the son of God. Matthew and Mark both record this, turn to Matthew 27:44. In this passage we're told in verse 38 that, "Two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right, one on the left." And then there were passersby who were wagging their heads and hurling abuse, literally blaspheming Christ, and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself!" Verse 41, "In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking Him and saying," these things. But notice verse 44, "The robbers who had been crucified with Him were also insulting Him with the same words." They too were blaspheming, and both Matthew and Mark make it clear that both of these men were involved in this.

Often, sin looks for an object at which to strike, and in this case it found its target in the sinless son of God.

Jay Oswald Sanders puts it profoundly when he writes these words: "One of the most incredible facts of the whole event, is that those seasoned criminals became worried for their reputations, through being crucified in Christ's company. Lest they be credited with being His friends or associates, they joined company with the passersby as they taunted and mocked Him."

Think of them, afraid that their reputation would be sully by being crucified with the son of God.

Look at the nature of their blasphemy. Back in Luke chapter 23, he basically records the same thing recorded there in Matthew, verse 39. This is what both of them had been saying, one of them continues to say it, “Are you not the Messiah?” Obviously didn't believe this, this is the ultimate in blasphemy and in ridicule. “Save Yourself and us!”

You know we look at these two pathetic figures, hanging on a cross on either side of Christ and, let's be honest, it's hard for us to think that we have anything in common with them. Condemned criminals, worthy of death and not just worthy of death, but worthy of the worst kind of human torture and death, guilty of blasphemy against God. Do we really have anything in common with them? Well, the truth is, that describes every one of us in the sight of God.

A number of years ago I had the opportunity to preach through a good portion of the book of Romans, and ever since then I've been haunted by one particular text, turn to Romans chapter 3. In Romans chapter three, Paul concludes the bad news. He began in chapter 1:18 saying, “For the Wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness”, and he basically, through the middle of chapter 3, builds his case against all mankind, religious and secular, Jew and gentile. And here's his conclusion about every man, Romans chapter 3:10:

There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who understands, There is none who seeks for God; All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, There is not even one.

And then he describes the perversity of fallen man in the verses that follow. When he comes to verses 19 and 20, he takes all that he has taught about our condition before God, and he summarizes it in these profound and haunting words. Verse 19, “Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law,” we stand under the law. He's already proven in the first few chapters that the Jew is under the law because he has the external word given to him by God. And the gentile is under the law because he has the substance of the law written on his heart, he knows what God demands.

So we all are under the law. Why? Verse 19, “so that every mouth may be closed.” This is a legal term. Literally it says, “so that every mouth may be stopped” so that we are rendered guilty. This is what would be said when a verdict of guilty was rendered. Paul is saying, listen, we've all been found guilty.

But then he says something that is even more disturbing, he says, “and all the world may become accountable to God;” It's an interesting Greek expression. Literally it says, “and all the world

may become liable to judgment.”

I searched long and hard for an English parallel that might capture the meaning of this Greek phrase, and this is as close as I could come, and I think it does capture it. He's saying here, we've all been found guilty in God's court, and all the world now stands under the sentence of death. In other words, we all are living in the sight of God, on death row. There isn't a single human being whom God sees on his own apart from the grace of Christ as living anywhere but on death row, awaiting simply, for the sentence to be carried out.

That's how God sees every person without his son. Without exception, whether we're willing to admit it or not. We all meet this first condition of being with Christ in Paradise, because every one of us has lived a sinful life. We look at these men, we see nothing in common with them, these condemned criminals, when in reality, when God sees us, He sees us the same!

You see, we grade on a curve, and when we look at ourselves and compare ourselves with these men, we look pretty good, but God doesn't grade on a curve. When God sees us, He sees both them and us, through the lens of Romans 3:19-20, every mouth guilty, and everyone living on death row. So the truth is, we share a lot in common with these men.

If you want to be with Christ in Paradise, then you must meet the same conditions, this man did, and we all meet the first one, and that is a sinful life: we all qualify on that front.

You'll remember that Christ said He didn't come to call the righteous for repentance, but sinners. The first condition is to understand just how sinful you really are.

There's a second condition here in this text, if you want to be with Christ in Paradise. You must not only have a sinful life, but you must have a repentant heart, and not everyone does have this, a repentant heart.

While these two men had been partners in crime, they suddenly part ways for the rest of their natural lives and for all eternity. One of these men, whom Luke simply refers to as “the other”, experiences a dramatic change. Now remember all three of these men, Jesus and the two thieves,

had been crucified about nine o'clock in the morning. It's not yet twelve o'clock because we know that at twelve o'clock, the sun goes dark at midday and for three hours there's total darkness, and so we're still in that three hour window between nine and noon. Remember this thief, this “other thief”, began that period hurling the same blasphemy at the son of God as his companion. But somewhere, during that three hours between nine and noon, a dramatic change began to take place in his heart. The only explanation is the work of the spirit of God.

You know, we've talked often about the reality that salvation is always a work of sovereign

grace, but nowhere is that clearer than in the life of this thief, during these three hours on the cross, where he goes from a blasphemer to a believer.

But as the spirit always does, He uses means. Specifically, He uses the means of truth, to draw people to Himself, and the same is true of this thief: He used the truth in his conscience. Let me just trace with you for a moment what this man had learned about Christ in just the last couple of hours. As far as we know, he'd never met Christ before. Certainly, he had probably heard of him, because his fame was spread throughout the land of Palestine, but there's no indication he had ever met Christ before he met him in the praetorium, in Pilate's judgment hall, now taken out with Him to be crucified. So his knowledge of Christ was confined to those few hours that Friday morning.

What did he learn? Well, this thief was apparently Jewish, and as part of his education in the synagogue, he was probably exposed to the concept of the Messiah, but as he had grown up that became the very last thing on his mind. And as he grew, he squandered every opportunity that he'd had in his upbringing. He abused God's goodness, and now he finds himself being executed for his crimes and just a few torturous hours away from death because of them.

But the last few hours of that Friday morning had given this man a great deal to think about. It had begun on the terrible journey from the Praetorium to Golgotha. It was on that journey, you remember, that Luke records that, Jesus turned to the women who were following and crying, and Jesus' predicted judgment on the city of Jerusalem that would come in 70 AD, with its destruction, but eternal judgment as well, and so perhaps, that was the first prick to this man's conscience, as he heard Jesus proclaim that judgment was coming.

And then, once they had been crucified, you can be sure that it shocked this man who was given over to violence, to hear Jesus pray the words that Luke records in Luke 23:34, "But Jesus was saying 'Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'"

You can be sure that shocked him. I mean, after all, he was used to men of violence, men of revenge, and here was a man filled with grace toward His enemies. He had witnessed Jesus' remarkable character, but I think even more importantly, he had heard Jesus' own incredible claims, through the words of His critics and adversaries. Look at Luke 23:35; here as these three men hang on the cross, "the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Christ, saying, 'He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One.'"

Perhaps those lessons he had learned long ago in synagogue came back to his mind, and he thought: “Has this man, being crucified with me, really claimed to be the Messiah, the Chosen One of God?” That goes on verse 36;

The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine and saying, ‘If You are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’ Now there was also an inscription above Him, “THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

The thief had undoubtedly read this, most prisoners, when they were crucified, would either have a sign hung around their neck or posted on the cross above their heads, identifying the charge for which they were being put to death. And in Jesus' case, the only charge was that He claimed to be the King of the Jews.

So he heard that this one claimed to be the Messiah, the Chosen One of God, the King of the Jews. Also, in this text, three separate times, Christ is accused of claiming to be the “One who Saves”, the one who delivers both temporally and eternally. Notice in verse 35, “the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, ‘He saved others, let Him save Himself.’” He claimed to save others. That's his claim, let Him save himself. Verse 37, the soldiers said, “If you are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!”, implied as you've claimed to save others, and as you have the power to do that. Verse 39, here's what the other one said, what both of them had originally said, and what one continues to say, he says, “Are You not the Christ? Save yourself and us!”

You're the savior, both temporally and eternally, “Save yourself and us!” So this thief had heard that claim, that Jesus was the Messiah, that He was king of the Jews, that He was the savior.

But there was another claim that Christ had made earlier that morning, that was the most shocking claim of all, turn back to Luke 22:66. This is the third phase of the Jewish trial of Jesus. This is just after daybreak on Friday morning, verse 66,

When it was day, the Council of elders of the people assembled,” this is the Sanhedrin, “both chief priests and scribes, and they led Him away to their own council chamber,” that is, to the official place where they met, “saying, ‘If you are the Christ tell us.’ But He said to them, ‘If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I ask a question, you will not answer.’ But from now on THE SON OF MAN WILL BE SEATED of the power of God.”

They understood that this was a claim to more than to be human, and so in verse seven 70, they said to Him, “Are you the son of God, then?” Is that what You're really claiming, that You're the son of God? “And He said to them, ‘Yes, I am.’”

I don't understand it for the life of me, how anyone can ever say that Christ didn't claim to be God. That's exactly what He's claiming here, and in fact they understood it, because look at verse 71, "Then they said, 'What further need do we have of testimony?' He's guilty of death. He's blaspheming! He's claimed to be God! "For we heard it ourselves from His own mouth." Now, the thief wasn't there to hear this interchange, but as he hung there on the cross next to Christ, this incredible claim that Christ had made came out. Matthew records it for us in his gospel, Matthew 27:39:

And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him" literally, they were blaspheming Him, "wagging their heads and saying, 'You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself. If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross. In the same way, the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking Him and saying, 'He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the king of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross and we will believe in Him. HE TRUSTS IN GOD; LET GOD RESCUE Him now IF HE DELIGHTS IN HIM; for He said, 'I am the son of God.'"

This thief, both of the thieves hanging there, heard all of the incredible claims that Jesus had made coming back at Him from the mouths of those who hated Him.

Both of these condemned criminals had been exposed to the truth that morning, the truth about Jesus, who Jesus really was, and the truth about the Gospel and that He was a savior.

At some point through the work of the Spirit of God, the truth began to dawn in the other thief's heart. And as he saw Christ for who He was, he began to see himself more clearly. You know that always happens, when a person is experiencing the work of God in their hearts, they first see who Christ is more clearly, and then they begin to see themselves in light of that. Notice the conclusions this thief came to about himself, verse forty, he concluded that he didn't fear God. He says to his friend, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" Now remember, just a few minutes before, he had been doing the same thing, So his indictment of his friend is really an indictment of himself. He says, "Listen, we haven't feared God!"

This is common of all sinful mankind. In fact, the Bible makes this a consistent theme: that sinners who aren't in a right relationship to God. don't fear Him. That passage in Romans 3 that I read a few moments ago, just before he gets to verse 19, in verse 18, he concludes that section by saying this, "THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES." That's true of every

person who isn't rightly related to God through Jesus Christ; I don't fear God.

He also gives us here a tacit admission that he had violated God's law, verse 41 he says, “we indeed are suffering justly.” If he had violated the law of man to the point that he deserved death, then he's admitting that he also had violated the law of God, and was deserving a punishment before God.

He also recognized that he deserved whatever punishment he got in this life, and in eternity. Again, notice verse 41, he says, “we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds.” Let me tell you folks that is not the normal human response.

I had the opportunity when I was in college and seminary, to go to a prison every Saturday night for the better part of four years, and serve the prisoners there and preach the word of God to them, and evangelize them. Let me tell you, rarely did I meet a man who knew he deserved what he was getting, and when I did, it was because the work of God had been in his heart and he had come to true and genuine faith in Jesus Christ.

This isn't the normal response, let me show you the normal response. Turn to Jeremiah 5:3, the prophet Jeremiah writes, “O Lord, do not Your eyes look for truth?” you, speaking of Judah here, “You have smitten them, But they did not weaken: You have consumed them, But they refused to take correction. They have made their faces harder than rock; They have refused to repent.” That's how people normally respond when they understand their sin and what they deserve. In fact, one of the most surprising and shocking passages in all the New Testament to me is in Revelation 16:11. If you remember the context there, it's the context of God pouring out judgment on the Earth, and the angel comes with the Fifth Bowl representing God's judgment, poured out on the world, and the people are gnawing their tongues for pain, verse 11 says, because of the sores that God has inflicted upon them in His justice, how do they respond? Do they fall down on their faces and say, “God forgive us, we're wrong. We deserve what we're getting.” No! You know what Revelation 16:11 says? They will blaspheme God, and they will not repent. That's how man responds. So this thief, in his response, is showing the work of grace in his heart.

But perhaps most important of all this man came to understand that Christ was not like he and his friend were. Notice verse 41, he says, “but this man has done nothing wrong.” He's not like us, we're getting what we deserve, but He's done nothing to deserve this.

He has begun to realize that Christ was not dying for Himself, for His own sins, and before the next few hours are done, he came to understand that Jesus' death involved a divine transaction.

Remember, this thief outlives Jesus Christ. It's only later in the day before sunset, when the soldiers come and break his legs so that he can no longer pull Himself up to get an agonizing breath of air and then slump back down. It's only then that he loses his life. He saw the darkness of black midnight at noonday. He heard and felt the great earthquake after Jesus cried out, "it is finished" and, "Faher, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMEND MY SPIRIT." He heard the centurion standing at the foot of Jesus' cross, say "Surely this man was the son of God."

Both of these robbers saw and heard the same thing that morning. One acknowledged his sin and guilt, the other never did. One acknowledged that whatever he got, he deserved, and the other just kept on justifying himself.

For a moment, let me ask you to do something, be honest with your own heart: which of these two men do you most resemble? Have you come to the place in your own life where you have expressed to God a genuine repentance? A repentance that says, "I have violated your Holy Law, I have not feared you. I deserve whatever I get from your hand, but I'm sick of my sin and I want to follow Christ." Do you have a repentant heart?

That's the condition to be with Christ in Paradise. There's a third necessary condition to be with Christ in Paradise, and it's a genuine faith, a genuine faith verse 42, "And he" that is, the thief, "was saying 'Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!'"

Such a simple expression, and yet filled with rich meaning, it illustrates the nature of true, saving faith. Notice what this man says. First of all, he acknowledges that Christ is King. He says, "remember me when you come into your kingdom!"

But think about it, at that moment, everything about Jesus seemed to hide His royalty, but somehow through the eyes of faith this thief looked past the blood and the crawling flies and the nakedness of the Son of God, and he saw that the sign Jesus wore in jest was in fact a reality: Jesus King.

John Calvin, in his commentary on this passage, writes this, he says, "I know not that since the creation of the world there ever was a more remarkable and striking example of faith. A robber, who not only had not been educated in the school of Christ, but had endeavored to extinguish all sense of what was right, suddenly rises higher than all the apostles. He adores Christ as a king, while on the gallows, he celebrates His kingdom in the midst of shocking and worse than revolting abasement. And he declares Him when dying to be the author of life."

At the same time, this thief acknowledged his own unworthiness to belong to Christ's kingdom. Notice, he doesn't ask, verse 42, he doesn't ask directly to be saved, he simply says "remember

me.” It's the attitude of the tax collector in Luke 18, who refuses to lift up his eyes to heaven, but instead he lowers his face and he beats upon his chest and he says, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” That's what this man is saying, “Christ, I don't deserve to be in your kingdom, but when you come remember me, think about me, show kindness to me.” But don't miss the main point of what this thief is saying. Remember, he's just admitted that he is a terrible sinner who deserves what he's getting. He's lived his whole life in sin. And he's just admitted that Christ is righteous, and still, he wants to be a part of Christ's kingdom.

This means that what he really wants is to change sides, to change kingdoms. He's saying, “I understand that I have a king over me now, that king is Satan, the lord of this Earth, and I understand that I'm living bound in slavery to this kingdom, but Christ, I want a different kingdom, I want a different master, I want to be in your kingdom. I'm tired of the kingdom in which I live.” Reminds me of the words of the apostle Paul in Colossians 1:13, where he says that God has “rescued us from the domain” or the kingdom of “darkness,” and He's transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved Son.

That's what he's asking, he's saying, “Christ get me out of the kingdom in which I live. I want to live in Your kingdom. I want You to be my King. This dying thief obviously came to believe all he saw and heard that morning about Christ, but his faith, as with all true faith, didn't stop with simply believing the facts about Christ. Notice, he put his eternal oath in the person of Jesus Christ, as he hangs there on the cross, just a few hours from his death, he turns to Jesus and he says, “Jesus, You are my only hope and confidence. If I ever make it into Your kingdom, it will be because You remember me and show me mercy; Jesus remember me when you come into Your kingdom.”

What does that mean when you come in Your kingdom? It means when after your death, you ascend to your rightful throne, when you begin to look like the King you are. And Luke says notice in Luke 23:42, “and he was saying.” You see, this thief didn't just say this one time, literally in the Greek text, he uses a tense which means he kept on saying this. He kept on saying this to Christ, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!” He was like Jacob wrestling with the angel.

He demonstrated not only a repentant heart, but also a genuine faith. By the way, these are the two conditions that Paul always prescribes for salvation, a sinful life everybody has, here are the two conditions that are necessary for salvation. Listen to Paul in Acts 20:21 to the Ephesian elders, Paul said he “solemnly testified to both Jews and Greeks” of two things: repentance

toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. There it is, exactly what this man exhibited, repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Without those you can never be with Christ in Paradise.

There's a fourth condition here, but it's not a human condition, it's Christ's. It's all about Christ, it's not about us. This fourth condition to be with Christ in Paradise is Christ's unchanging promise. Notice it in verse 43, "He said to him, 'Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.'" What an amazing promise, what incredible Comforter is in those words! It's this promise everyone who repents and believes clings to, it's the promise we cling to. When I face death when I come to the end of my life, I can promise you this, if I'm still alert, if I'm still cognizant, it'll be this promise to which I come and grab onto and hold onto; Lord, You promised to that thief, because of his repentance and his faith, that he would be with You today, the day of his death in Paradise, Lord make that true as well for me.

Notice Christ's promise, in verse 43, it was certain, "Truly I say to you," this is how Christ introduced things that He wanted to emphasize, things that were particularly profound that He wanted people to have confidence in the verity of, He said, "Truly I say to you," you don't have to doubt this, it's certain. Notice it's immediate; today.

The moment of death, by the way this absolutely shatters the concept of Purgatory, if anyone ever needed his soul purified by the flames of Purgatory, it was this man. But Christ says "today you shall be with me in Paradise."

Christ's promise was not only certain and immediate, but it was personal, "You will be with me" You remember Christ's High Priestly prayer in John 17, He says, Father, I want those "whom You have given Me, be with me where I am." Christ says, "You'll be with me." 2 Corinthians 5:8, I love that expression, where Paul says "to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord." You're going to be with me, you're going to be at home!

But notice the promise is specific, "in Paradise." The Greek word for Paradise comes from an old Persian word. It was used to refer to magnificent parks and gardens. In fact, in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, this word is used, this word Paradise, is used to describe primarily the Garden of Eden, the Paradise of God. We translate it to the Garden of Eden. But every time it occurs, or most of the times it occurs in the Greek text of the Septuagint, it's translated with this word: Paradise, the Paradise of God. It's used only two other times in the New Testament. In 2 Corinthians 12:4, where Paul says he "was caught up into Paradise." He uses another word there, the third heaven. It's also used in Revelation 2:7, when John writes to

the church in Ephesus and he says the one “who overcomes” will “eat of the tree of life in the Paradise of God.” A reference to Heaven. So, what Christ is saying here to this man is today you will be with Me in the Garden of God, in the Paradise of God in Heaven. J Oswald Sanders writes, “The thief asks only a place in Christ's memory.” He was granted a place in his kingdom in Heaven.

Listen for a moment if you miss everything else I've said today, don't miss this. This is the point of this story, the point of this passage in the mind of Luke I believe, the writer, and it's this: the True and Living God that we worship is by nature, a Savior, a Deliverer, and He delights in hearing and saving the worst of men and women. You see this throughout the Scripture, but you see it especially in the book of Isaiah. Turn there with me for just a moment, Isaiah is basically a pre-evangel, It's the gospel in the Old Testament. Listen to how he puts it in Isaiah chapter one, listen to how he describes Judah and her sin, verse five:

The whole head is sick And the whole heart is faint. From the soul of the foot even to the head There is nothing sound in it, Only bruises, welts and raw wounds Not pressed out or bandaged, Nor softened with oil.

God says, “You want to know what your sin looks like to Me? There it is.” How will we respond to someone like this? Well, we would respond much as people responded to the thieves; just put them out of sight, just put them out of their misery. But notice how God responds with one of the most famous passages in the Old Testament, verse 18 of chapter 1, “‘Come now, and let us reason together,’ says the LORD, “Though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool.”

God says, “Listen, I'm a savior, I delight in rescuing and saving those who find themselves at the absolute bottom, the absolute worst of men.

One other passage I can't avoid, Isaiah 55. Again, one of my favorite passages that comes back to me many times, Isaiah 55:6-7:

Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And he will have compassion on him, And to our God For He will abundantly pardon.

I love that word, pardon. Somebody who's guilty with no hope of ever remediating the sentence, there comes a word that sets them free. God says, “I will abundantly pardon” God, how can you do this verse? Verse eight:

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the

LORD. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts.”

Praise God. He doesn't treat people like we would. He delights in being a Savior for the worst of men and women. Now turn back for just one moment to Luke 23. Let me ask you the big question; why were these two thieves crucified with Christ? In both Acts 2 and Acts 4, passages we've looked at many times before, it says that nothing happened surrounding the death of Christ, except that which was within the eternal predetermined plan of God. So why did God sovereignly determine to have two thieves, two robbers, two violent abusive men, crucified on each side of Christ? There's only one possible answer, and that's that those two men illustrate the responses of all mankind to the dying son of God.

There are only two possible responses: You can defend yourself, justify your sin, despise God's Son and his Lordship in Your life, and you can die guilty before God. Or you can acknowledge your own guilt, you can acknowledge the fairness of God's justice, you can repent of your sins, and you can believe in Jesus. You can ask God to credit your sins to Jesus Christ as He died on the cross, and to credit Jesus' perfect righteousness to you.

Both thieves died that day. But one lifted up his eyes in heaven in the presence of Christ. And the other opened his eyes in the torments of Hell.

This morning if you aren't confident that if you were to die, you would wake up in the presence of Christ in Paradise. Then I urge you, as Paul says, “I plead with you” to follow the example of this condemned criminal. You now know what he knew, you've heard the claims of Christ as he heard them. All you must do now is respond as he responded. Repent, admit that you violated God's Holy Law, acknowledge that you deserve the eternal judgment that's coming to you, turn from your sin to Christ and believe in Christ, acknowledge Him as your King, put your eternal hope for salvation in Him and in Him alone, for your eternity. And then you can be with Christ in Paradise.

If you're a believer here this morning, as most of you are, this compelling account should affect you the same way it affected my own heart this week. It should strengthen your faith, look at the promise God made this man who repented and believed, we can cling to that promise, if you've repented and believed in Christ. When the day comes, you will be with Christ in Paradise. It's a timeless promise, should increase your assurance, it should cause you this week as you remember the Lord's death to overflow with love and gratitude. Should also encourage you to keep praying for the salvation, even in the most hardened case you know, because no one is ever

beyond the reach of the grace of God in Christ. I was reminded of that Wednesday night, we had Don Johnson, who was one of the missionaries who went searching for the bodies of those five missionaries that were slain down in Ecuador, back about 50 years ago, one of them was Nate Saint. I had the opportunity, a couple of years ago to meet a man by the name of Minkai. Minkai was the one who took his spear and thrust it into the body of Nate Saint, taking his life. Minkai is now the most gracious, gentle Christian you'd ever want to meet. He's an elder of the church there in Ecuador, and he has become the surrogate father of the man whose father he killed, 50 years ago, he's become the surrogate grandfather of the children whose grandfather he killed 50 years ago. There's a lesson, a modern lesson, in the grace of God like this. Minkai was from one of the most violent tribes in the history of humanity. He himself was a man given to violence like this thief, yet God worked a miracle in his heart through the prayer of those missionary families. Keep praying. A couple of years ago, I heard a song for the first time that captivated my mind, and it really brings all of this to a close in this way, listen to the lyrics; "How deep the Father's love for us. How vast beyond all measure. That he should give His only son, to make a wretch His treasure. How great the pain of searing loss, the Father turns His face away. As wounds which mar the Chosen One, bring many sons to glory. Behold the Man upon the cross, my sins upon His shoulders. Ashamed I hear my mocking voice, call out among the scoffers. It was my sin that held Him there, until it was accomplished. His dying breath has brought me life, I know that it is finished. I will not boast in anything, no gifts, no power, no wisdom. But I will boast in Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection. Why should I gain from his reward? I cannot give an answer. But this I know with all my heart, His wounds have paid my ransom."

How deep the father's love for us. Let's pray together.

Father, we see ourselves in these two men, thank you for this profound picture of how each of us has chosen to respond to your Son. Lord, I pray for those of us, who like this believing thief, have turned in repentance and faith. Lord, may this week be one of worship and love and gratitude. And not just this week, but every week. And Lord, I pray for the person here this morning, who doesn't know that they would awake from death in Paradise. Help them to turn from their sin, and to embrace Christ. And not to be like the other thief, who died and went into a Christless eternity. I pray in Jesus' name, Amen.