

Words of Life from the Cross: The Promising Word!

A sermon based on Luke 23:39-43.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The greatest vacation you ever had...where was it? Or, if you could go anywhere in the world, where would it be? Well, what makes or made that place so appealing, so wonderful? For me, it would be Jamaica...went there on our honeymoon. The white sand beaches, the crystal blue waters, all the sunlight, the relaxing without a care in the world, no kids, the food, the laid back employees...it felt like paradise. What's yours?

Paradise probably should have been the furthest thing from the criminal's mind as he hung there on the cross, just to the side of the real man of the hour...the jester, the joke, Jesus. He had plenty to keep him occupied in the short amount of time he had remaining on this earth. We can hardly begin to imagine the pain and torture that man was experiencing there on his cross.

But he knew...he deserved it. We don't know the exact nature of his crime...or his partner's. "Criminals; thieves" are simply what they're called. Perhaps "insurrectionist" or even "terrorist" might strike somewhat closer to the reality. These were no common robbers but those who presented a threat to Roman security. Their public, painful crucifixion was intended to ward off others.

And yet, while the one criminal began to have this moment of introspection – looking inward at himself and his life and his sins, the other could only look outward...and saw Jesus. And, oh, how misery loves to gather up company. He loathed Jesus and hurled insults at Him, joining the chorus of the religious leaders and the passers-by who had come to shake their fists. ***"Aren't You the Christ? Save Yourself and us!"***

Strange, isn't it, that the man's mockery should come in the form of a prayer for salvation? ***"Save Yourself and us!"*** This is not a prayer of faith but of derision. What kind of Christ are You? What sort of Messiah are You going to be? Flex some of that messianic muscle and save Yourself and us too. Or are you a fake, an impostor, a phony Christ? Spare Yourself from this death, and spare us too...with the humored assumption, "You can't!"

But the other criminal came to Jesus' defense. ***"Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence?" (Luke 23:40).*** This thief is penitent. He confesses his sin; he tells the truth. ***"We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve" (Luke 23:41).*** And the thief is also faithful. He confesses Christ: ***"But this man has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41).*** Did the thief understand all the implications of what he was saying? Did He fully understand who Jesus was for him? What did he actually know of Jesus? We don't know. All we know is his dying prayer: ***"Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom" (Luke 23:42).***

And Jesus' simple response...his comforting word of promise, ***"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."***

Why did Jesus say that? Do you ever think about that...wonder about that? Why did Jesus make that promise? Was it a distraction? Like a shot of morphine to this dying man, to help ease the pain as his entire body would start to undergo the intense shock resulting from asphyxiation and the exhaustion of

trying to hold onto to breath and life? Was it just the simple, generic, “Oh, son, better things are ahead,” meant to simply calm a troubled heart, giving him some kind of false hope?

We know it wasn't. We know it's his promise...meant to assure him of what lay ahead after his suffering was complete.

We know it's his promise. We know it's his promise. We know it's his promise. Right?!?

Andrew Pollack...does the name sound familiar? His daughter was one of the victims of the Parkland, Florida shooting last week. He was invited to this listening session with President Trump a few days ago, along with other parents and classmates of the victims. Something he said has been playing over and over in my head. In a moment of raw emotion – anger and grief, he lamented, **“I'm never going to see my kid again. I want you all to know that. Never, ever, will I see my kid. I want it to sink in. It's eternity. My beautiful daughter, I'm never going to see again.”**

“It's eternity. My beautiful daughter, I'm never going to see again.” Sounds like someone on the complete opposite end of the spectrum from this thief on his cross and Jesus' promise to him, doesn't it? Isn't that a mindset we're hearing and being exposed to far too often today? Is that a mindset we've allowed to penetrate our own lives?

The problem is this: instead of focusing on the promise of paradise, we are being distracted away from that paradise (which can seem only hypothetical...more like a pipe dream), but instead we want and are looking for our very best life – for our paradise - right here, right now.

We see it in the job that causes me to miss church far more often than I'd like, but hey, it's part of living the dream...what? Are we setting our sights too low...being too nearsighted?

We see it in this growing mindset that my family will always take precedence over church, Bible class, getting involved here, as if they – and not God – are the most important thing in this life, because, as Andrew Pollack could attest to, they're not going to be here forever.

We see it in our interactions with others, doing what we can, whatever it takes to ensure we'll have peaceful relationships with them, even when it sometimes means compromising my faith or softening or even going beyond what God's Word says. It certainly makes life more enjoyable here. Should that be the goal?

Or, maybe we take our lead from the unbelieving thief, the spokesman for the unbelieving world. His mocking “prayer” comes in the form of a demand. If Jesus is worth His salt as the Messiah, He would come down from that wretched cross and save Himself, and while He was at it, save His fellow criminals. But that isn't the way of salvation at all. That's the devil's way, the way Peter represented when he took Jesus aside and rebuked Him for speaking of His death and resurrection. This mocking prayer echoes Satan's temptations in the wilderness: **“If You are the Son of God . . . If You are the Christ . . .”** Andrew Pollack would say, “My daughter would still be here.” What would you say? Of course, with the unspoken taunt “you can't because you aren't.”

Look at your life. Take the moment of introspection. Where are you? Isn't it in the same position the thief on the cross was? Knowing his sin, he could only say, **“we're getting what our deeds deserve”** This thief is a penitent. He confesses his sin; he tells the truth. **“And we punished justly.” “The wages of sin is death,”** Romans reminds us. The thief recognizes his sin and confesses it. The only truth a liar can say

is: "I am a liar." The only truth a sinner can say is: "I am a sinner." For expecting paradise here on this earth, for our attempts to make this paradise on earth, for the lack of love we've shown to God when this hasn't been our paradise on earth, we can only do the same..."I am a sinner.'

You know, of all the people to address Jesus, the thief here was the only one to use Jesus' name without some other title. Simply "Jesus." Familiar, direct, no flattery—Jesus. Death is the great leveler; it puts everyone on a first-name basis. **"Remember me when You come into Your kingdom."** A simple word of faith. He sees this broken, bleeding, dying man next to him and takes the sign over His head literally. He is a King with a kingdom. And all this criminal asks is to be remembered. Not spared the agonies of death, not rescued—simply remembered.

Driven to the same depths of that criminal, realizing we don't deserve paradise at all – here or hereafter – we can only do the same..."**Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.**" And this tiny little mustard-seed-sized faith, in the thief and us, is acknowledged by Jesus and credited to the thief and as righteousness sealed with Jesus' loving response, his promising word: **"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."**

That's the word of life here, and it starts with the most important word, "Truly." It comes from the Greek word "amen," our "amen," yes, this is the certainty. And everything else that follows, it's no longer just even a promise. It's Jesus' guarantee.

The thief, through his heartfelt confession and his simple request to be remembered, he proved how faith-full he was. But Jesus' words here...even more so!

Jesus didn't just assure the man he would be in paradise that very day, but that very day, Jesus made it possible for the man to be in paradise. And the only way for paradise to be achieved was through what was taking place at the very moment...Jesus suffering on the cross...leading up to his death, where Jesus gave the results of his perfect life – his righteousness – to that criminal and us, while he took on the results of our imperfect lives – death and hell. And he went through that to open the door to heaven and eternal life and paradise to every believer, proved by his resurrection. "Truly" he did...that's the guarantee! Paradise for you because Jesus remained faithful to God's saving plan.

What sort of Man is this who promises Paradise to a dying thief who admits the guilt of crime? What sort of justice is this that speaks pardon to the unpardonable, that acquits the guilty, that saves those society deems unsalvageable and worthy of the cruelest form of death? This is the Savior of the world, the Redeemer of fallen mankind, the One who reconciles the enemy as enemy and justifies the sinner as sinner. **"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).**

And he gives us something to focus on, to calm our troubled hearts, to give us certainty in this life. Now, he doesn't tell us what paradise is. Doesn't matter. We just know it's not here. No, we will be with Jesus. Truly we will. That word of promise...it's the strength to endure. It's the comfort in affliction. It's the guarantee in death.

"Today, you will be with Me in Paradise." Hear that word of promise for yourself. **"Today, you will be with Me in Paradise."** Hear it now, in the good days, when this seems to be the life, and in the bad days, when you could use a vacation. **"Today, you will be with Me in Paradise."** Hear it at the hour of your death, for none of us knows the day and the hour of our "Today." But we know where it will lead. **"Today, you will be with Me in Paradise."** That's Jesus' promise. That's Jesus guarantee! Amen.

