

"Paradise"***It Is Finished***

It was a god-awful scene: "a trinity of execution" you might call it - an innocent man hanging between two criminals. Three men died that day. They were crucified side by side outside the walls of Jerusalem at a place called Golgotha ("skull hill") where the Romans did their killing. It was located not far from the Damascus Gate so that people going in and out of the city would have to see the executions. Jesus of Nazareth hung on the middle cross.

There He was, the One of whom God had said, *"This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him,"* in a place he didn't really belong, associated with people to whom he had no obligation. And one of those mockingly said, *"Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"*

But the other criminal rebuked him. *"Don't you fear God since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."* He continued, saying, *"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

Then Jesus answered him, *"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

Eden Again

This is the only time Jesus used the word **"paradise."** Scholars tell us that it originally referred to the walled gardens of the Persian kings. When a king wanted to honor his subjects, he would invite them to walk with him in his garden in the cool of the day. This same word was used in the Greek Old Testament to refer to **the Garden of Eden** and in the mind of the Jews inferred **the place of creation's original goodness before sin entered in**. Paradise is where humanity's perfect relationship with God is restored, redeemed from the sin-filled heart that is the cause of so much anguish in the world. [In Revelation 2:7 it refers to heaven, a place of beauty, openness and inexpressible blessedness. One other use of this word is found in 2 Corinthians 12 where St. Paul speaks of a man *"caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things"* 2 Cor. 12:2-4.]

As we saw last week, when Jesus spoke of forgiveness from his pain-filled perch, here **Jesus again ignores his own terrible situation to speak in favor of another who suffers**. Jesus offered the one criminal an undeserved grace even as He himself suffered the overwhelming burden of all the pain and brokenness that humanity can produce. Jesus promised the dying man he will be in the place where all things are made right, where trees are not used to execute

people, men and women once again walk in the true freedom that is only found in God's design, no longer bound by Satan's curse. The grace that flows from the cross of Jesus saves people from the things that bind them.

Two Criminals, Two Paths

Let's consider those two criminals. Who were they? The translators use different words to describe them . . . "Thieves, robbers, malefactors, bandits." Luke's word means "members of the criminal class, professional criminals, members of the underworld." These men were likely those who would readily kill for profit, be it theft or assassination. Some writers suggest that they were political revolutionaries bent on overthrowing the yoke of Roman rule – perhaps even like terrorists - but we don't know for sure what brought them to a cross. We do not know their names or their hometowns or the specific crime they committed. We might assume that they had been partners in crime, but there is no way to be sure. We would not know them at all except that they are supporting players in the greatest drama of all time, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

It may appear that these two men were alike: both criminals sentenced to die together at the same time at the same place on the same day. Both had been severely beaten before they were crucified, both were stripped naked before the leering crowd, both were covered with blood and dirt. Both men were dying and both would soon be dead. No one could look at them and tell any difference. At this point they were considered scum.

But in reality, no two men could be more different. Crucified on the outer crosses, they differed on one main point: how they viewed the man in the middle. They saw him differently and therefore asked him for different things. One man wanted escape, but cared nothing about forgiveness. The other wanted forgiveness, whether or not he escaped.

Both were brought to the cross by a lifetime of following the dictates of expediency. What do I mean by that? I mean that, like all of humanity, the criminals' response to the tragedy and suffering that is life was to take the simplest most obvious and most direct route: serve self first and foremost, pursue pleasure, follow your impulses, live for the moment, do what is expedient, even if it is to lie, deceive, manipulate, or even kill. It is the siren call of the serpent to Adam and Eve in the Garden; acting as if they were God and could control their lives and determine the future. It led them to the pursuit of immediate, selfish gratification; expediency. To a greater or lesser degree we all follow that route; a route that actually leads to death in a hell of humanity's own making.

The alternative to this self-serving path was embodied by the man on the middle cross. He sacrificed the present – including his own needs – for the reward in store. There is a lesson here for us about how privileging the future

over the present in our lives, in our relationships, in our interactions, in our resources, can reshape our reality for the better.

The one criminal, in the most desperate of situations to which he had brought himself by his life of expediency, only continued in the same pattern crying for Jesus to fix it for him. The other criminal looked to Jesus in an all-together different manner.

Responsible Faith

It is recorded that this second criminal, in agony said: ***"We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve."*** In that sentence he has confessed the weakness and arrogance of any and all man or woman. He has taken up the awful responsibility that the Serpent's lie avoided: realizing that we are not God – we cannot control the future, we can't even control what happens to us. And yet ***we are responsible for our choices in life***, even how we respond to evil not of our own making, which nevertheless assails us. Confessing this truth is the beginning of true life. With his confession the thief has chosen to become an angel of paradise over continuing as a denizen of hell. It is the same choice before you and me each and every day.

At the last moment he makes one final appeal to the Supreme Court of the Universe: ***"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*** He looked on Jesus hanging next to him, a naked and bloody mess, a sight awful to behold. No man ever looked less like a king than Jesus did that day, yet this man saw him as he really was. ***He saw Jesus at His weakest moment, and still he believed in him.*** As far as we know, he never heard Jesus teaching by the seashore, he never saw Jesus heal the sick or raise the dead, he knew nothing of Jesus' great parables and never saw any of his miracles. This man missed all the outward signs of Jesus' kingship. Yet there on the cross, he came to understand the heart of the gospel. In the crucified Jesus, beaten, mocked, forsaken, his life-blood ebbing away, this thief saw a king and another crown than the crown of thorns. He is a crucified sinner trusting in a crucified Savior. That made the difference between heaven and hell. What excuses do we make concerning Him given all that we have heard and known of Jesus Christ?

Our choice is to follow one or the other criminals. We can cry, "God, what can you do for me?" and go about our skeptical, self-serving lives. Or, we can confess our inadequacy to control the future, sacrifice our selfish impulses and throw ourselves on His mercy and simply ask to be remembered by Him, undeserving as we are. I appeal to you, do not wait until you're hanging on a cross of tragedy, self-pity, evil, and suffering, living with all the deceit and conceit that typifies, yet binds in chains, the human nature, do not wait before you throw yourself on the mercy of One who gives true life.

Hope of Paradise

A few hours before he hung on the cross Jesus promised his disciples, *“Where I am, there you may be also.”* We do not know who all is going to be in heaven except One: Jesus himself. Indeed, there will be others, but that is in God’s hands. Knowing that Jesus is there is really enough. It is the promise that Jesus will be with us; that we will not be alone in Heaven. That is what makes it Paradise. Where He is, there is life, and love, and peace. That is why Jesus said to that thief crucified next to Him, today you will be with me in paradise. We too can take hope and encouragement from the promise Jesus made to all who confess Him as Savior.

1. God has made salvation so simple that anyone can be saved. The thief was never baptized, never took the Lord’s Supper, didn’t attend a new members class or small group. This man could not lift a hand for the Savior for his hands were nailed to a cross. He could not run errands for the Lord for his feet were nailed to a cross. He could not give his money for he had not a penny to his name. For this man, there was no way to Heaven but by the mercy of God. In one transforming moment, a man who was not fit to live on earth was made fit to live in heaven. All that God wants from us is simple faith in Jesus.

2. Even the very worst can be saved. When that thief trusted in Christ he was pardoned without having lived a single righteous day. I know that some people feel that they are too deep into sin to ever be forgiven. Some feel so enslaved by their habits that they despair of ever being set free. Many people would do anything to be forgiven but they think that forgiveness is impossible.

But here’s the truth of the matter: it doesn’t matter where you’ve been sleeping or with whom. It doesn’t matter what you’ve been drinking. It doesn’t matter who you’ve been hanging around with. It doesn’t matter what sins you’ve committed. It doesn’t even matter if you’ve broken the Ten Commandments—all of them, one by one—this week. It doesn’t matter. You can be saved right now. If this man can be saved, anyone can be saved. If there’s hope for him, there’s hope for you. If he can make it to heaven, so can you. If Jesus would take him, he’ll certainly take you. Everything else is past.

3. It is never too late to turn to Christ. Sometimes we hear people make fun of “death-bed” conversions, as if such conversions aren’t really genuine. But why not? Staring death in the face has a way of getting one’s attention. That’s when one is likely to think about the hereafter and where he will spend eternity.

Don’t get me wrong. I am not suggesting that anyone should wait until the last moment to be saved. Nor do I intend to suggest that one can live a profligate life with the intention of coming to Christ just before he dies. People who live that way aren’t serious about salvation and they’re lying to themselves. God will not be mocked. People tend to die the way they have lived. No one should think they can laugh at Christ for years and then at the last second repent and be saved. Oh sure, such a thing *could* happen, and it

sometimes *does* happen, but it is not the usual course of events. People who live that way just aren't serious about salvation

Let no one use the example of this thief as a reason to delay coming to Christ. Do not put off until tomorrow what you should do today. If the thief could speak to us now I imagine he'd say, "Don't delay like I did. Don't wait until your life is a total mess. Give your heart to Jesus now." And notice: salvation happens today – your new life begins in this life.

Sometimes people say, "I'm too old for this" or "I'm too old to try that." That may be true on the physical level. But when it comes to the spiritual life it's never too late. No one can ever say that about turning to Jesus. As long as there is life and breath, as long as the heart still beats, the invitation still stands. What are you waiting for?

Those of us who are praying for our loved ones should take great hope in this. Sometimes we look at people and say, "They are just too far gone. They will never come to Jesus." Then we get discouraged and stop praying for them. But this story teaches us that no one is ever too far gone. It's true, he waited until the very last second . . . but it's also true that in that last second he was saved. Don't ever give up on those you love. They may, like this wretched thief, waste a lifetime and then at the end turn to Jesus Christ. Don't despair . . . for yourself or for anyone else. It's never too late to turn to Christ.

"Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom."