

Jesus' Last Words: The Word of Promise

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Isaiah 53:7-12, Luke 23:39-43

Isa 53:7 He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

Isa 53:8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
And who can speak of his descendants?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was stricken.

Isa 53:9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.

Isa 53:10 Yet it was the LORD'S will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

Isa 53:11 After the suffering of his soul,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.

Isa 53:12 Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

Lk 23:39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

Lk 23:40 But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?"

Lk 23:41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

Lk 23:42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Lk 23:43 Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

Jesus, in his first word from the cross, prayed, "*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*" When we discussed this word a couple of weeks ago, we noted that it was a bit surprising and a little strange that Jesus should pray for forgiveness for his executioners. It just wasn't a normal human response. Had you and I been treated so shamefully, we no doubt would have uttered curses, not prayers for forgiveness for our tormentors.

Well, here again in his second word from the cross Jesus says and does the surprising thing. To one of the thieves crucified next to him Jesus gives a loving word or promise:

"Today" he says, "you shall be with me in paradise."

It seems so ridiculous and absurd from our human perspective. Look at who Jesus is making this promise to: a *thief!* Jesus promises heaven to a complete scoundrel -- to someone who has made a mess of his life by doing evil, robbing and taking advantage of people. Then this thief has the gall to wait until his dying moment to turn to God for mercy. It's one of those death-bed conversions and now he expects to go to heaven. *And Jesus gives it to him!* It just doesn't seem fair. It offends our sense of justice. This guy couldn't have been more undeserving.

We human beings always want to put limits on grace: we think that heaven ought to be only for those who deserve it. God's grace, however, has no limits. God knows heaven is for those who don't deserve it. The truth is, no one does. Not one of us is righteous enough - no not one. We all fall far short of the glory of God. In God's scheme of things, heaven is not a reward but a gift. It is a gift that must be received in faith, to be sure, but it a gift nevertheless.

One of the thieves crucified next to the Lord received that gift in faith. *"Jesus,"* he said, *"remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

Have you ever wondered what it was that caused this thief to reach out in faith to Jesus? Had he heard Jesus preach before and now, in his dying moments, decides to put his trust in Him? Did he overhear Jesus' prayer of forgiveness for his executioners and marvel at Jesus' love exuding from the cross? Had he, at that moment, felt forgiven and liberated from the guilt of his crimes, and loved Jesus for it?

There is an interesting thing about this thief who responds to Jesus in faith: he is the only one in the whole of scripture who approaches Jesus using his first name – *"Jesus."* It is a thief, of all people, who dares to approach Jesus in such a familiar way. Everyone else in the gospels approaches him using a title – his followers call him "Lord" or "Master." He may not have known much about Jesus, but could it be that he in faith is boldly claiming the *meaning* of his name? As you may know, "Jesus" in Hebrew means "God saves." The angel said to Joseph: *"You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."*

At his dying moment, that thief knew Jesus to be the Savior – *his* Savior, which makes him the first person to experience the saving power of the cross.

Do you realize that at that moment, this thief was probably the only person in the whole world who believed in Jesus? The disciples all forsook him and fled. The women who followed him were full of despair. But here was this criminal, who shows faith by saying, *"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."* Notice he doesn't say, "remember me *if ...*" but "remember me *when.*" That's trust in the saving power of Jesus.

And Jesus responds to this man's trust by giving him a promise; it is a promise of heaven or paradise: *"Today, you shall be with me in paradise."* And what is paradise?" The

word Jesus uses is a Persian word meaning 'walled garden.' To a people used to sandy deserts, a lush green-walled garden was about the best place you could think of. The Garden of Eden was such a paradise. But Jesus has more than earthly or heavenly gardens in mind. In fact he tells us what paradise is: It is to be *"with me."* The best thing you can say about heaven or paradise is that it is a place where Jesus is. It is to enjoy the companionship of Jesus and what could be better than that? Paradise is more than a reunion with loved ones, as good as that may be. It is more than a place where we receive another jewel in our crown for good deeds done on earth. The best thing about heaven for Christians is to be with the one we love best: Jesus.

If paradise is being with Jesus, do we want to be there? If we do not care to be with Jesus here on earth, heaven will be hell for us.

We are given the promise of paradise. But now when will that promise be fulfilled? Will we enter paradise when we die? At judgment day at the end of time? On the day of the resurrection when the trumpet shall sound?

Jesus said: **"Today you will be with me in paradise."** *Today.* Immediately. Heaven is for here and now. It begins as soon as you and I accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. To be with Christ is paradise, on earth as in heaven. We don't even have to wait until we die. Heaven is now. That doesn't mean we won't have any problems, of course. It doesn't mean that everything in our life will be perfect. But it does mean that we can be enjoying our Lord's companionship today with all the love and joy and peace he has to offer.

So the question is: are you and I living in heaven right now? Are we experiencing eternal life before death? Are we in Christ and is he in us?

The tragedy of the penitent thief was not only the sorry life he lived but the fact that he waited so long -- until his dying moment -- to turn to Christ. Some people do wait until their death beds to make that decision. The sad thing is that they could have been enjoying the benefits of knowing Christ much earlier in life. They missed so much of the joy!

"Now is the accepted time" says Scripture, *"Behold, now is the day of salvation."* The promise of paradise may be fulfilled for you and me here and now.

And who gets the promise? The promise goes out to everyone, but again, you have to claim it for yourself. The penitent thief did just that. He claimed it through repentance and faith. As he hung on the cross he confessed his sin, knew he was undeserving and reached out to Jesus in faith, trusting in his mercy and in Jesus' kingly power to save. That is all he could do. He threw himself upon the mercy of the Lord. *"Remember me"* he said. And that is all any of us can do - unless, we refuse the Mercy.

There was another thief in our story who did just that -- he refused the promise of heaven. You see, some people never claim the promise for themselves, even on their death bed.

That is a human being's right of course. C.S. Lewis said something to the effect that God doesn't send anyone to hell: people send themselves there by refusing to respond to God's gracious and loving invitation. God doesn't force anyone into paradise. The possibility of rejecting God's love is always preserved. God always honors human free choice.

But now how shall *we* choose?

There were two thieves there on Calvary's hill; two men with two eternal destinies. One went to paradise; the other did not.

What about you and me? Will we claim the promise for ourselves? Are we interested in paradise?

Copernicus, the famous astronomer, directed that this epitaph should be placed on his gravestone: *"O Lord, the faith thou didst give to Paul, I cannot ask: the mercy thou didst show to Peter, I dare not ask; but, Lord, the grace thou didst show unto the dying robber, that, Lord, show to me."*

Lord, have mercy upon us for not one us is deserving of your love. Show us your grace that we may experience the paradise of your presence. Amen.