

May Christ the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us and grant us His peace. Amen.

Ash Wednesday
February 14, 2018

Luke 23:39-43
112-Insert*-98-593

*TLH 181 - "Jesus, Pitying the Sighs"

"Today You Will Be With Me in Paradise"

- I. A promise that gives comfort at death.
- II. A promise that gives comfort for life now.

Dear Christian friends,

As you heard in this year's Lenten sermons we're looking at Jesus' **seven words** from the cross. **Today** we focus on His precious promise, ***"Today you will be with Me in paradise."***

I've always considered that **to be** Jesus' SECOND word from the cross. I don't know if I was actually taught that or JUST THOUGHT that for **whatever reasons**. But as I worked on this sermon I found some calling it Jesus' THIRD word from the cross.

Now we can be sure of Jesus' FIRST word – ***"Father, forgive them."*** We can be sure of the ORDER of the **last four** words too. But we really can't say WHICH CAME FIRST **between** this promise and Jesus' word directed to His **mother** and the **beloved apostle** John.

But you know what? SO WHAT! It really doesn't matter if Jesus first said, ***"Today you will be with Me in paradise"*** of if He first said, ***"Here is your son – your mother."*** WHAT MATTERS is that Jesus actually spoke these words and there's no doubt about that. ***"Jesus said to him, 'Amen I tell you: Today you will be with Me in paradise.'" That's a promise*** 1)that gives comfort at death and 2)that also gives comfort for life now.

I. A promise that gives comfort at death.

A promise that gives comfort AT DEATH. Hanging on his cross this criminal was staring death in the face. He had been nailed to that cross for ONE PURPOSE – to die. **To die** a slow – tortured – tormented death. NORMALLY death by crucifixion could last several days. There was nothing pretty about it.

This criminal was ONE OF THREE men **crucified** that Friday morning. It was Jesus and ***"two criminals"*** – with Jesus in the middle. We're never told the names of the two criminals. We're not told EXACTLY WHAT their crimes were – possibly ***"armed robbery."*** We're also not told WHICH ONE of them spoke these words. **Matthew** and **Mark** tell us that AT FIRST BOTH of them had joined the **crowds** and **chief priests** and **soldiers** in taunting and MAKING FUN of Jesus **as He hung** on His cross. But then one of them grew silent. He stopped his mockery. And when the other KEPT UP with his ***"blasphemy"*** this guy ***"rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God, since you are under the same condemnation? We are punished justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for what we have done."***

What a simple, honest confession of his sin! ***"We are punished justly – we are getting what we deserve."*** He doesn't MAKE EXCUSES for his **life of crime**. He doesn't BLAME others – his parents – the **government** – the **economy** – the bad influence of **bad company**. He doesn't argue that his **death sentence** was "CRUEL AND UNUSUAL punishment. WHATEVER his life of crime had **all involved** – his death by crucifixion was ***"justly deserved."*** You get the impression that these two ***"criminals"*** were PARTNERS IN CRIME since he uses the words ***"we/our"*** – ***"we are punished – our deeds deserve."***

His honest confession is followed with a HUMBLE REQUEST. **“Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom.”** Just the night before in the **“upper room”** the apostles had been arguing over **“which of them was considered to be the greatest.”** That wasn't the FIRST TIME either! But this criminal simply prays, **“Remember me”** – “THINK of me. THAT'S ALL I ask. That will be enough for me. I'll BE CONTENT with whatever You then do/decide.” This criminal understands that he DOESN'T DESERVE Jesus' mercy but his faith confidently clings to Jesus' mercy.

This criminal is a good example of **“we walk by faith and not by sight.”** WHAT HE SAW with his eyes said there was no way Jesus could help him. **Jesus was** in JUST AS BAD shape as he was! But **what he saw** with the EYES OF FAITH was a sight to behold – his SAVIOR from sin and guilt – death and hell.

Jesus answered his BEAUTIFUL PRAYER with an even more beautiful PROMISE. This criminal didn't end his prayer with an **“amen”** – Jesus ADDED it. Jesus said the **“Amen”** to it! **“Jesus said to him, ‘Amen I tell you: Today you will be with Me in paradise.’”**

That promise is FIRST OF ALL a word of absolution or **forgiveness**. If God had treated this criminal **“as his deeds deserved”** – death by crucifixion would have been the LEAST OF HIS WORRIES. If God had “punished him justly” he'd be spending all eternity FOREVER BANISHED from God's presence – forever punished in hell's torments. That Jesus here promised him **“paradise”** INSTEAD OF hell means he's FORGIVEN – fully – freely. Not one single sin was held against him.

This is what Jesus' PERFECT **life** and INNOCENT **death** on the cross are all about, right? **We** may not be guilty of the SAME CRIMES as this criminal but we are all guilty of **ignoring** and **breaking** God's law. Get out your **catechism** and read through those commandments again. LIKE this criminal **we too** need to make a SIMPLE, HONEST **confession** of our sins. IF God **“kept a record”** of our sins and **“punished us justly as we deserve”** life now with **all its pains** and problems would BE THE LEAST of our worries. Picture yourself dying and “MEETING your Maker” and in His hand is a **very big book** listing all your sins. Do you really think God will “UNDERSTAND” and ACCEPT our excuses or let us blame others?

Thank God we have Jesus and His **cross**! The criminal was right when he said Jesus **“(had) done nothing wrong.”** Jesus had actually lived a life PERFECT in **every way** – a life **“well pleasing”** to His heavenly Father. But behold again the AMAZING LOVE of our God! Jesus gives us all the credit for His holy life and He took the blame for the sins of the whole world. There on the cross Jesus was punished IN **our place** and FOR **all** our sins. Jesus was “forsaken” – we are forgiven. Jesus sheds His blood – the precious blood of God's **“beloved Son”** and we are cleansed **“from all our sins.”**

With that forgiveness – trusting in Jesus as our Savior - we also have GOD'S PROMISE of **eternal life** in heaven when we die. **“Today you will be with Me in paradise.”** RIGHT NOW he's on a cross NEXT TO Jesus on His cross. LATER this day he would be with Jesus in **His heavenly glory**. In a FEW HOURS he would hear Jesus pray, **“Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit”** and he would be able to CONFIDENTLY PRAY that **same prayer** and be sure God would WELCOME him into heaven. INSTEAD of going to hell he would soon be **“with (Jesus) in paradise.”** JESUS HAD PROMISED him and in faith he was COUNTING ON Jesus to **keep His promise**.

Clinging to Jesus' promise he could confidently look forward to SHORTLY being in heaven. In the meantime he still HAD HOURS to **spend on** that cross. But Jesus' promise is also...

II. A promise that gives comfort for life now.

He had Jesus' promise but it's NOT IMMEDIATELY fulfilled. **“Today”** Jesus had promised but **not** “RIGHT THIS MINUTE.” He still had **several** MORE HOURS of **physical** – **mental** – **emotional** – TORTURE to endure. Jesus had promised him ETERNAL life in heaven but not an EASY **life** or a

PEACEFUL death. As that darkness fell for those **three hours** between noon and 3:00 p.m. he's hanging in that darkness. He hears Jesus cry out, ***"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"***

He COULD NOT wish the pain away. He could not block it out of his mind. It's UNRELENTING. All he can do is CLING to Jesus' promise, ***"Amen I tell you: Today you will be with Me in paradise."*** After those three hours the darkness lifts. Jesus speaks His final words – words of FULFILLMENT – VICTORY – PEACE. Then Jesus is DEAD. His body hangs lifeless on His cross – blood still dripping from the many wounds. He sees Jesus DEAD on His cross and what he sees TELLS HIM there's no way Jesus can **help** or **save** Him. **What he sees** tells him Jesus was a FRAUD – Jesus' promise a CRUEL JOKE. But his faith tells him, "JESUS PROMISED you!" His faith clings to Jesus' promise DESPITE what he sees and **feels**.

It's getting late in the afternoon - getting time for the **Sabbath** to begin. This criminal doesn't know it but ***"Because the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down."*** Breaking their legs would make them die faster. He sees a Roman soldier coming toward him with what MUST HAVE BEEN something like a sledgehammer. The soldier isn't going to worry about being GENTLE. Screaming – cursing – WON'T HELP one bit. All he can do is CLING to Jesus' promise, ***"Amen I tell you: Today you will be with Me in paradise."***

The soldier swings the hammer to SMASH FIRST one leg and then the other. The pain is UNBEARABLE and UNBELIEVABLE. He clings to Jesus' promise – and IN AN INSTANT Jesus' promise is fulfilled! He's no longer hanging on that cross dying a CRUEL and TORTURED death. He is now with Jesus ***"in paradise."*** God has ***"wiped every tear from his eyes."*** His cross is FORGOTTEN – he now wears ***"the crown of life."*** He now ***"feasts with Abraham – Isaac – and Jacob in the kingdom of God."*** WHAT GRACE – what peace – what a SAVIOR!

Do you see the lessons for YOUR WALK of faith? It is a ***"walk by faith and not by sight"*** – a faith that clings to God's promises DESPITE what we may all see or be going through. God has never promised us an EASY – PAIN and problem free – life here on earth. But trusting in Jesus He has promised us ETERNAL life in a ***"new heaven and earth, the home of righteousness, where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain."*** UNTIL that promise is fulfilled we CLING to God's many promises and find our comfort in them. We know God LOVES us – Jesus' cross **proves** it. **We know** God is FAITHFUL – that He always keeps His promises. Easter proves that – ***"He is not here. He has risen, JUST AS He said."*** Clinging to God's promises we can confidently LOOK FORWARD to one day joining this criminal ***"in paradise"*** and personally thanking Jesus for being our GRACIOUS – FAITHFUL Savior. Amen.