

‘Today You Will Be With Me In Paradise’

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Good Friday

Luke 23:35-43

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Movement 1 – The Hour of Darkness

Are you looking for paradise? Are you looking for a place of peace, a place of hope, a place of rest? Are you looking for paradise? Maybe you are struggling in life. Maybe you feel afflicted in life. Maybe you have been put down so much that you want to look up to paradise. Are you looking for paradise?

You know those people who are looking for paradise. There are those who have much, but still want more. There are those who build garages just for all their stuff. There are those who have put up walls so high that it feels like they are in their own world. There are those who have much, who have power, who have wealth, who have nice things and are still looking for paradise. They thirst for something deeper. They thirst for something with more substance. They thirst for something that has meaning, something that offers life, something that money cannot buy. They are looking for paradise, a moment when they can feel safe, a moment when they can feel loved. Do you know these people? People who have reached the limit in spending and have realized that you can spend no more? Can you relate with these people who are starving for a real life, a full life. They are looking for paradise.

There are others who are looking for paradise. There are those who are trying to find enough money just to make ends meet. There are those who are trying to find a job that will offer dignity and a just wage. There are children who are told by our society, by our media and images that others do not value them. There are children who are trying to act tough to survive when they just want to be loved. There are mothers who are crying out for support, but receive none. There are people crying out to be acknowledged but receive only oppression. There are people who are starving, who are homeless, who are oppressed, and who are mired in so much despair that light does not shine. They are looking for paradise. They are looking for some kind of hope, some kind of word that offers help. They are looking for a paradise, which offers a full life, a true life, and a life that is recognized, as valid and full. Can you relate to these who are looking for paradise? Are you one of these who are looking for paradise? Are you looking for paradise?

There are those of us who are gathered around the cross, and we are also looking for paradise. Remember what it is that we see on the cross. Remember how we look up at the cross and we see our savior hanging, suffering, and enduring ridicule. The authorities mock him and our heart breaks. The Roman guards mock him and our heart breaks. Even the thief on one side of him mocks our Lord. One who is enduring the same fate as Jesus still hurls insults and jabs, still puts down our Jesus, and our heart breaks. It is like a cloud of hate has surrounded Jesus, and the smoke hurts our eyes and stings our hearts just to watch. Do you remember the mocking? Can you taste the salt, which has been added to the wounds? Do you not now yearn for paradise? Do you not now yearn to return to the table where you ate with Christ, the countryside where you listened to Christ or the home of Mary and Martha where you relaxed with Christ? Just a glimpse of that moment would be bliss for now. The suffering, the mocking, the ridicule cuts as deep as

the strips on Christ's back, and we yearn for paradise. Here at the cross, at this dark hour, are you looking for paradise?

Movement 2 – The Vision of the Thief

But at least one man could see through the haze. At least one man could peer through the cloud of hate and scorn. The other thief on the cross looked at Jesus and saw who he truly was, the Son of God. Maybe the thief had spent a life looking for paradise in all of the wrong places. Maybe the thief stole from others to acquire things to simulate paradise. Maybe the thief dabbled with drugs and excessive alcohol in order to experience a kind of paradise, even if it was just for a moment. Maybe the thief lived a life that had no dignity for life. Maybe a life of crime was the only life he had, and remorse was far from his thoughts. And then his life finally caught up with him. And then the authorities finally caught up with him, and he was imprisoned and condemned. You can imagine how he kept his heart hard as he walked to that hill, and as he was strapped and nailed onto a cross. You can imagine that his eyes were clouded with hate even until the end.

But then, on the cross, something happened. Like the scales falling from Paul's eyes, the hatred fell from the eyes of the thief and he saw Jesus, he really saw Jesus. Not many people really saw Jesus. The disciples looked at Jesus with sleepy eyes, sometimes understanding and sometimes not. The authorities looked at Jesus with closed eyes, not seeing Jesus for who he was. But the blind man in Jericho saw Jesus pass by and cried out his name, "Jesus, Son of David." Even without normal sight, that man saw Jesus. The women with the hemorrhage maybe never heard Jesus, maybe never got a good look at Jesus, but saw Jesus as one who could offer a healing touch, and she reached out and touched his cloak. She saw Jesus.

And something happened to that thief on the cross. He heard the mocking, he heard the cries and the taunts, but he did not see Jesus in the way as the authorities, as the guards, and as the other thief. He saw Jesus as the Christ, the anointed one, the Messiah, the Son of God. He saw Jesus. Maybe he had a bedside conversion like Constantine did. Maybe he had a moment of revelation even in his pain like Teresa of Avila did. Maybe the Holy Spirit took hold of him and called him to look just as it took hold of Augustine and called him to read. I don't know what happened, but this thief, on Jesus' side saw through the smoke of hate, saw through the cloud of anger, and saw Jesus.

Movement 3 – The Cry of the Thief

And the thief cries out for paradise. The thief sees Jesus as the Christ and cries out, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom." Do you hear those words? The thief did not cry out, "Jesus, get me off this cross." The thief did not cry for an instant paradise, but for redemption. The thief was not looking for a soothing touch, but for the experience of salvation. Remember me, Lord, because I have led a life of sin. Remember me, Lord, because I have not walked in the way of mercy, kindness or love. Remember me Lord, because now, now in the final breaths of my own life, I finally realize what it means to truly live. Remember me Lord, because now that I can truly see you, I realize that in you and through you I can have paradise. Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.

What else can the thief say? What else can we say when we are in our own moments of despair. Are we to shout out demands to our Lord? Are we to offer suggestions for our own salvation, or are we to cry out, "remember me." Don't forget me, Lord, because I am in a dark hour. Don't forget me, Lord, because I feel lost and scared. Just as Job cried out in his own distress, Lord, remember me. Just as Jeremiah cried out for vindication from his own adversaries, Lord remember me. Liberate me, free me from this pain and suffering and bring me into your glory, they all cry out. We have cried out as well. We have called for Jesus to remember us, for Jesus to stay with us, for Jesus to deliver us. When the bills pile up, when the demands of work and family pile up, when the weight of the world piles up, can we cry out with the thief, Jesus remember me? Can we look with the eyes of the thief and see Jesus, and can we cry out that Jesus remember us? The prayer on the cross, the prayer from the depth, the prayer from despair.

Cry out with the thief for hope and for paradise, "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom."

Movement 4 – The Word's of Jesus

And Jesus promises to remember. Jesus promises to remember our sufferings. Not tomorrow, not next week, but today. Right now, Jesus says, you will be with me in paradise. Jesus looks at the thief and says, "I will remember you, my son." Jesus looks at the mother trying to care for her children and says, "I will remember you, my daughter." Jesus looks at the father trying to set a good example and show a different way to live and says, "I will remember you my child." Jesus looks at the youth on the street, walking through a jungle of crime and violence and says, "I will remember you, my child." Jesus looks at the widow alone in her home, Jesus looks at the executive surrounded by stuff and feeling alone, Jesus looks at the sick, Jesus looks at the homeless and says, "I will remember you, I will be with you, and today you will be with me in paradise." Even as he is suffering on the cross, even as he is crying out on the cross, Jesus does not save his own life but the lives of others, offering them paradise. It is as if Jesus is taking the cross and making it into a banquet table for all to sit at. All who see Jesus, all who cry out for Jesus, and all who ask for Jesus' grace. Martin Luther said that in this passage we are given the assurance that heaven is not full of saints, but of sinners, of the suffering and of the wounded. But we can look to the cross, and know that Jesus offers us paradise. Because if Jesus can take his own suffering, his own death and make it into glory, if God can take the mess of the cross and make it into salvation, then God can take our lives and bring us into paradise. Jesus knows what it means to suffer. Jesus knows what it means to cry out in pain, and promises to remember us today.

Movement 5 – Our Own Working With Jesus in Paradise

Are you looking for paradise? My brothers and sisters, are you looking for paradise? Know that the day you look to the cross and cry out of your own pain, out of your own suffering, Jesus will remember you and you will be in paradise. Know that the day you look to the cross and ask for light, and ask for hope, and ask for mercy you will be in paradise. Know that the day you look to the cross and ask for forgiveness you will be in the paradise of God's grace and mercy and love. Are you looking for paradise? Look no further and look to the cross; there you will find paradise.

But we cannot just stand next to Jesus. We cannot relax and enjoy the bliss. We must look for Christ, we must follow Christ, and we must go with Christ as far as he goes. Do you know the story of Clarence Jordan's conversation with his brother:

Clarence did not just receive resistance from his community. He also received resistance from his family. He had asked his brother to join him at Koinonia Farms. His brother had political aspirations and eventually became a state senator in Georgia and a justice on the state Supreme Court. His brother said, "I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. I might lose my job, my house, everything I've got."

Clarence said, "We might lose everything too."

"It's different for you," Robert responded.

"You and I joined the church the same Sunday as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked, . . . 'Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?' And I said, 'Yes.' What did you say?"

Robert replied, "I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point."

"Could that point by any chance be-the cross?"

"I follow him to the cross, but not on the cross. I'm not getting myself crucified."

"Then I don't believe you are a disciple. You're an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to, and tell them you're an admirer not a disciple."

Can you follow Jesus to the cross? Can you live the costly discipleship, sacrificing just as Christ sacrifices for you? There are so many who are crying to be in paradise, bring them to the cross. There are so many who are crying for peace, bring them to the cross. There are so many who are crying for justice, bring them to the cross. And in that moment, in that moment when you are speaking truth to power, in that moment when you are standing up to the powers and the principalities, in that moment when you are bringing the balm of Gilead to the wounds of the world and it become to much. In that moment when discipleship becomes so hard that you cannot bear it any more, cry out to Jesus to be remembered, look past all the haze of hate in the world and see Jesus suffering on the cross for all those who need redemption, strength and grace, and know that today, today you will be with Jesus in paradise. When you hold the hand of the sick you are in paradise. When you offer food to the hungry belly you are in paradise. When you stand up for justice, righteousness and mercy, then you are in paradise.

Oh it is a dark day. It is a day of death, but it is also a day of hope. Today, today you will be with Jesus, the Christ, the Son, in paradise. Thanks be to God.

AMEN