

Good Friday

Text: Luke 23:39-43

I Tell You the Truth . . . Today You Will Be With Me in Paradise

The apartment building is about to collapse, but a child is still trapped in his third-story bedroom. The fire chief has ordered everyone out. On the edge of the yard stands the firefighter who is a father of four. He stares at the flames and then slowly turns his head to the mom who is crying uncontrollably as she is held back by the police. Will the firefighter rush in, risking his own life and perhaps orphaning his own children to save this child? It's the moment of truth.

You've dated for three years, surviving your share of challenges along the way and coming out stronger in the end. With sweaty palms and fidgety fingers you reach into your pocket for that tiny box, drop to a knee, and ask the life-changing question. Will she say, "Yes"? It's the moment of truth.

You haven't been feeling well as of late. After a recent visit to the doctor and numerous tests administered, the nurse calls and says the doctor would like to meet with you. After what seems an eternity in the waiting room, you finally get called back to a room. After another lengthy wait, the white-coated specialist finally opens the door and sits down on the rolling stool next to you. What's the report? It's the moment of truth.

We've all had them. Those crucial moments, those critical or decisive times on which much depends. We wait and wait as our lives seem to hang in the balance during a moment of truth. Yet there is no moment of truth greater than when our very lives hang in the balance. Such was the case with the criminal whom we see hanging on the cross today. He is about to die. As his life flashes before his eyes this Friday afternoon, he's not too happy with what he's seen. "We are getting what we deserve," he said. But it wasn't the burn in his lungs or the blood trickling down his arm that brought him to his moment of truth as he hung suspended on Golgatha. It was the *"What happens next? What happens when I die?"* And so he asks, he pleads to the One hanging next to him, *"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

I don't know how much time elapsed between the desperate request and the divine response. As this was apparently only the second word Jesus spoke from the cross, perhaps his breaths weren't so shallow yet. But no matter whether it was minutes or seconds, imagine the guilt the criminal felt as he tuned his ears to the center cross. Imagine the anguish he felt during this moment of truth. **"Will Jesus remember me?"** Then imagine the relief when he heard these words, ***"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."***

Every segment of that sentence lifted the criminal's soul. "Today," Jesus said. **Today** you will be with me. For someone who sat on death row for who knows how long, for someone who had just begun one of the slowest forms of execution—one that could extend three or four days—how comforting that element of time must have been for this criminal. Before the sun would rise again, this man could be assured his suffering would be done.

Through faith, this criminal could be assured his suffering would be over today. When we're lying on our own deathbeds, Jesus says the same. For the one who looks to Calvary's center cross, death is not just the cessation of breath. It's the cessation of suffering. No more hunger. No more pain. No more tears. No more guilt. No more anger. No more envy. No more sin . . . today.

That's only the tip of the iceberg. Find comfort in Jesus' other words: ***"Today you will be WITH ME in paradise."*** Jesus' promise is not just a promise of time. It's a promise of companionship. Imagine what that meant for this criminal.

There was something different about this thorn-crowned criminal. Something that made him different than the soldiers and the scorners. There was something about him that made him different than the other criminals. Instead of cursing as the nails were driven through his hands, Jesus prayed, **"Father, forgive them."** Instead of the charges that convicted him to death being hung over his head, a statement of conviction, power, and fulfillment hung over Jesus' head: **"Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews."** The differences between Jesus and everyone else on that hill were like oil and water, black and white. It was the difference between sin and perfection. And the Holy Spirit used Jesus as the living Word of

God to work on this criminal's heart so that instead of wanting to run away from God in fear of punishment, he was drawn by his grace.

Jesus promises, "You will be *with me*." Not behind me. Not a stone's throw away from me. But *with me*. Jesus' forgiveness is so complete that it allows us to be in the very presence of perfection.

And what will heaven be like? In Revelation, God uses a palette of gold, jewels, and rivers to paint some beautiful pictures for John. Here, Jesus paints with the word "paradise." A lush garden. For some of you that's a picture of tulips and roses and gladiolas. For others of you that's a picture of palm trees and citrus trees in the midst of a meandering river. But, ultimately, it's not the species of plant blooming in the gardens of paradise but the One walking with you on the paths of paradise that makes it beautiful. Think about it this way: when you're at the airport to greet your son as he returns home from a two-year tour in Afghanistan, does it matter if the airport walls are gray or blue as you throw your arms around him? Does it matter if the room temperature is 72 or 82 degrees? No, what matters is that you're with your son. In heaven—in paradise—you're with the Son of God. You'll be with the Son who loved you enough to leave heaven and be with you on earth. You'll be with the Son who loved you enough to live under the law that he was above. You'll be with the Son who loved you enough to die for you, so that you might be with him. If Jesus thought having you in heaven with him was worth all that, you can be guaranteed it's a spectacular place.

But how do you know this is what's in store for you? When you're on your deathbed, experiencing your "moment of truth," how do you know that very day you'll be with Jesus in paradise? He left no room for doubt about whether or not that thief would be in heaven. Through his Word, he leaves no room for doubt whether or not you will be in heaven. Today Jesus makes it clear that when that moment comes, it doesn't matter what we've done in the past. **"Today you will be with me in paradise."** Amen.