

“Today you will be with me in Paradise”

Luke 23:39-43

I was brought before the courts, charged with robbery and murder, and convicted. The sentence given to me was dreadful news. I am to die a death of shame, living out the last few hours of my life literally in excruciating pain. Another man is condemned of the same crimes, perhaps as an accomplice, and sentenced as well to death and public humiliation. Nothing can be done for us now, as we are dragged through the city and hoisted up before a diverse crowd of onlookers. Some of these are in tears and are in complete shock—it is strange for someone to be mourning the death of criminals! Still others are having a grand time with their ridicule, but for some reason it is directed mostly to another man, placed between us. He is called “Messiah” by some, mocked as a so-called “king” of the Jews by others. In keeping with the mob mentality, we began to laugh. It was a nice sort of temporary relief from our situation, as all attention is on the other man. He seems as though he expects this sort of reception from the people, and he keeps himself composed, even in the dire current situation. Maybe there is something more to him.

I have heard of him, this Messiah. I have heard stories of his preaching: different interpretations from most of the Jewish teachers. I have heard of strange wonders that are credited to him. Apparently he can heal all kinds of illnesses. From the reports I have heard, he can even raise the dead. Foolishness is what I called it. Now that I see him I wonder: is there something else to this man? Could he be the Messiah? Could he truly be a king from God? Come to think of it, why would some of these people be here if there is no truth to this?

Look at him. He just told one of his friends to take care of his mother. This guy can not be serious. After everything that we are going through (and worse for him: the brunt of everyone’s jokes), and he still is more concerned about his friends. He has to be the Messiah. No one else would endure this torture like this. Everything that they are accusing him of doing is unreal: blasphemy, by saying he was the son of God; treason, by saying he was the king of the Jews. If he is the Messiah, he has every right to make those claims. He has done nothing deserving of this treatment.

As I am thinking this, my fellow criminal is beginning to really mock this man. “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” What is he thinking? We are about to die, and we will face God to take responsibility for our actions, and he is just piling more onto his stack! I can hold my tongue no longer: “Do you not even fear God, knowing that we are going to give an account for what we have done? He has not done anything wrong!” Everyone is looking at me, but I don’t care. I know he has to be the Messiah. If he is from God, then he may be able to forgive me. “Lord, remember me when you come in your kingdom.” I was not prepared to hear what he had to say next. After all of the ridicule I endured, the pain I felt, the weakness from not being able to breathe and loss of blood while on the cross, the last thing I expected was a word of comfort from another sufferer of the same ills. “Truly, I tell you that today you will be with me in paradise.”

- I. What great comfort that must have been for the criminal to hear those words!
 - a. The truth is that we are in the same situation as those two criminals were.
 - i. We have sinned and are faced with the choice of turning *on* Christ *with* the rest of the world or turning *to* Christ *away from* the rest of the world.
 - ii. We will choose to be as one of those two criminals

II. **We have sinned and deserve punishment.**

- a. First let us define sin.
 - i. We get a view of what the Hebrews thought was sin in Judges 20:16:
 1. The left-handers mentioned could “sling a stone at a hair and not miss.”
 2. The word for “miss” is the word often translated as “sin.”
 - ii. Also, in Proverbs 19:2: “Whoever makes haste with his feet misses his way.”
 1. The King James Version translates this as: “he that hasteth with his feet sinneth.” The same word is used here.
 2. What does this mean? The Hebrews thought of sin as missing your target.
 - iii. When we look at what we should be, we have a standard: the Bible. We have the example of Jesus, and whenever we miss that target of being like Christ, we sin, just like we sin when we break a law of our country or of the Bible (Romans 3:20).
- b. This brings up another interesting thing said by that thief on the cross:
 - i. “He has done nothing amiss.”
 1. In other words, this thief is saying that Jesus had not sinned, at least in reference to the reasons he was crucified.
 - a. This we know is a biblical teaching (Hebrews 4:15).
 2. The thief says that he and the other criminal were being condemned for their actions, their sins, but Jesus had nothing to be afraid of.
 - a. He had not sinned.
 - ii. Since we have sinned, we deserve punishment.
 1. The cost of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23).

III. **We have been given the death penalty.**

- a. Carrying on with the discussion Paul had in his letter, we find in Romans 7:4 that we have died to the law through the body of Christ.
 - i. When we put to death our old self (Colossians 3:1-14) and are buried with Christ in baptism (Romans 6:1-11), we *put on* Christ (Galatians 3:27).
 - ii. Paul says it this way in Galatians 2:20: “I am crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”
- b. In Homer’s Odyssey, at one point Odysseus and his men are captive in a cave by Polyphemous the Cyclops. After gouging out the monster’s only eye, they are condemned, and no escape seems possible. However, Polyphemous let his sheep out every morning to graze, and Odysseus took advantage of this. He had each of his men to grab on to the underside of a sheep as the sheep went out of the cave the next morning. As each sheep passed by Polyphemous, the monster would reach down and felt around to make sure none of the men escaped.
 - i. All he felt were sheep, and all of the men made it out safely.
 - ii. Likewise, when Christ died, he took all of our sins (our wounds inflicted upon God) and bore them himself (Isaiah 53:5-6). When we die, we need

to have lived in such a way that God sees his Son die (as Polyphemous only felt his sheep).

iii. Romans 5:9-10

1. Since we are justified by his blood, we will be saved from wrath through him.
 - a. Justification means that justice has been served, and that a wrong has been made right.
 - b. In this case it refers to the sin we committed being corrected by the death of Christ. His blood saves us. It is the atonement that prevents us from being punished for those sins we have repented of.
 - c. We were reconciled to God by the *death* of Christ.
2. Therefore we shall be saved by his *life*.
 - a. This means that we are saved because Christ was raised from the dead, not because he died. It is the fact that he was raised that gives us hope.
 - i. Romans 6:8-9 – Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him: Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him.

IV. **We will be with Christ in Paradise.**

- a. As Romans 5:11 says, we receive reconciliation through Jesus.
 - i. If we look at the text of Luke 23:43, the phrase used by Luke implies more than just bodily presence. It implies fellowship.
 - ii. This is the type of reconciliation we have with God. In spite of the crimes we committed in our former life, before our crucifixion with Christ, we are now in fellowship with God.
 - iii. Thus there now remains no fear of facing God in judgment.
 1. The criminal asked his counterpart, “Do you not even fear God?” After Christ said, “You will be with me in Paradise,” the penitent criminal no longer needed to fear judgment.
- b. This brings us to an interesting question: “How could this criminal have been saved?”
 - i. Some argue that since he died after Christ that he would have needed to be baptized to be saved.
 1. In response to this, some argue that he could have been one of those who were baptized by John before Jesus’ ministry.
 - a. How could this make sense if Paul said that John’s baptism was not enough for salvation after Christ had died? (Acts 19).
 - ii. Others argue that he was under the old law and did not have to be baptized. All that was necessary was repentance.
 1. However, the thief would have had to give an offering to the Lord after his repentance (see Deuteronomy 4-6), whether the sin was intentional or not. The thief never came off of the cross alive. He never could have made that sacrifice.

- iii. There is only one solution: Jesus simply forgave him of his sins. Are we going to say that he did not have the authority to forgive sins without someone doing all of the things that characterize repentance? We have to! If someone does not believe that Christ could have forgiven this thief without the thief doing the rituals necessary for forgiveness, they are no more than the scribes were.
 - 1. Matthew 9:1-8
- c. Romans 8:31-39 gives us a similar scenario:
 - i. We are on God's side.
 - 1. Since God is our judge, who can condemn us?
 - 2. Since Christ intercedes for us (like a lawyer), who can bring a charge against us?
 - a. No one can, whether by threatening our lives or by taking away our conveniences.
 - b. "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:37-39).
 - c. We mentioned this morning that the one who turns to God and repents of his sins will be forgiven.
 - i. If God has nothing against you, you will not be condemned. Therefore if you have sins in your life, you need to remove them and turn back to God.
 - ii. If you have not been baptized into Christ (Galatians 3:27), you are not in Christ. The scripture says that nothing can separate us from the love of God *in* Christ. As many as have been baptized in Christ have put on Christ.
 - iii. If you are not sure of your salvation, you need to make it right, get rid of your sins, be baptized if you have not already done so, and ask God for forgiveness. Do that now, while we stand and sing.