

The Promise of Paradise

Luke 23:39-43

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Rev Joe Sanders

First Baptist Church Coshocton, Ohio

You wake up everyday and you have a choice to make. Do I get out of bed or do I sleep a little longer? You have a choice to make. Do you live for yourself, doing what you want? Do you pursue your own desires to own determent? Do you say, "I'll do it different the next time? I've got plenty of time to live my way. There's too much I want to do. I don't need to change my actions or my attitudes right now."

This is more than just the sin of procrastination. This is the sin of not deciding to trust Jesus. We've been looking at some of the encounters of Jesus during the last hours of His life. We started with His Last Supper and His words, "this is My body broken for you, this is My blood poured out for you." Then we encountered Jesus' trial where He proclaimed, "You will see the Son of Man at the right of God in Heaven." We encountered what might be Jesus' first words from the cross, "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." Today we encounter Jesus again on the cross promising eternal life to one who believes in Him.

Luke 23:39–43 (NIV) One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

Remember, it's never too late to be forgiven by Jesus. As long as your heart is beating, your lungs are breathing, your brain is clear, it's never too late to call out to Jesus. Jesus has been nailed to the cross as a criminal for being the Son of God. His death is imminent, a few hours. His body that has been beaten will succumb to death. His lungs will stop breathing. His heart will stop beating. All life will go out of Him.

He hangs by the nails in His feet and His hands. Slowly the weight of His body is pulled down by gravity. Many who are crucified are drugged with cheap wine to ease the pain. Jesus chooses to experience fully all the consequences of dying by crucifixion. His first words were a prayer of forgiveness. He is dying so the world can be forgiven of sin. His body is being broken for each person to be forgiven. His blood is being shed for the forgiveness of sin.

Jesus is being insulted by some of the religious leaders. They wanted Him dead. They wanted to silence Him from speaking the Truth that He is the Son of God. But He wasn't the Son of God they wanted. They rejected Him because He called for people to repent and follow God, not rituals and rules.

The insults grew throughout the crowd that gathered to watch Him die. More and more people had become disillusioned by the events of the last day. They wanted a king that would defeat their enemies. They didn't want a spiritual king that enters their heart and defeats sin. The criminals nailed next to Him on each side began to torment Jesus. That is until one realized, maybe through Jesus'

prayer of forgiveness, that he needed to be forgiven. This criminal could only think about the pain, his own punishment, and Jesus. His heart was changed.

While Jesus hung on the cross dying He was insulted relentlessly. At the foot of the cross were some of Jesus' followers. His mother was present along with some other women. We don't know how many disciples stood by watching and waiting. We do know that His disciple John was present. These followers of Jesus were severely outnumbered. More people now despised Jesus than wanted Him as their king. More people called for Jesus to prove He was God's Son. They called for Him to free Himself in some miraculous way. They cried out for Jesus to save Himself from the torture and from death.

Jesus refused to listen to the crowds. He refused to pay attention to their insults. He refused to give into their demands. Through the pain, the attacks, and now facing death Jesus remained faithful to Himself as God. He would not give into the temptation to be a miracle worker, but remained the Savior. He would not be overcome by the temptation to prove Himself, but remained the Lord of life. He would not fall to the temptation of establishing His Kingdom on earth only, He remained faithful to His promises to be the sacrifice for our sins. Nothing stopped Jesus from being God's Son, the Lamb of God that saved the world.

Luke 23:39–43 (NIV) One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”

We're all guilty of something and want to be delivered from our punishment. One criminal on the cross only wanted to be saved from dying. This is like the person who says, “God if you answer my prayers, I'll do whatever you want.” It's not faith, it's not trust. It is looking for the easy way out. It's looking for an opportunity to do what you want. While you do what you want, you also want God's blessings. If that isn't enough, it's turning away from God.

Many times we call this man a thief. The ancient Greek word that is sometimes translated thief has many applications. The person could be trying to steal from the government. That is trying to steal power and authority from the government. That would make the person a rebel. Jesus' was crucified because another criminal was set free. That criminal was a rebel against the Roman Army. When the people were given an opportunity to set Jesus free, they choose the rebel. If Jesus wouldn't set them free from the Romans, then they would kill Him and keep their rebel.

So this criminal, thief or rebel, joined the chorus of insults. He was dying and only wanted to live. He wanted to extend his life a little longer. He was willing to call out in sarcasm to the only one who could save him. Nobody knows when they will die. No doctor can predict when a cancer patient will die. They can't determine when the heart will stop, when the liver will quit working, when the lungs will stop working. Do you know when the bomb will drop from the sky? Do you know when a lightning bolt will strike? Do you know when the earthquake will happen? Heart attacks and strokes happen. Gunshots go through car doors and siding on a house. Flash floods come without notice. In the blink of an eye everything can be taken away.

Every criminal thinks they will get away with it. They don't think about being caught. They don't know when the police officer will knock on the door. They live like they got away with their crime. A moment will come when this life will end. It could be in your sleep. It could be after a long struggle with a disease. It could be suddenly without notice. Your life can be lived without purpose or direction. You can live each day doing whatever you want. You can pursue anything and everything. But one day your heart will stop beating. One day your lungs will quit working. One day you will pay the

punishment for what you've done. Or one day you will be delivered from that punishment because of Jesus.

Luke 23:40–41 (NIV) But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

Are you aware that your death is the final judgment? One sinner said to another, I regret my sins and want to be saved. This criminal recognized that death was approaching. He had no control over anything that was about to happen. Since his arrest this criminal has lost control of everything. At last this criminal realized that his life was about to end. In this realization came the truth that dying was painful, but what comes next might be worse than crucifixion. He was afraid to die. He didn't want to die. He knew he was guilty. He was aware that he deserved to die.

He heard the words coming out of his mouth. He was insulting the man called the King of the Jews. His own words echoed in his ears. But when the King of the Jews prayed words of forgiveness for executioners, his heart, his spirit, his very soul was taken captive. This King of the Jews, the man named Jesus, this miracle worker, this great teacher became his Savior. This Man was the promised Messiah. He was the Anointed One of God. He was the Son of God. This moment was life changing for one criminal. He wanted to be forgiven. He knew that death was coming, but more than that he wanted to be with Jesus.

After you die it's too late to call out to Jesus. Everyone at their death will be judged for their life on earth. When you die you can't talk about your good deeds. They won't matter. When you stand before Jesus it doesn't matter if you kept nine out of ten of the commandments. As Jesus looks into your eyes no matter how much begging you do it won't matter. The only thing that matters is that you know Jesus before you die. If you have a lifetime ahead of you, call out to Jesus. If you are down to your last hours, your last minutes, call out to Jesus.

One criminal died beside Jesus and is with Jesus for eternity. He called out to Jesus. He recognized his sin, his need for Jesus, his need to repent. Another criminal died beside Jesus and as far as we know he isn't with Jesus. His unwillingness in his greatest moment of need, in his dying hours didn't call out to Jesus. It was too late for him.

Jesus is guilty of being the Son of God. He is seated at the right hand of God. One criminal when he died saw Jesus and heard Him say, "I know you." Another criminal when he died saw Jesus and heard Him say, "I don't know you."

Luke 23:42–43 (NIV) Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

In your own words speak to Jesus and seek the forgiveness of your sins. This criminal was guilty and decided before it was too late. In this life it is never too late. But, waiting until your dead is too late. I can't do for you what only you can do. Every person has to decide for themselves to call upon Jesus. No one can do this for you. You can't experience forgiveness by your parents' or your grandparents' faith.

Faith in Jesus is personal. It's intimate. It's risky. It's courageous. Faith isn't the result of what you know. Faith isn't wishful thinking. Faith is trusting Jesus with everything. Faith means you do what

cannot see. Faith means you trust sometimes what you cannot understand. Waiting until it's too late leaves you to suffer alone now and forever.

When you choose Jesus, He enters your life. He fills your heart, your spirit, your soul. He takes up residence within you. He lives in you through His Holy Spirit. By living in you Jesus is always present, always available. He guides you through decisions and temptations. It's easy to fall back into sin, into your old lifestyle. He provides you with wise counsel.

When you listen to Jesus there will be wisdom beyond your understanding. He gives you reassurance in every troubling moment. The tidal wave of troubles, emotions, burdens comes against you, but the quiet voice of Jesus speaks hope and power into your life.

By living in you Jesus gives you His characteristics, His traits. Everyone has a different personality. But there are qualities that as a sinner you don't have. Jesus through His Holy Spirit gives them to you. Your life produces these qualities like a branch on a vine produces fruit. He starts taking away your old desires and giving you new ones.

Don't lie to yourself, there are some sins that you like. You enjoyed them before Jesus entered your life. With Jesus living in you, He makes those sins disgusting to you. He develops in you the qualities of God's personality. You were created in the image of God. Jesus begins to bring out that godly image in your life. You become more godly the more you trust Jesus.

By living in you Jesus has already washed away your sins. You are fully and completely forgiven. Everything from your past, your present, and your future is cleansed by Jesus. His death on the cross was your death to sin. His resurrection from the dead is your new life. You are starting a new life and given a second chance. You don't deserve the second chance, but Jesus wants you to have it. His desire is for you to live the life you were created to live. His love for you has made it possible for you to start over again.

Take a moment and think about your life. In what ways are you insulting, rejecting, ignoring Jesus? How have you taken the perfect person God created you to be, and thrown it away? In what way are you saying to Jesus, that you can handle life, you're in control, and you don't need Him?

As you think about these things decide if you want to continue on your path or do you want Jesus to live in you? During the next minute or so, in the silence tell Jesus what is in your heart. Then I'll pray.