



Luke 23:39-43

SW MN Lenten Exchange
Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong."⁴² And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."⁴³ And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

"Hey, do you remember me?" Have you ever asked that question before? You see someone that you haven't seen in years, *you* recognize them immediately. You approach, you say their name, and if they don't say your name right back to you, you ask, "Do you remember me?"

That can be a scary question to ask. Scary, because it *could* be that they *don't* remember you at all, maybe because they didn't think you were very memorable. It could be that they don't remember you at all, because you've changed so much physically—a few more gray hairs, a few added wrinkles, a few extra pounds—so that they don't even *recognize* you at all. "Do you remember me" could be a scary question to ask, because what if they *don't* remember you?

But what if they *do*? "Do you remember me?" What if they say *yes*? That could be scary too. *What* do they remember about you? That could be even scarier than them forgetting about you, because *what* they remember about you might not be something very good. They might remember something about you that you'd hoped everyone would have forgotten about. Their memories of you might be memories that you don't *want* to be dug back up. So, do you really want people to remember you, or would you prefer that you were forgotten about?

The man in our text, speaking with Jesus—he wants to be remembered. He wants to be remembered *by Jesus*. Why? What does he want Jesus to remember about him? Does he want Jesus to remember that he was a criminal—and not just any criminal, but one deserving of the death penalty? After all, not every criminal in Judea was sentenced to a cross, did he want Jesus to remember *that* about him?

Does he want Jesus to remember the things he had been saying moments before this? Our text tells us that ***"one of the criminals who were hanged railed at him,"*** but Matthew and Mark tell us that *both* of the men crucified with Jesus were insulting Him and reviling Him. (cf. Matthew 27:44; Mark 15:32) When he asks that he be remembered when Jesus comes into His Kingdom, is he hoping that Jesus would remember those *insults*? Or is he hoping that Jesus might not have heard that part? Does he *really* want Jesus to remember him, or would it be better for this man if he were forgotten?

We might think that could be the case, but again, this man did not. He *wanted* to be remembered by Jesus. That was not because of who *this man* was or what *he* had done but because of who *Jesus* was. Less important than *what* was being remembered was *who* was doing the remembering. And this most unlikely of individuals had been led by the Holy Spirit to identify Jesus as the promised Messiah, as his own personal Savior, and therefore as the one by whom he *wanted* to be remembered.

He knew he *needed* a Savior. He had rebuked the other criminal, ***"Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"*** And then he confessed his sin: ***"And we indeed justly,***

for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” This criminal confessed his many sins, but he also recognized that Jesus was innocent of any crime. He recognized that Jesus was *not* deserving of death as he was.

However, this man’s faith went even *further*, as He believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah King, who had come to establish His Kingdom—which is remarkable. At a time when even the disciples were still generally confused about what Jesus’ Kingdom would be, *this* man saw the truth. Did he know *exactly* what Jesus’ Kingdom entailed? Probably not. And yet, he saw a man dying a criminal’s death, naked and impaled to a cross—and by faith he saw through it. He saw the truth. That this Jesus was a King, and though crucified—even still—after this, He *would reign* in His Kingdom.

He looks to this one whom he believes is the King with the Kingdom. And *this* is his dying plea before Him: ***“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*** He did not use his dying breaths to try to remind Jesus of any good thing that he had done, because he had nothing to offer—no good to point to. He did not try to reframe Jesus’ remembrances, “Hey, I hope you can forget about what I was saying before, because, remember, I just *defended* you against that other guy!”

He doesn’t do any of that. He offers no defense. He makes no excuse. Instead, he reflected the thoughts of the hymnist, *“Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling.”* He knew who he was, a sinner getting what he deserved. But He also knew who Jesus was. And so, he simply threw himself on Jesus’ mercy and uttered his dying plea, ***“Jesus, remember me.”***

And Jesus is the one that you want to do the remembering. ***“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*** On that day that we know as Good Friday, the Son of God opened the gates of paradise to sinners, even to one like the thief on the cross. ***“Today you will be with me.”***

Now, it is sometimes wondered: what did Jesus mean when He said, ***“Today”***? Did He really mean, “Today,” as in *that* very day this man and Jesus would be in heaven together? Or did Jesus mean, “Not really *today*, it’ll be more like a couple thousand years, but because you’re going to be asleep, from *your* perspective it will feel like ‘today’ that you will join me in paradise”? I’ve heard that latter explanation given from time to time, and I don’t think we need to give that explanation.

For one thing, any other time when Jesus speaks about something happening ***“today”*** in the Gospel of Luke, He meant that very day. Like when He read the Scriptures in the synagogue, Scriptures about Himself proclaiming ***“good news to the poor... liberty to the captives... the year of the Lord’s favor”***—regarding that passage, He announced, ***“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*** (Luke 4:18ff) And as the Son of God was present doing that very thing in front of their own eyes, this Scripture *was* being fulfilled *that very day*. Or when Jesus spoke to Zacchaeus sitting up there in that sycamore tree: *“I’m going to your house today.”* (cf. Luke 19:5) It *was* that day that Jesus went to his house, and it was also *that day* that salvation came to that house. (cf. Luke 19:9) Or when Jesus told Peter that ***“before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me,”*** (Luke 22:34) it happened that very day.

Jesus says, ***“Today you will be with me.”*** Usually when Jesus says, “Today,” He means *today*. And in general, it is wise to take Jesus at His Word. Besides, there’s other passages that speak of this same

idea, dying and going to be with the Lord right away, even **“today.”** The Holy Spirit describes through the pen of Solomon: **“Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.”** (Ecclesiastes 12:7) Paul speaks about his longing for death, **“My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.”** (Philippians 1:23)

Yes, when Jesus says, **“Today you will be with me in paradise,”** I really believe we ought to understand that in its literal sense. The man’s soul would go to his Savior’s side that very day, and on Judgment Day his crucified body also would be raised and glorified and join his soul in heaven.

The problem that I *believe* people have with this concept is regarding a question about Judgment Day. I’ve been asked before, “What would be the point of Judgment Day if we already know where we will be?” But then I ask in return, “Don’t we *already* know where we’ll be?” Judgment Day isn’t the question mark at the end of our lives, it’s the exclamation point! We won’t find out *later* where we will spend eternity, we’ve already been told!

Haven’t you heard? **“The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.”** (1 John 1:7) We’ve been forgiven! We’ve been forgiven because **“while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”** (Romans 5:8) Christ died and then He rose again, and this wasn’t just for *His* benefit, He was **“delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”** (Romans 4:25) And in that death and resurrection, you have been included. After all, **“We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”** (Romans 6:4) Your baptism connects you to Christ’s death and resurrection, ensures that the benefits He has won are distributed to you. In fact, **“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”** (Galatians 3:27) And, **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”** (Romans 8:1) No condemnation—only justification. No sin—only restoration. No guilt—only forgiveness. No hell—only paradise.

Yes, all of that is just small sampling of Jesus’ assurance to you, that **“You will be with me in paradise.”** The message for the criminal is the message for you.

What do you think the criminal thought of that promise? Do you think that later, when the guards came to break his legs and quicken his death—do you think he was pleading with them to stop so that he could live a little longer? Or do you think he gritted his teeth while clinging to His Savior’s promise: **“Today, you will be with me in paradise”?** I think we can rightly guess the answer.

And our Savior has given us the same promise. He’s assured us of the same thing. We also may have confidence of eternal life, because Jesus has given us His Word. And so, we can go to Jesus with the same simple plea, **“Jesus, remember me.”** And because *He* is the one doing the remembering, we do not need to be afraid of what He might remember. For no matter who you are, no matter what you have done, no matter what you are facing, Jesus remembers you with grace, with forgiveness, and with steadfast love. Your plea as a lost sinner has been answered: **“You will be with me in paradise.”** Thanks be to God, in Jesus’ saving name. Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.