

Luke 23:39-43 I Tell You the Truth . . . Today You Will Be With Me in Paradise Good Friday
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God's grace and peace are yours from Jesus Christ our Savior who died to give us Paradise! Amen.

Jesus gives some of the most comforting words that sinners can hear in Luke 23:39-43

These are Your Words heavenly Father to make us certain of being in paradise by Jesus. Your Word is truth.

Dear Christian Friends,

The apartment building was about to collapse, but a child was still trapped in his bedroom. The fire chief ordered everyone back. On the edge of the yard stands a 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 he rush in, risking his own life and perhaps orphaning his own children to save this child? It's the moment of truth. In another situation, you haven't been feeling well lately. After a recent visit to the doctor and numerous tests, the nurse calls and says the doctor wants to see you. After what seems an eternity in the waiting room, you finally get called back to a room. The white-coated specialist finally opens the door and sits down next to you. What is the report? It's the moment of truth.

A man is dying as he hangs on a cross next to Jesus. The criminal speaks: "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." What will Jesus say? It's the moment of truth! Jesus answered:

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

First, Jesus gave His promise for today. We've all had crucial moments and decisive times in our lives. We held our breaths waiting to see how the moment of truth concludes. There is no greater moment of truth than when our lives hang in the balance. Such was the case with the criminal on the cross next to Jesus. He was about to die. As his life flashed before his eyes, he was not happy with what he saw. If his life was a movie it would be rated "R" for violence and language. He knew that the nails in his hands were pounded with a hammer of justice. He knew the burning in his collapsing lungs was fair punishment. He said, "*We are getting what our deeds deserve*" (v.41) But it wasn't the burning in his lungs or the loss of blood that brought him to his moment of truth. It was the question: "What happens when I die?" So he pleaded with Jesus: "*Remember me when you come into your kingdom.*" (v.42)

We don't know how much time elapsed between the desperate request and Jesus' response. It was only in the second hour of the crucifixion, so Jesus should have been able to speak without much difficulty. But whether it was minutes or seconds, imagine the anguish the criminal felt as he waited for Jesus' answer at his moment of truth. Then he heard, "*I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.*" (v.43) Every word of that sentence lifted the criminal's soul. "*Today,*" Jesus said. Today you will be with me. For someone who had just begun one of the slowest forms of death from execution, one that could extend for days, how comforting that element of time must have been for this criminal. Before the sun would set, this man was assured that his suffering would be done.

The promises that we make to each other come with conditions. If you do this, I'll do that! But, Jesus' promise of relief to this repentant sinner had no if's. Nor was it preceded by "perhaps" or "someday." It wasn't next week or tomorrow, but "today." Hearing Jesus' promise, this criminal believed his suffering would end that day. When we're suffering and nearing death, Jesus assures us that there will be an end. The curse of death has been turned into blessing. Death for Christians is the end of pain, hunger, and tears; there is no more guilt, anger, or envy, for there will be no more sin the moment we die.

Second, Jesus promised companionship. The word, “today” was just the beginning of His promise. Jesus’ other words were: “*You will be with me in paradise.*” Imagine what that meant for this criminal. More than likely, his rebellion and stealing had placed him among bad people. Now, in the ending hours of his life, people watching him were even worse. The passersby spit on him and scorned him with their words and their glares. Imagine how deserted he must have felt. That was part of the punishment of crucifixion.

But as much as this criminal wanted to despair from the people surrounding him, Jesus on the cross beside him gave him hope. Jesus was far different than the criminals. Instead of cursing others as the nails were driven through His hands, Jesus prayed, “*Father, forgive them.*” Instead of the charges that convicted this criminal to death, the statement nailed above Jesus’ head was noble: “*JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.*” The differences between Jesus and everyone else were like day and night or between love and hatred. The Holy Spirit used Jesus’ words and His life to change this criminal’s heart so that instead of wanting to run from God in fear of punishment, he was drawn to Him through Jesus.

Christ promised, “*You will be with Me.*” Jesus’ forgiveness was so complete that it allowed sinners to be in the very presence of a holy God. Moses, the great leader of God’s people, couldn’t view God in His glory and live. But in heaven, we will see God and our lives will be made glorious in Christ.

Third, Jesus promised a place. What will heaven be like? In Revelation, God uses words like gold, jewels, and beautiful trees along rivers to paint a scenic picture. Here, Jesus simply said “paradise,” a lush garden. For some of you that’s a picture of spring flowers. For others it’s a picture of flowering trees next to a meandering river. But, ultimately, it’s the One is with us that will make it paradise. Think of it this way: You’re at the airport to greet your son as he returns home from two years in Afghanistan. Does it matter if the airport walls are gray or blue as you welcome him? Does it matter if the room temperature is 72 or 82 degrees? What matters is that you are with your son. So, in heaven, we are with the Son of God. We’ll be with the Son who loved us enough to leave heaven. He loved us enough to live in our place under the law. We’ll be with the Son who died in love so we will live with Him forever. Since our loving Savior will be with us, life is guaranteed to be fantastic. A little girl once walked with her dad under a star-filled sky and said, “Dad, if heaven is this beautiful from this side, imagine what it looks like from the other side!”

But how do we know this is what’s in store for us? When we’re experiencing our “moment of truth,” how do we know that that day we’ll be with Jesus? It’s because Jesus said, “*I tell you the truth.*” He does not lie! The word translated “truth” in the original language is “Amen.” Jesus left no room for doubt about whether that thief would be in heaven that day. Through his Word to us, He leaves no doubt that we who believe in Him to save us will be in heaven with Him, too.

So, what about those moments of truth? The firefighter did rush into the building and saved woman’s child from the fire. The doctor gave that patient the news that the cancer was at an early stage and could easily be treated. And what about our moment of truth when we as sinners someday face death? Jesus, like that firefighter, experienced the burning judgment of God to rescue us. Jesus, like that doctor, offers us a treatment for our incurable sin. His shed blood cleanses us from sin. At that moment of truth for us Jesus’ words will ring out clearly: “*Today you will be with me in paradise.*” To that, we say: “Amen.”