

A Promise of Paradise: A Letter that Satan Does Not Want You to Read

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:39-43, ESV)

Dear reader,

Please give me five minutes of your time to explain to you the meaning of the text that you have just read. This text from the Bible is about the thief on the cross who has been assured by Jesus that he will enter paradise. The word *paradise* simply means heaven, the dwelling place of God. Thus, Jesus said to the thief, "Today you will be with me in heaven where my Father is." What a promise! Now why did Jesus give the thief such a wonderful promise? What did the thief do? Or to make the question more personal: What must you do in order to be with Jesus in heaven? Before you answer this question, I must honestly tell you that when you die, you either will go to hell or heaven. There is no place in between. Have you thought of dying before? What if you were to die today (God forbid!), do you know where you are going to spend your eternity? The thief knew: He would be in heaven with Jesus! So what must you do in order to be with Jesus in heaven?

First, repent of your sin. In our passage we see how this thief acknowledged his sin. He admitted that he deserved the punishment that he was suffering because he knew that he had sinned against a holy God. But of course he did not only *acknowledge* his sin, he also *repented* of it; that is, he turned to God and away from sin. One of the serious problems today is that people do not admit that they are sinners. Yet, the Bible clearly says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). We are all sinners; that is, we all have transgressed God's Law! That includes you, my dear reader. You are a sinner too. And the Bible goes on to say: "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

Perhaps this sounds unpleasant to you, but the fact that you will die someday is proof that you are a sinner. Death exists because sin does. But you may say to me, "I am not a sinner." Well, for sure, at one point in your life you have told a lie. That is enough for you to be called a sinner. Lying is a violation of the Ninth Commandment of God. And the Bible tells us, "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it" (James 2:10). If you don't admit that you are a sinner, God says, "we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8).

O dear reader, do you understand that because of sin you have been separated from God? And if you continue in this state, when you die you will experience God's eternal wrath in the lake of fire. Yes, it is true that God is loving; but you must remember that He is also just. And thus, He will punish the unrepentant sinners. But here is the good news: the Bible says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). The Lord Jesus forgave the criminal, when he repented. My dear friend, if you ask forgiveness for your sins, God is willing and able to forgive you too, regardless of how much and how long you have sinned.

Second, as you repent, you must also believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. In our text, after the criminal repented of his sin, he spoke to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." This was a simple and humble expression of the criminal's faith in Jesus. He believed that Jesus is the ONLY ONE who could save him from the power and punishment of sin. The sinless Jesus died at the cross for sinners such as you, so "that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). To believe in Jesus means to put your complete trust in Him as your Lord and Savior. My dear reader, have you already believed in Jesus? Please believe in Him now before it is forever too late for you to do so.

Now, after the thief repented of his sin and believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, Jesus gave him a glorious promise: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Please note that Jesus not only promised to remember the thief, but also that He would take him with Him into His kingdom, which is the same as saying, paradise or heaven. There are two important truths about this promise:

First, the promise is sure. Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." The word *truly* in Greek is *amen*, which means *surely*. In other words, the promise that Jesus gave to the criminal was not uncertain, such as a "maybe" or "perhaps." Rather, it was a sure and absolute promise. The thief knew that the moment he died he would be with Jesus in His Paradise. My dear reader, may I ask you again? If you die today, do you know for sure that you will be with Jesus in heaven? Yes, you can know it with certainty if you turn away from your sin and believe in Jesus.

Second, the promise is for today. Please listen to the words of Jesus again, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." Observe that Jesus did not say, "tomorrow" or "next week" but rather *today*. There are people who say that no one can know if he is saved until he dies. But the thief knew that he was saved even before he died. Why? Because he had believed in Jesus, and the promise for those who believe in Christ is that they will be saved. God is faithful to His promise! "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31).

Dear friend, as I close this letter, let me leave you these final thoughts to ponder upon:

First, the ONLY thing that you must do in order to be saved is repent of your sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. These two—repentance and faith—must go together. But you might ask me, “Is this enough for me to be saved?” Yes, it is! Perhaps you might ask me again, “How about those who teach that in order to be saved, you must do good works such as keeping the Ten Commandments?” Well, remember that the thief had not been able to keep the Ten Commandments. In fact, he was crucified because he violated one of the commandments. The ONLY thing that he did was to repent of his sin and believe in Jesus. The Bible says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). You see, my dear reader, salvation is a gift of God. This means that salvation is not something that we work for, but something that we freely receive from God.

Second, the thief would go with Jesus to heaven not because of his goodness, but because of God’s grace. Did this thief deserve to be with Jesus in heaven? Of course not! What he deserved was hell, for he was a sinner. Do you recall the wages of sin? Eternal death in the lake of fire! But because of God’s grace, the thief had been given the assurance of being with Jesus in heaven forever. This is the meaning of grace—something we receive from God that we do not deserve. In fact, it means that God gives us the exact opposite of what we deserve!

Dear friend, allow me to ask you again with love, “What if you die today, do you know where you are going to spend your eternity?” Please, don’t avoid this question for your own sake! Remember, there is a promise of paradise!

Sincerely,

Rev. Brian G. Najapfour

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