

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

The firefighter stares at the burning house, engulfed in flames. To his side stands the mother of a child trapped inside. It's the moment of truth. Will he put his life on the line to save another?

The young man reaches into his pocket for that tiny box with a sparkling engagement ring inside. He drops to a knee, and asks the life-changing question. Will she say, "Yes"? It's the moment of truth.

You haven't been feeling well lately. You sit in the exam room waiting for the doctor to arrive. He finally does and sits down next to you. What's wrong? What's the prognosis? It's the moment of truth.

We've all had them. Those crucial moments, those critical or decisive times on which so much depends. Our lives seem to hang in the balance during these moments of truth. Yet there is no moment of truth greater than when our lives really do hang in the balance. Such was the case with the criminal whom we see hanging on the cross this evening. He is about to die. As his life flashes before his eyes this Friday afternoon, he's not too happy with what he sees. The movie of his life would receive an "R" rating, maybe worse, for violence and language. He knows the nails through his hands were pounded with a hammer of justice. He knows the burn in his collapsing lungs was ignited by the fairness of the law.

Listen to his moment of truth: <sup>39</sup> One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" <sup>40</sup> But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?" <sup>41</sup> We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." <sup>42</sup> Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." <sup>43</sup> Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

"We are getting what we deserve," that criminal said. But it wasn't the burn in his lungs or the blood trickling down his arm that brought him to his moment of truth as he hung suspended over Golgatha. It was the "What happens next? What happens when I die?" And so he asks, he pleads to the One hanging next to him, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

I don't know how much time elapsed between the desperate request and the divine response. As this was apparently only the second phrase Jesus spoke from the cross, perhaps his breaths weren't so shallow yet. But no matter whether it was minutes or seconds, imagine the angst, the fear, the worry the criminal felt as he tuned his ears to the center cross. Imagine the dread that he felt during this moment of truth. "Will Jesus remember me?" Then imagine the relief when he heard these words, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

Every segment of that sentence lifted the criminal's soul. "Today," Jesus said. Today you will be with me. For someone who sat on death row for who knows how long, for someone who had just begun one of the slowest forms of execution—one that could extend three or four days—how comforting that element of time must have been for this criminal. Before the sun would rise again, this man could be assured his suffering would be done.

The promises you and I make to one another come with conditions. If this happens, then that will happen. Perhaps we'll visit there. Someday I'm going to do that. Jesus' promise of relief to this repentant sinner had no conditions. And it wasn't a next month, a next week, or even a tomorrow, but a today. Through faith, this criminal could be assured his suffering would be over today. Good Friday means that when we're lying on our own deathbeds, Jesus will say the same thing. For the one who looks to Calvary's center cross, death is not just the cessation of breath. It's the cessation of suffering. No more hunger. No more pain. No more tears. No more guilt. No more anger. No more envy. No more sin . . . today.

That's only the tip of the iceberg. Find comfort in Jesus' other words: "Today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus' promise is not just a promise of time. It's a promise of companionship. Imagine what

that meant for this criminal. More than likely, a life of crime did not land him in the nicest company of people. Now, in the waning hours of his life, he saw people at their worst. As the passersby spit on him and shook their heads in disgust, scorning him with their words and their glares, imagine how emotionally deserted this criminal must have felt. That was part of the punishment of crucifixion. Not only was it physically tormenting, it was embarrassing and shaming as you were hung naked along the busiest street so that others could heap their insults on you.

But as much as this criminal wanted to escape the people around him, there was something that drew him to the man on the cross next to him. There was something different about this thorn-crowned criminal. Something that made him different than the soldiers and the scorers. There was something about him that made him different than the other criminal. Instead of cursing as the nails were driven through his hands, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them." Instead of the charges that convicted him to death being hung over his head, a statement of conviction, power, and fulfillment hung over Jesus' head: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." The differences between Jesus and everyone else on that hill were like oil and water, black and white. It was the difference between sin and perfection. And the Holy Spirit used Jesus as the living Word of God to work on this criminal's heart so that instead of wanting to run away from God in fear of punishment, he was drawn by his grace.

And Jesus assured the criminal that the sin that separated him from a perfect God was not unbridgeable. Jesus promises, "You will be with me." Not behind me. Not a stone's throw away from me, but with me. Jesus' forgiveness is so complete that it allows us to be in the very presence of perfection. Even Moses, the greatest leader of God's Old Testament people, couldn't see the full glory of God and expect to live. But in heaven, we will.

And what will heaven be like? Jesus calls it "paradise." A lush garden. A Caribbean vacation with all its rest and relaxation and joy and peace. And even more than that, paradise means paradise restored, the Garden of Eden made new in its perfection for you and me to enjoy.

The account of Christ's death, the Passion History that we will read through in a few moments, is so far removed from this concept of paradise. In all that happened to him we see the ugliness, the suffering, the depths to which people can sink. But the events of the cross were more than just a moment of truth for one repentant criminal. The cross was a moment of truth for a world of sinners. There, when Jesus had satisfied all of the demands of God for justice, for sin's punishment, he announced, "It is finished."

And because of that, you can have confidence in every moment of truth in your life. Even at the ultimate moment of truth, when you lie on your deathbed, you have the assurance that when your final day comes, you'll be with Jesus in paradise. Marvel again at the wonderful words of Jesus that we've been looking at all Lent: "I tell you the truth." Those are the English words. Do you know what one word is translated "I tell you the truth"? It's the word amen. In the Passion history we'll hear it as "amen." Isn't that awesome! Jesus' "amen" for you, Jesus' "Yes, this shall be so" is "Today you will be with me in paradise." He left no room for doubt about whether or not that thief would be in heaven. Through his Word, he leaves no room for doubt whether or not you will be in heaven.

We tend to use the word "Amen" to conclude our prayers, to express our confidence that God in his power and grace will hear and answer them. Jesus used this word frequently in a slightly different way. When he wanted to really drive home an important point, when he really wanted everyone's attention and to say, "This is something you can lean on and can rely on," he would start out by saying, "Amen." His amen is what we rely on throughout our lives, And this Amen is one that we can rely on even at the time of our death. Today Jesus makes it clear that when that moment comes, it doesn't matter what we've done in the past. What matters is that our sins have been taken away. What matters is that when our ultimate moment of truth comes, our prayer may be the same as that of the thief on the cross, and Jesus' answer will be, **"Amen. Today you will be with me in paradise."** To that, we too say, "Amen."