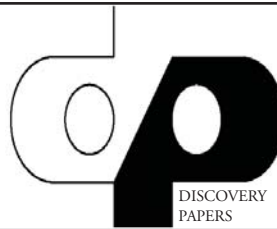


PARADISE THROUGH THE CROSS

SERIES: SEVEN LAST WORDS



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Luke 23:38-43
2nd Message
Paul Taylor
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*When she was just a girl
She expected the world
But it flew away from her reach so
She ran away in her sleep*

*and dreamed of
Para-para-paradise, Para-para-paradise,
Para-para-paradise
Every time she closed her eyes*

*When she was just a girl
She expected the world
But it flew away from her reach
and the bullets catch in her teeth
Life goes on, it gets so heavy
The wheel breaks the butterfly
Every tear a waterfall
In the night the stormy night she'll close her eyes
In the night the stormy night away she'd fly*

*and dreams of
Para-para-paradise
Para-para-paradise
Para-para-paradise¹*

You may have heard this song being played a lot lately. *Coldplay* performed it on *Saturday Night Live*. They played it during one of the New Year's Eve concerts on TV. It was also used for the *Olympics* commercial that played during the *Superbowl*.

It's a powerful song. It tells the story of a girl who is overwhelmed with her world. A world where every tear is a waterfall. To escape that world, she closes her eyes and dreams of paradise. Something better. Something more. Someplace where there are no tears and there is no pain.

I like this song. But even if you don't like this music, I think most people resonate with the idea of paradise whether you believe in it or not. Paradise is a powerful word. Everyone longs for something more. We all live in the midst of stormy nights. There are times when we want to close our eyes and escape to a better place.

This is what we'll be talking about this morning. Paradise. What is paradise? Is it simply a dreamland and nothing more? Is there such a thing as something better?

And if there is, how do we get there? Is there a path open to us?

This is the second week in our preaching series that we began last week for the season of Lent. It's called *Seven Last Words*. For these seven weeks, we'll be looking at the seven statements that Jesus made from the cross as a way of entering more fully into what happened when the Messiah was executed. Our goal during this series is summarized in 1 Corinthians 2:2, "To know Christ and him crucified." My prayer is that by looking in depth at Jesus' words from the cross, God will do something among us and grow a sense of connection with Jesus on the cross.

Today we're looking at what is traditionally called the second word of Jesus on the cross. Last week we looked at the first word, a prayer to the Father for forgiveness on behalf of the people around him. This week he doesn't speak to the Father, he speaks to one of the criminals that are being crucified along with him. It is an amazing, shocking, and hopeful statement. He tells this man who is dying the same death he is, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

To look at this statement, we're going to watch the whole scene unfold in the broader context of what was going on when Jesus said it. We'll start by looking at these two individuals crucified with Jesus and how they interacted with Jesus. Then we'll look at this unique request that one of them makes of Jesus. Finally, we'll consider Jesus' response: the promise of paradise to a criminal on a cross. We'll try to answer these questions of what exactly paradise is and how we might get there.

The setup

So we'll start by reading the background of what was going on.

Luke 23:32-33:

³²Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left.

Luke 23:38-41:

³⁸There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

³⁹One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”

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

This is a scene that we are all familiar with. Jesus Christ hanging on the cross, with two criminals on either side of him. The three crosses on a hill. It is significant that Jesus isn't crucified alone. It's important that there are other people around him.

The Romans used crucifixion primarily for the lower-class: slaves and peasants. These two men were identified as criminals. At least one of them seems to think they deserve what they are getting. They are being publicly humiliated and executed. Not the kind of people you'd want your daughter to bring home.

In the middle of these two guys hangs Jesus, the God who became man. This is the kind of company he keeps. We're always surprised by the kinds of people Jesus hangs out with. During his life, he was constantly criticized for being friends with the wrong kind of people. At his death, it had to be this way, because the prophets had described a picture just like this one.

Isaiah 53:12 says, “He poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors.” That is what is happening here. Jesus, the Messiah and rightful King of Israel is numbered with the transgressors.

It's incredibly important to us to identify with the right group, isn't it? I think if I were Jesus hanging between these two guys, I'd want to make it clear that I'm not really one of them. “I may be on a cross, but I'm not really one of those criminals. I'm just here because I'm the Messiah and all and even though I'm innocent I'm being executed, but it's actually for the sins of the world, not my own sins and well, it's really complicated, but just believe me that I'm not one of them.” Jesus doesn't say that. Not at all. He is numbered with the transgressors and doesn't do a thing to explain that away. That's incredible.

Luke tells us that there are two different responses to Jesus in this situation. One guy starts out by what the

NIV describes as “hurling insults” at him. That's pretty amazing. That a guy who is being tortured to death would find the energy to hurl insults at the guy next to him. Why would he do that?

Probably because when Jesus comes in among those who are guilty, their guilt is exposed. This same thing happens to us. Most of us don't like others to see what we're really like at home in our families or what we do when we're alone. There are parts of our lives and our hearts that we want to hide. And when we can't hide them, we lash out in anger. Being exposed makes us defensive and angry. That's what the first criminal felt. He knew that Jesus was innocent. And Jesus' innocence highlighted his own guilt. So he lashed out.

But the other guy stands up for Jesus. As incredible as it is that one guy would find the energy to insult Jesus, it's just as incredible that the other guy would find the energy to defend him. Why does he defend him? He's being exposed too. His guilt is being shown for what it is also. But he doesn't lash out. He says in two different ways that he accepts this terrible punishment that is being given to him. He calls it just and he says his crimes deserve it. That's amazing. Crucifixion has often been called the most horrible way to kill a man. Today, we would say that no crime deserves such an inhumane method of execution. And yet this guy accepts it.

We have a word for that. It's repentance. The second criminal is humble. He recognizes that he is broken. In the face of the innocence of Jesus, he doesn't lash out in anger. He repents.

What we realize as the story continues is that this second criminal becomes a model for us. We are meant to find ourselves in the story in his place. We are meant to follow his lead. We are meant to repent. This is where we ended last week: an attitude of repentance. This is where we begin this week. A simple word. An almost impossible task: repent.

Remember that repentance isn't always about specific sins. It's not about saying that you're a terrible person. Repentance is an attitude toward God. A recognition that we are broken before God. That our best efforts are, at best, a mix of impure and pure motives. Repentance is about humility before God.

We haven't seen much about paradise yet—in fact it's quite the opposite. It's a terrible scene so far and paradise is the farthest thing from our minds. Jesus hangs on the cross. Two criminals hang beside him. One of those criminals hurls insults. The other shows something we wouldn't expect. He is humble in the face of his circumstances. He

is humble in the face of God. If these are the two ways we might respond when Jesus comes into our mess, how will you respond? Insults or repentance?

The Request

As the story moves on, this second criminal becomes the focus of the story. The first one was just to give us something to compare him to. Now he makes a startling request.

Luke 23:42:

⁴²Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

We’ve heard this before, so it doesn’t sound like that big of a deal. But this request is a huge deal. First of all, this is the only person in all of Scripture to address the Messiah simply by his first name. Other people have used his name, but it’s combined with some title of respect. Blind Bartimaeus called out to him, “Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me” (Luke 18:38, Mark 10:47). Ten lepers ask him, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us” (Luke 17:13). The demons refer to him by name and title (Mark 1:24, 5:7; Luke 4:34, 8:28) when they beg Jesus not to destroy them. In all of these cases, the one addressing Jesus using his name is in desperate circumstances.

And so you have this second criminal, repentant and desperate, crying out to Jesus. He doesn’t use his first name out of disrespect or familiarity. He simply says “Jesus” out of desperation. This is his last chance.

Who was this guy anyway? We don’t exactly know what his crime was. The New Testament uses various words to describe these two men that can be translated “thief,” “criminal,” or sometimes “revolutionary.” Rome frequently used crucifixion as a public form of execution to make a point about their power and discourage anyone from questioning it. So it’s likely that some portion of their crimes had to do with rebelling against Rome.

Why would they rebel against Rome? Because they wanted a better life. They wanted fair treatment. They were angry about taxation without representation. They hated Caesar’s latest health care reform pronouncement. Whatever it was, they were hoping for something better. They wanted a kingdom of justice.

These criminals are probably on the cross for trying to bring in a new kingdom. The second criminal recognizes that it’s not working out so well. So he desperately asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom.

It’s a curious thing to ask a man on a cross. What is he talking about? He’s asking a man who has just been beaten within an inch of his life and is now hanging on a cross as that final inch is taken away about his kingdom. To any reasonable person walking by, this guy doesn’t have any hope of any kind of kingdom. In fact, it’s the kingdom of Rome—the most powerful kingdom the world has ever known—that is currently making sure that he has no kingdom.

Would you have dared to ask Jesus this? Would you have dared to address him by name? Would you have dared to think that there was any way that this request could be answered? It probably sounds a bit audacious. It sounds a bit ridiculous. Here’s an innocent man being executed alongside you. You are a convicted criminal. So you ask him to remember you? How would you have the nerve?

But it’s not nerve. It’s not audacity. It’s something else. We have a word for this too. It’s called “faith.” This criminal, hanging on the cross, has exhausted himself trying to fight for a certain kind of kingdom. So he’s ready for a different approach. He’s ready for faith. He’s ready to ask a guy minutes away from death if he can be part of his entourage. He must really be desperate. So the first example for us is to repent. The second call is to have faith. Repent and believe. Repent about the mess you’ve made and believe that Jesus can get you out of it. Believe.

So what is this guy believing?

Well, he either thinks that someone is going to come and save Jesus off the cross, or he thinks that something is going to happen after Jesus dies on the cross. Given everything we know about this guy: he’s probably Jewish, he’s probably aware of the Messianic claims that Jesus has made, and he’s probably familiar with the idea that the Messiah will bring in some kind of spiritual kingdom. So he’s asking Jesus to welcome him into some kind of heavenly kingdom. He’s asking Jesus to save him a spot at the table in the New Jerusalem.

In short, he believes that Jesus can make things better. He’s come to the obvious conclusion that what got him on the cross isn’t working, so it’s time to try something new. So he puts his faith in Jesus. He believes in a dying Messiah.

That’s faith. A commentator in the 19th century said this, “Some saw Jesus raise the dead, and did not believe. The robber sees Him being put to death, and yet believes.” That’s incredible.

What about us? Do we have that kind of faith? We may not be on a cross, but if we’re honest with ourselves, our efforts to bring in some kind of better life for ourselves

aren't working out as well as we'd hoped. Fighting the Romans isn't getting us anywhere. Maybe it's time we believe. Maybe it's time we live our lives as if we believe; as if we really think that Jesus can lead us somewhere good.

The Answer

Again, we haven't quite gotten to paradise yet. But we're closer. This criminal is asking the right guy, he's just not sure exactly what he's asking for yet. That's OK. We do the same thing. We ask Jesus for what we think we need and he gives us what we really need. This guy asks for a spot in the kingdom. Let's see how Jesus responds.

Luke 23:43:

⁴³Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

This story is all about surprises. First, you have a criminal who takes the time to insult Jesus. Then another criminal who takes the time to defend him. Then that criminal asks him, as he's dying, to save a spot for him in his kingdom. And to top it all off, you have Jesus answering him with this crazy statement: "Today you will be with me in paradise." Wow.

Paradise. Here it is. The criminal asked for a kingdom. He is thinking about power, authority, rule, and living on the top. He's desperate, but he's still after a kingdom. Jesus doesn't really answer his question (he never seems to). He answers a different question. He promises him paradise, not a kingdom.

Just as in our culture, this word for "paradise" was a powerful word in their culture. It was originally a word from the Persian language that referred to an enclosed space. It gradually started to mean "garden," which is how it is mostly used in the Bible. The Greek translation of the Old Testament uses this word to refer to the Garden of Eden. It's used throughout the Old Testament to refer to gardens, but it starts to pick up the sense of paradise that we understand it to mean.

Remember what happened in the Garden of Eden? Adam and Eve lived in paradise. Literally. They rebelled and they were kicked out. Then God did a funny thing.

Listen to Genesis 3:24, "After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life." Life began in paradise, but then paradise became forbidden. God blocked the way back to paradise. He made it so Adam and Eve couldn't just go

back to the way things were. The tree of life, which stood at the center of paradise, was off limits. They couldn't go back the way they came.

Have you ever done something stupid and thought, "If I could only take that back?" As I've gotten older, I've been amazed at the number of decisions in life that are truly irreversible. Things that simply cannot be undone. And yet sometimes we want more than anything to simply make it go away. This is what the young woman who finds herself pregnant wants when she decides to abort her baby. Just go back to the way it was. This is what the unfaithful spouse wants when he covers up his sin. Just pretend it didn't happen and go back to the way it was. This is what we want when we fail to confront a friend or a spouse or a co-worker when the relationship is strained. Just pretend it didn't happen and go back to the way it was.

But you can never go back to the way it was. There is simply no going back. Life doesn't work that way. An abortion doesn't actually make anything go away. It just adds more to the story of pain and regret. Lies about behavior only add to the problem. And ignoring a difficult situation, hoping it will go away, only makes it fester and get worse. You can't cover up a mistake and get back to the way things were.

My wife, Rachel and I went through some very difficult times in our marriage. During those times, I remember having lots of conversations along the lines of her saying, "Why don't you treat me the way you treated me when we were dating?" And I'd ask, "Why don't you act the way you acted when we were dating?" By this time in our marriage, we had several kids and things just weren't the same. We desperately wanted to go back.

But we couldn't go back. Through a lot of counseling and by the mercy of God, we realized that we couldn't go back—we had to go forward. We couldn't just fix it. We had to be honest about where our marriage was and honest about where each of us was personally. Only then, could we see a way forward. It was about getting something back that was lost; it was about finding something new. But that newness lay on the other side of a lot of pain, disappointment, confession, and forgiveness.

This is how God works. He made it possible for Adam and Eve to get back to paradise the way they left it. In fact the whole rest of the Scriptures tell the story of how they can get to the tree of life. But it wasn't the way they came. Their mistake could not be repaired. It had to be redeemed. God had to redeem it. The third time this word for paradise is used is at the end of the story. In the book of Revelation.

In Revelation 2:7, John says this, "To him who

overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” There is a way back to the tree of life, in the paradise of God. You just can’t get back the way you came.

The first criminal doesn’t understand this. He’s tried to make things better by force and manipulation. But that way is blocked. He’s ended up on a cross. That doesn’t make him stop trying though. He keeps at it. Hurling insults at Jesus. He’s trying to get back to paradise the way he came.

But the second criminal finally is trying something new. He’s not trying to get back to the way things were. He’s looking for something new. He’s asking Jesus for help. He has faith. He asks Jesus for a kingdom. So Jesus promises him a garden with a tree of life in the middle of it. He promises him a way back to what everyone in the world most longs for. Para-para-paradise. This is what we were created for.

But the way back to that paradise is not the way we left it. This is the shock of the cross. The way to the tree of life goes through another tree. A tree where a bloody peasant dies. The way to the tree of life is through the tree of death. You can’t go back the way you came. You have to go through Christ and his tree of death.²

What does it mean to get to the tree of life through the tree of death? It means your sin is exposed. It means you can’t hide who you really are. It means you can’t cover up what you did or how you think or what is really going on. In short, the truth comes out. We have to admit our sin. We have to stop being defensive. We have to ask for forgiveness. We have to be redeemed, not repaired.

For most of us, the whole truth is a terrifying thing. If people really knew what I thought or did or wanted to do ... The truth can get a person killed. And it did. But on the other side of that death is life; the tree of life in the paradise of God.

None of this really makes sense. How could death lead to life? How could facing the truth ever lead to freedom? It’s the opposite of how we normally think. No one would make this stuff up. But this is the path that God has prepared. We think we have to repair our mistakes. Make up for them. Fix them. But God doesn’t repair us. He redeems us. This is the gospel that is preached all throughout the New Testament and it’s the gospel that we need to hear again and again. Repent. Believe. And you will be given the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. Receive the promise of paradise.

This is what we long for. It’s what our world longs for. Para-para-paradise. We don’t have to close our eyes and

dream of it. We don’t have to look back on all our missed opportunities. We don’t have to fight and manipulate and force our way into some paradise of our own making. We have to do something much harder. We repent, we believe, and we receive the promise. The promise of paradise.

Are you trying to go back the way you came? Are you trying to repair things in your life? What will it look like for you to stop trying to repair and start letting God redeem? How can you receive this promise in your life?

There’s one more interesting aspect though. One little word that is still a bit confusing. Jesus doesn’t just say that you’ll be with me in paradise. He says, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” What does that mean? It’s a crazy thing to say. The criminal seems to expect some kind of wait. He asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom. He seems to think it might be some time in the future. But Jesus responds and tells him that he won’t have to wait. He’ll be with him in paradise today.

But isn’t time a created thing? What does it mean to tell a dying man that he’ll be with him today? When he dies, doesn’t he leave time? Doesn’t he enter some kind of existence apart from time?

Well this starts to get into the questions that science fiction movies try to answer. There is a whole genre of movies and TV shows that try to figure out what happens when someone travels in time. One of the newest ones is a TV show called *Alcatraz* that toys with this question. The premise is that all of the inmates of Alcatraz suddenly disappear one day in 1963. But now, in present day San Francisco, those inmates are showing up again. So we’re trying to figure out where they went. But they didn’t go somewhere, they went somewhen. But what does it mean to speak of time when you’re moving through it differently?

Well, maybe Jesus means something other than “this very day” when he says “today.” In fact, the author of Hebrews uses it in an interesting way. In Hebrews 4:7, he says, “Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.’” So God talked about “Today” to David in the 11th century BC, the author of Hebrews wrote about it in the 1st century AD, and we’re reading it in the 21st century.

As you read more in Hebrews, it becomes clear that the author is speaking of some kind of final day. He’s talking about Sabbath rest, the seventh day of creation, the final day in God’s plan for the world. That’s the day that all history is moving toward. And in some sense that day is “Today” because we are in the last times of things. We are

almost there. The author of Hebrews taps into an ancient tradition of understanding that we are still waiting for that final day of creation. That the new creation, the new heavens and the new earth will somehow come after that seventh day has passed. Maybe that is what Jesus means by “Today.”

But you can't really let me get away with that fancy theology, can you? For a dying man on a cross, today means today. Today means soon. It's not like this poor man is going to understand all of this. Jesus spoke words of comfort to a man who needed to know that something immediate was going to happen.

And so we see that this answer that Jesus gives operates on two levels. To a desperate dying man, he promises relief that is in some real sense immediate. He tells him that he won't have to wait, that all of this pain is almost over, that paradise will come to him today. So that is one sense that this statement operates on. You might think of this as the street talk understanding. The earthly meaning. The “down here” talk. And it is true on that level. We're not sure exactly what “today” refers to, but there is an obvious sense of immediacy that is meant to comfort and minister to this desperate man.

But there is another level that this statement operates on as well. The sense that “Today” taps into some deep tradition of completion. The day that God's work is final. The day that all history is moving toward. The day when the dead will be raised and the tree of life will flourish in the middle of the New Jerusalem. You might think of this as the theological understanding. The heavenly meaning. The “up there” talk. This statement is true on that level as well. It is true in a way that makes us long to understand.

So to this desperate man on a cross, Jesus speaks to him with a simple message that is immediately comforting and encouraging in its simplicity and infinitely rich in its theological complexity. It is both “down here” as well as “up there.” Today is in some sense “this very day” but it is also the “Today” that the prophets have spoken of for hundreds of years.

We need both of these meanings. We need the “down here” meaning. We live desperate lives. We've tried all the wrong ways to get back to paradise. We're tired. We need to know that as we repent and believe, we are given a promise immediately. Jesus meets us here and now. Things can be different today. It's not easy, but it is simple: repent and

believe and receive the promise of paradise.

But we also need the “up there” meaning. We need to know that Jesus is bigger than our lives and that we are part of a story that began long ago in a garden with a tree and is moving toward a “Today” sometime in the future where that same tree will give us life forever. We need to be invited into the mystery of the cross and the wonder of God's work in the world. We need to receive the promise that Jesus offers this dying man. We need paradise.

Conclusion

“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” Once again, it's a simple statement. One single sentence. But a world of meaning. Jesus speaks to a man who has tried to make things work his own way and given up. He speaks to a man who has repented of his own efforts and believed in a ridiculous Messiah.

And we find ourselves being taught how to respond to Jesus by this man: a criminal on a cross. We can repent. We can believe. The promise of this passage is that when we say what this criminal says, we will hear what this criminal hears. When we stop trying to do things our way and accept the ridiculous and painful way of the cross, Jesus will be there. He will answer us. He will welcome us. He will bring us into the garden of paradise where we can sit under and enjoy the fruit of the tree of life.

We can't go back the way we came. We can't bring about paradise on our own. But the good news is that we don't have to. We just need to close our eyes and wish for something better. There is a promise out there for us to receive. We can't repair our mistakes, but they can be redeemed.

There is a way back to the tree of life. It goes through the tree of death. That's the mystery of this message. Repent. Believe. Receive the promise of paradise.

NOTES

¹COLDPLAY—PARADISE LYRICS <http://www.metrolyrics.com/paradise-lyrics-coldplay.html#ixzz1nc53aRfd>. Copied from MetroLyrics.com

²This idea originated from the book by Richard John Neuhaus, *Death on a Friday Afternoon*. (New York: Basic Books, 2000) 41.