

Luke 23:39-43; Rev. 2:2-7; Today in Paradise I. The Timing II. The Location III. The Occupants

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, when people face trials and hardships, they usually respond in one of two ways. The two thieves on the cross illustrate these 2 common responses to suffering. The first group responds with anger- as their hatred for God grows, they rail and complain- thinking that God owes them a life of ease! So the first group responds by complaining and getting angry. The second group as seen in the other thief responds to suffering with humility. Those in this group acknowledge that they deserve nothing good from God- but rather they cry out for mercy as they petition for this thorn to be removed. Today we come to the second saying of Jesus on the cross in Luke 23. Last week we consider the prayer of Jesus- Father forgive them. This week we consider the promise of Jesus- You will be with me in Paradise! The thief on the cross illustrates what can be called a death-bed conversion- but it takes a cross to bring this thief to this point in his life. What hope do dying sinners have? Richard Baxter said that when he was preaching, he preached as a dying man to dying men! Impending death has a way of sobering us- or as the Psalmist says- teach us to number our days so that we might have a heart of wisdom! This morning we consider this theme: Jesus Christ promises paradise to those who cling to Him in faith! Our text is v. 43.

### **I. The Timing**

In our first point we consider the timing of this promise. Jesus is here on the cross at the end of His life. Being crucified for our sins- being innocent He was unjustly condemned. At this very time- during His suffering- He makes a promise- entrance into paradise will be given to this thief- Today! Today, you will be with me in Paradise. The timing is now! Now Jesus begins to speak in v. 43 with a promise- verily- truly- this is a certainty. Today. Entrance into glory is a promised reality that is soon to be realized. It is not a gift that needs to be waited for- it is a present event- today. Children, I imagine that you do not like to wait for promises to be fulfilled. If your parents promise you something good will happen

tomorrow- it is hard to sleep- right! You can't wait! Well, this thief did not need to wait at all! Now this is very instructive- and we need to see what Jesus is promising here. After death, both Jesus and this thief will be reunited- that very day. When Jesus dies in a few short hours, He will commit His soul into the hands of His Father in heaven as we will read on Good Friday. After death, Jesus will not go down into hell- He will not descent into Hades by way of His Spirit going into the place of punishment and death. To be clear, when we confess that Jesus descended into hell in the AC, this phrase is a summary statement that covers His entire suffering! And that especially at the end of Jesus life- as He suffered on the cross- He was suffering hellish agony in His body and also in His soul. But that suffering would end as soon as Jesus dies- His soul will go up to the Father that very day! Jesus spent the three days- from death until His resurrection- not in hell but in paradise! This truth also applies to the thief! When the thief dies this very day, he will go to paradise. The thief will not go to hell because he has been forgiven as Jesus had prayed for last week. But neither will the thief go to purgatory as the RCC teaches- the thief is not going to a place of refinement, purging and testing. Nor is the thief going no where! The thief is not going to sleep in his soul- he is not going to cease to exist. But rather, this thief is going to paradise that very day! Now this truth is very comforting, those who die in the Lord go to be with the Lord in glory immediately after death. Their souls are caught up to glory- taken to father Abraham by the angels as Luke 16 teaches. This is focus of I Thes. 4 as well. Those who die in the Lord will be with the Lord until they are brought back to earth and are given their resurrected bodies. So the point is clear- those who live by faith die in their bodies- their bodies sleep in the grave- but their souls do not die- but rather they continue to live and go directly to be with Jesus in glory! Today- at the very time of death- they are brought up to be with Him.

## **II. The Location**

But where will they be? What location or residence will those who die in the Lord find themselves dwelling in the Spirit? Well, as Jesus said- Today you will be with me in Paradise! The promised

destination is glory! Now paradise is a word that we are familiar with- right? The word in the Greek is "Paradisos"- and it was borrowed from a Persian word for garden-like paradise. In fact, the Septuagint reading of Genesis 13:10 compared the Jordan River valley to a garden paradise- like the garden or paradise of God. The Garden of Eden would be our closest picture to what Paradise is in the OT. The Persians pictured this paradise as a walled enclosure filled with all forms of trees and well watered. It was a shady retreat that even had various animals within it- a place of great pleasure and refreshment. We would say that paradise is a garden of delight filled with every good thing- a place of great joy and refreshment. Now when we think of paradise you may think of some tropical island- where you have sights, sound and flavors that bring great joy! This image is not too far off. But the problem with paradise for us is that we can only visit on vacation- we always have to go back home- right! Well, this thief was being invited- promised- that he would have a place in the paradise of God after death! Now this word- paradise- is found in 2 other places in the NT. The first is found in II Cor. 12:3- that is where Paul was caught up to the 3<sup>rd</sup> heaven- or caught up into paradise. Here in paradise- Paul heard things and saw things that he could not describe and could not repeat! Paul was given a glimpse of the heavenly glory that awaits God's people after death- it was so wonderful that words could not capture what he saw and heard! The second place we find this word found is in Rev. 2:7 as we read earlier. To him who overcomes, I will give to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God. So this paradise is where the tree of life is found- where we will live forever. So to summarize this point, the paradise that Jesus is promising- that this thief will enter into- is what we would call heaven. The place where the souls of God's people go after death- this is the intermediate state- it is a temporary residence that will only become permanent when the new heaven and the new earth are made. This is the heavenly Jerusalem that will come down to earth- the place where God dwell with His people! That is the blessed residence that this thief is promised!

### III. The Occupants

Now then- who is that will be in this garden paradise? Who will be the occupants- or the residents in this place? Today- Jesus said- You will be with Me! We will be together in this paradise! So Jesus will be there! Here is Jesus- still on the cross- still suffering- and He is promising blessings to a thief! What a glorious Savoir! And it is this promised place of glory that Jesus truly deserves to be! If anyone deserved to hear- well done, my good and faithful son- it would be Jesus! He was enduring the cross- suffering the shame- and now His would be the joy that had been promised Him! His shame and humiliation were over- now was His exaltation! So Jesus rightly would be welcomed into the paradise of God- because of His perfect obedience and faithfulness. But the surprising thing to note is this- that Jesus said to the thief- You will be with Me! The fellow cross bearer- the one that deserved the cross- He too would be in paradise! There will be a communion- you with Me- He with Him- together Jesus and the thief! Now remember that back in v. 42 this thief had asked to be remembered. That the thief would not be forgotten in the grave. But what Jesus promises is so much better- not just to be remembered- but to be exalted- to enter glory along with Jesus! Now this thief has undergone a dramatic change over the past few hours. At first this thief derided and ridiculed Jesus along with the other- but as v. 40 reads- his heart had been changed. We learn something about thief- about how he viewed himself. He saw himself as he was, a guilty sinner. One who deserved to be on this cross- one who deserved to be punished and put to death. He also knew where he was headed- had a real sense of coming judgement. Don't you fear God- he said- God will enter into judgement with us- and we deserve condemnation! So this thief saw himself as a guilty sinner that deserved destruction- to be condemned by God for his sins. That is how he saw himself! And what did He know about Jesus- what had he learned about this fellow crucified man at His side? Well, this thief knew that Jesus was innocent. This man has done nothing wrong he said in v. 41. He also knew that this man was a king- as the sign above Jesus read- Here is the King of the Jews. This thief came to see the truth of that sign- He was a King!

Remember me when you come into your Kingdom! He identifies Jesus as the innocent King- but more than that! In asking Jesus to remember him, this thief must have had some hope for the future! In seeing his impending death, this thief asks Jesus for help! There is a faith- a hope- a trust in Jesus to save! So this thief knew himself to be a guilty sinner- and he knew that Jesus was the innocent King who could help- who could save Him from the wrath he deserved! So in these few verses- in these last hours of his death- this thief confesses his sin, acknowledges his guilt, rightly identifies Jesus and professes faith in His name- asking Jesus for aid! And to this man with childlike faith Jesus responds- today you will be with Me in Paradise! The careless, guilty sinner is granted entrance into glory! A condemned man is saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ! He is promised peace, forgiveness and grace- not only to be remembered- but to be welcomed into the paradise of God! The thief on the cross receives citizenship in the Kingdom above- graciously pardoned and lovingly welcomed! This man will go directly from the cross to the paradise above! Although he does not have a lot of time for service, this man knew his sin and he embraces his savior!

To conclude, the conversion of the thief on the cross is a beautiful picture of undeserved grace! Jesus Christ promises paradise to those who cling to Him in faith! This promise stands today! The joys that Jesus purchased will be shared with those who call on His name! Whoever asks receives- and whoever seeks, finds! For those who know their sins and embrace the Savior- these too will be welcomed into the Kingdom and garden above! Father- forgive them! And this thief receives forgiveness! To this man Jesus promises- today you will be with Me in Paradise!