

"God's Gift of Paradise!"—Luke 23:39-43

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, "God's Gift of Paradise!", is Luke 23:39-43 → *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."*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

I've been told that "there are no atheists in a foxhole." The reference is to a soldier who is serving on the front lines of battle where the fighting is fierce. The foxhole refers to a pit or small hole which the soldier digs in the ground in an effort to protect himself from the enemy. In the crossfire of bullets and artillery one comes face to face with one's mortality. Death is a very present reality at any moment. Thus, the thought is that a soldier has no one else upon whom to depend in the face of potential imminent death except God. The idea that "there are no

atheists in a foxhole” is applied to many situations where your context makes you face your mortality, implying that you have no other choice but to admit there is a God and even trust in Him.

I suppose there could be some truth in this cliché. It seems to have displayed itself in the context of Jesus’ crucifixion as He was hanging on the cross between two *criminals, one on His right and one on His left* (cf. Luke 23:33). The primary purpose for Jesus being crucified between these criminals was to fulfill God’s prophecy from Isaiah 53:12 where Isaiah prophesied: *He poured out His soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.* As Jesus fulfilled God’s plan of salvation in accordance to His written Word, Luke gives us a record of some of the interaction which took place between Jesus and these two men, an interaction which placed before them the gift of Paradise in the midst of imminent death within hours.

Verse 39 of our text records Jesus being reviled by one of the thieves (cf. Matthew 27:44) on the cross who join in on the mockery of most of those present at the crucifixion. He *railed at Jesus, saying, “Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!”* Interestingly, it sounds as if this man may be recognizing Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah and Redeemer of God’s people promised in the Old Testament Scriptures. However, it is not spoken to Jesus in faith but rather in ridicule and arrogance. The text

says He *railed at* Jesus. Literally, the Greek reads “he blasphemed” Jesus.

Blasphemy is a term which is usually used in connection with God in one of two ways: ① when you strike out with extreme slander or cursing of God (i.e. evidence of hard-hearted rejection and unbelief), or ② when you attribute to yourself characteristics or attributes which rightly belong to God alone. Ironically, the people falsely crucified Jesus under an accusation of blasphemy (cf. Matthew 25:65-66) and then they themselves blasphemed by their ridicule of Him while on the cross (cf. Luke 23:35-37).

However, Jesus had told them throughout His earthly ministry that He did not come to save Himself. The whole reason God’s Son became incarnate was *to seek and to save the lost* (cf. Luke 19:10), that is, those lost in their sin who had lost paradise. While Jesus was doing exactly what this robber challenged Him to do with his second statement (i.e. saving him from spiritual death in hell), this criminal seems to reflect the notion that he **deserved** to be saved from his imminent death for some reason. This criminal’s attitude is expounded today by so many who look to God in arrogance, demanding that He save them, coming to their rescue in some fashion. Or it is reflected in the belief of so many that they deserve paradise because of what they’ve gone through here on earth, whether it’s their suffering or their wonderful character and good works. They fail to recognize that paradise cannot be grasped but can

only be given. It is a gift of grace.

Luke also records the words of the other thief crucified with Jesus. In verses 40-41 of our text we hear him rebuking his fellow thief 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.* He begins by challenging the man's statements and his lack of faith: *Do you not **fear God**?* Fearing God is how the Old Testament describes faith and trust in the LORD (cf. Proverbs 3:5; 9:10) with the idea of respect for Him. In effect, this criminal rebuked his fellow thief for his lack of true faith.

We receive the impression that this thief saw Jesus as the Christ because of his fear and faith in God. He hung convicted of his sins, accepting responsibility for them and confessing that he was *receiving the due reward of his deeds*. Such faith is a gift of God (cf. Ephesians 2:8-9) by which the Holy Spirit enabled this criminal to confess, *this Man has done nothing wrong*. How did he know Jesus had done nothing wrong? The Holy Spirit must have given Him faith in Jesus as the Messiah Who was to redeem people from their sinful arrogance, pride, rebellion and self-righteous sins, including his own.

Willing to accept the consequences of death for his deeds, this criminal made a simple humble request: *Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom*. Again, the Holy Spirit gave him a different

picture of the Christ's kingdom. It is far more than some political reign over people who are lost in their sins, striving for power over others. It is an eternal kingdom *which is in the paradise of God* (cf. Revelation 2:7). It is described in Scripture as *new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells* (cf. 2 Peter 3:13), where God *will wipe away every tear from your eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore* (cf. Revelation 21:4), and you will be granted to *freely eat of the tree of life* (cf. Revelation 2:7). Jesus' kingdom is Paradise restored!

Jesus promised this man more than he expected. Jesus would not just *remember* him in paradise but join him in paradise at the time of their deaths that very day! Jesus *said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be **with Me** in Paradise."* (verse 43) This man received the assurance of the certainty of His salvation in his present situation. Jesus says in John 5:24 → *Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears My word and believes Him Who sent Me **has** eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but **has passed from death to life**.* The certainty that eternal life (i.e. *Paradise*) is yours **today** is your certainty through faith in Jesus as your Savior from sin, sent from God for you in accordance with His Word. In essence, Jesus stated that this thief had already *passed from spiritual death in sin to life eternal **with Jesus!***

Faith in God and the gift of *Paradise* is not something which

automatically comes with being in a foxhole. Even if the thief who was blaspheming Jesus would have possibly repented of his blasphemy and placed his faith in Him, it would have been on the basis of the Holy Spirit working that repentance and faith in Christ through the other thief's rebuke (i.e. proclamation of the law on sin) and Jesus' Word of promise (i.e. proclamation of the Gospel and forgiveness). The gift of *Paradise* was acquired for you by Christ's life, death and resurrection and is received by humbly recognizing your sin and your need for the accomplished work of Jesus **for you**. This gift extends to all of us sinners, whose sins are personified in those who blasphemed Jesus while killing Him. Yes, all of us are a part of that despicable crowd. None of us in self-righteousness could ever say we would never have acted in such a manner. In such humility we recognize that *Paradise* with Jesus is pure gift, based upon His humiliation and exultation, so that we can live eternally **with Him** in *Paradise* restored. Amen.

The wages of sin is death,

but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Romans 6:23)

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