

From the Cross to Paradise

Sermon April 2, 2021

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." Luke 23:39-43

This scene is surprising to us in many ways. Indeed, is it possible that a criminal, a robber, a murderer, who was sentenced to death and was executed, could immediately enter into Paradise? Is this possible that a criminal, who himself admitted all his horrible actions, can go from the cross to Paradise without doing anything?

The power of Jesus' cross and His death can enable anybody to live in His eternal glory. Colossians 1:19-22 says: *"For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him."*

This criminal was alienated from God during his entire life, but a few minutes before he died, Jesus helped him appear before God as a holy, immaculate, and sinless person. This was possible only because he asked Jesus to remember him in God's glory. This person came to the point when he had trust in Jesus and His salvation. He realized that Jesus shed His blood on the cross for him as well, and by His amazing grace, Jesus reconciled him with God. This criminal, just minutes before he died, got a final chance to enter into Heaven. He offered his whole being into Jesus's grace and mercy.

For this Jesus said in a very personal way to him: "Today you will be with me in Paradise".

From this sentence, we are faced with five special pieces of good news on GOOD FRIDAY that we all should be thankful for.

1. The first is that there is Paradise.

God excluded Adam and Eve from Paradise because they rebelled against Him. This Paradise, known as Heaven, is the place where we will live in closeness with God. Nothing will separate us from Him and from those who are saved and will be there with us.

Before Jesus died, He said to his disciples that He will prepare a place for them and one day they will be in His glory with Him forever. So, there is Paradise.

2. The second good news is: We can only enter into Paradise with Jesus.

You and I, we all are sinners. This is not a happy news, but it is true. You don't like to hear this, and I don't like to hear this either, but you are a sinner, and I am too. We cannot use our good actions as tickets to paradise. We can enter there **only with Jesus**, together with Jesus.

In the Gospel of John, we read *“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.”* 1 John 3:1-2

3. The third good news is: We can access Heaven only because of the death of Jesus.

Only, because Jesus died for us. When our Saviour pronounced His last words on the cross: “IT IS DONE”, people experienced a total solar eclipse and earthquakes.

In Luke 23:44-45a, we read that: *“It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed.”* God showed us that cosmic signs accompany the cosmic significance of this event.

The other sign was that, in the temple of Jerusalem, the curtain of the temple was split from the top to the bottom. What God did through this was symbolic. In the temple, behind the altar, there was a separate room, called the Holy of Holies. Here, they kept a few things which reminded them about God, and they believed that place was God's place where He dwelled. Only the high priest was allowed to enter into this room once a year, when the high priest presented to God the blood of an innocent lamb for forgiveness on behalf of the people of Israel. The entrance of this room was covered with a thick curtain and did not allow anybody to see what was in that room. On that moment when

Jesus Christ died on the cross, this curtain was split by God from the top to the bottom. Now, because the blood of Christ was shed for us, people had an opportunity to come closer to God, because Jesus as the High Priest presented His sacrifice on the cross as the Lamb of God. Because Jesus died for you, now you have an opportunity and right to enter into heaven.

“For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified”.
Hebrews 10:14

After Christ Jesus died on the cross, and presented His offering, as the Lamb of God for you and for me, we have the opportunity and the right to enter into Heaven, but only through the dead body of Christ.

If someone would ask us if anybody can so easily enter into Heaven, please correct them and say to them that, on the contrary, Jesus Christ had to pay **a very high price** in order to help us to enter into heaven. Jesus Christ sacrificed His pure and sacred life for you and for me.

4. The fourth good news is that everybody has a chance, while they are alive, to return to God if they believe in Him.

This criminal did nothing to deserve the grace of God. He had absolutely no possibility to do anything to fix up his past with any religious performance. But Jesus did not expect anything like that from him. We cannot enter into heaven just because we think we have done good deeds. We can enter ONLY because Jesus died for us.

But this criminal still DID SOMETHING – quite a few things, and this is why Jesus offered him His mercy and glory.

- A. He pleaded guilty, he mentioned that He could see in Jesus a King, he heard Jesus praying, he confessed his faith in Jesus, and asked Jesus for mercy. He did not mention that some days he was a good guy, that he did good things sometimes in the past. He did not come up with his merits. He knew that would be nonsense.
- B. He said that he deserved his punishment. Then asked Jesus: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”. He was confident that Jesus was a King and He can help him in eternity.

I am asking you kindly but very seriously: Can you say the same things now to Jesus: Jesus, I deserve all the punishment because I am a sinner, and I don't deserve anything good from you because of my temper, my weak and sinful personality, and my hidden sins, but please remember me when you come into your kingdom.

I know that many of you have a problem with this. But I have to tell you, you will be able to enter into the Glory of God ONLY if you will confess this from the bottom of your heart.

This criminal was fighting with life and death on the cross. He had a hard time to breath and a very difficult time to speak but, with his remaining energy, he asked Jesus to remember him and he asked for grace, for free grace.

5. Jesus said to him, TODAY, you will be with me in MY GLORY. This is the fifth good news.

The good news is that immediately we can receive free grace. Immediately after we turn to Jesus, after we confess our sins, after we put our hearts in His hands. Jesus says: "Not then, but today".

We also know from Scripture that our final destiny will be decided at the moment we die. At the moment of death will be determined whether someone is going to paradise or hell: to paradise with Jesus, or to hell without Jesus. After we die, we won't have any opportunity to change and nothing will be changed. This is the teaching of the Bible.

Let me quote to you the Biblical teaching based on the second Helvetic Confession: "For we believe that the faithful, after bodily death, go directly to Christ, and, therefore, do not need the eulogies and prayers of the living for the dead and their services. Likewise we believe that unbelievers are immediately cast into hell from which no exit is opened for the wicked by any services of the living." Chapter 26

God gave us this earthly life and we can ask here and now for salvation. Jesus with the price of His death opened for us the gates of Paradise.

Let us reach out for Jesus' hands and say to Him right now: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Amen