

Paradise Lost . . . and Found! (Part 1)

Introduction

The Text

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴² And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³ And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:39–43)

Longing and Looking for Paradise

- A. Paradise. It’s a word that tries to get at the deepest longings of the human soul. We all want it. We’re all looking for it. Though we might all define it a bit differently.
1. And I wanted us all to pause and consider even here at the outset of this sermon, what is it for you? How would you define paradise?
 - a. It may be a three-day weekend.
 - b. A margarita by the beach.
 - c. A cabin in the mountains.
 - d. Movie night with the family.
 - e. Money in the bank.
 - f. A perfect bill of health.
 - i. What does paradise mean to you? What would it look like? Where would it be? What would you be doing? Who would you be with?
- B. Now, keep your reflections tucked away, we’ll return to this in a little bit, but let’s carry on . . .
1. The text we have before us, you may have noticed, is ultimately about paradise. That’s why I titled this sermon the way that I did: “Paradise Lost . . . and Found!” And this is Part 1 of what I anticipate will be two sermons on these verses.
 - a. This first part will focus in a bit more on the what of this paradise—what is it? And for this we shall fasten in specifically on the words of Jesus there in [v. 43](#) and we’re just going to take them up in our hands like a wet towel and wring them dry of every truth and implication.
 - b. Then next week for Part 2 we shall deal a bit more with the how of it—how do we get in on this paradise that Jesus has to offer? And for this we’ll fasten in on the words of the second criminal in particular there in [vv. 40-42](#). We’ll consider what repentance and faith really entail as modeled for us wonderfully by this man.

- C. It may be a bit backwards, I admit, but it's the way that made sense to me. So for this morning then, I know you're dying for me to share with you my outline. Well, take out a pen, are you ready? I've got six points: (1) Truly; (2) I Say to You; (3) Today; (4) You Will Be; (5) With Me; (6) In Paradise. There it is. Let's go!

(1) Truly

Breaking the Silence

- A. Before I really get to this first word in Jesus' statement here, it's worth noting that Jesus, for quite a while now, he's not had all that much to say to anybody. Since his arrest, he's largely gone silent.
1. You remember just a few hours earlier, the Jewish leaders are falsely accusing, Pilate is questioning, Herod is mocking, and he hardly opens his mouth to say anything. He's quiet. Like a lamb led to the slaughter.
 2. And so it has been to this point while hanging from the cross as well. As we saw last week, the rulers are scoffing, the soldiers are mocking, the other criminal there is railing on him or blaspheming him—"Are you the Christ? Are you the King? Are you Savior? Couldn't be!"—but he said not a word to them. He made no defense, he offered no further explanation, he gave no reply.
 - a. But, when this other criminal, now a genuine seeker, speaks to Jesus from a heart of repentance and faith, there is so much our Savior has to say. He doesn't hesitate in the slightest. He responds at once.
- B. Now, I tell you, there is something significant in this for us.
1. If, like the first set of men, we have closed our hearts and minds to God, he will eventually close his mouth to us.
 2. But if, like this lowly criminal, we open ourselves to him, we genuinely want to know him, well he will open himself more and more to us!

A Trustworthy Guide

- A. Well, this criminal is genuinely seeking and so Jesus, though near death himself, readily responds. And what he has to say is remarkable . . .
1. He begins his response there in v. 43 with the word "Truly . . ."—in the Greek: *amēn*, where, obviously, we get our word "amen" from.
- B. And here's what I want to bring out on this point. Jesus is saying: "I can be trusted in this." In other words: he is our trustworthy guide to paradise.
1. There are a lot of false guides, ready to lead you down this or that rabbit trail and dead end, but only Jesus can truly get us there.

- C. I remember I once went on a cruise with my extended family a while back. And when we would come into the various ports and get off the boat, there were always this massive crowd of tour guides waiting for us, always promising the best experience of the place for the best price.
1. And you never knew who you could trust, who would actually show you the city as it really is or who would spin you and just try to get the tourists' dollar.
- D. And that's what life is like here in this fallen world, right? We want paradise, as I've said. We're longing for it, we're looking for it, but we get all mixed up in our search. We think we're on our way but then we never quite get there.
1. I was talking with my neighbors the other day—we had them over for a barbecue because they're moving from the area—and the wife was saying how her career was just taking off and she was getting the position the salary she always thought she wanted, paradise, right? But it felt off. It wasn't what she thought it would be. She's left to look for another guide.
 - a. She's not a Christian, and she's not interested in following Jesus, at this point at least, so the family thought okay, maybe we need a move. Maybe we can't find paradise in San Jose, maybe it's up north where it's a little cheaper and slower.
 - i. We just found a different guide, who we think might be able to get us there, right? But we never really do. There's always something that's off.
 2. I thought of that song “*Ironic*” by Alanis Morissette. Now don't judge me but her album was actually the first CD I ever owned. I had tapes before that but that was my first CD. I wish it was something cooler, but nope. And the song is just about how I thought I had paradise but then it just escaped my grasp, something went wrong. Let me just read you a few lines:
 - a. “An old man turned 98 / He won the lottery and died the next day.”
 - i. I'm rich! I've got it. Paradise. And then I'm dead. And I don't even get to spend a penny of it.
 - b. “It's a black fly in your Chardonnay.”
 - i. I've waited all day to come home, kick off my shoes, and get that glass of wine, this is paradise, but when you go to sip, there's a bug in there and you spit it out all over the couch. This was supposed to be the best part of your day and now you're even more frustrated.
 - c. “It's like rain on your wedding day.”
 - i. You've been dreaming of this day since you were a little girl and it's finally arrived. Paradise, right?! Isn't that what the movies say. We ride off together into the sunset. Nope. We take shelter from the rain under umbrellas and awnings. My wedding dress is ruined, no pictures, the band

couldn't play, people didn't show up.

d. Or she's got this line at the end: "It's meeting the man of my dreams / And then meeting his beautiful wife."

i. Paradise . . . lost!

3. You remember those wildfires that ripped through Paradise, CA a couple years back now. How tragic, how ironic, how telling.

a. There's something profound in that, something that speaks eloquently of this point. I don't mean any disrespect to the terrible loss people experienced there. But it is a reminder, isn't it? All our attempts to find paradise in life outside of Jesus end in a heap of ash.

E. So Jesus comes and says: "Truly . . ." "I'm not like the other tour guides looking to fleece the tourists and take them for all they've got. I'll lead you there. I can be trusted."

F. Some of you have been trying so hard to fix your life, to get things in order, get everything right. If I just get the right doctor, if I just get the right house, if I just get the right spouse, I'll get paradise.

1. Listen to me: It won't work. It's not there.

a. Let me encourage you to lean in and hear Jesus out on this as we keep going . . .

(2) I Say to You

The Words of God

A. Now, what I wanted to bring out here was simply the authority the Son is wielding here. He is the executor of the Father's will, so to speak. What he says goes.

1. I thought of how the book of Hebrews opens at this point: "¹Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world" (Heb. 1:1-2).

a. The Son supersedes every previous prophet, surpassing them in both status and authority. And it is his prerogative now above any other to speak the words of God to us.

i. As John the Baptist testifies of Jesus: "[H]e whom God has sent utters the words of God" (John 3:34).

B. And as he's hanging there, next to this penitent criminal, he turns and he speaks with unmistakable authority. "Truly, I say to you . . ."

“The Man on the Middle Cross Said I Can Come!”

- A. I saw something recently from Alistair Begg where he’s reflecting a bit on this scene, and there’s this wonderful little bit where he imagines the moment this criminal comes to enter into paradise, into heaven, as it were.
1. And he considers how little the man probably knew about what was happening. He had just moments before been cussing out the Savior, he turned and said with an honest and broken heart: “Remember me . . .”—and then suddenly here he is.
 2. And there may be questions. Begg at this point, a bit tongue in cheek, imagines an angel there guarding the way in and asking: “Why should you be let in?” To which this criminal responds: “I don’t really know.” “How did you get here?” “I don’t really know.” “Well, are you clear on the doctrine of justification by faith?” “Never heard of it.” “What about the doctrine of Scripture and inerrancy.” “Nope.” The guy wasn’t baptized, catechized, a member of a church, nothing.
 3. So well then, the angel finally says with more force, a bit frustrated now: “On what basis are you here?” To which this thief can only say: “The man on the middle cross said I can come!” And that’s it. “Truly, I say to you . . .” “He said it. That’s all I’ve got.” And that’s all you need.
- B. Oh I love that! That’s the kind of authority our Savior has. That’s the sway his word holds in heaven. This is the source of our hope. It’s not in me. It’s in him and his word: “The man on the middle cross said I can come!”
1. We can stake everything on that. Are you?

(3) Today

- A. But Jesus goes on: “Truly, I say to you, today . . .”
- B. Now, this single word is so powerful, when you really pause and consider it. You see, this man, as far as we know, was certainly no upstanding individual to this point.
1. As has been said, he was a criminal of some sort, an evildoer—perhaps a bandit, a thief, or an insurrectionist. And we know that he was reviling Jesus along with the others just moments before this (cf. [Matt. 27:44](#)). I mean, by all accounts, it seems he was a son of the devil up to the very last minute.
 - a. And then something shifts. There was something about the way Jesus was handling the suffering and the shame—perhaps witnessing the way he was praying even for the forgiveness of his enemies ([Luke 23:34](#))—well the Spirit opens his eyes and his heart, and he wants in, he wants whatever Jesus has to offer.
- C. Now, if I am Jesus at this point (and it’s a very good thing I’m not), I would make this man sweat a bit, right?

1. I might hesitate at first to respond. I'm still a little hot under the collar from the names you were just calling me, man.
 2. And beyond this, there's no way I'm extending kindness just right out of the gate. I'm not sure I can trust you. You're going to have to work to get back on my good side. I'm going to need to see a few months of consistent good behavior before I'm letting you back in. You're going to have to rebuild what you've broken.
 - a. In other words, I would say to this guy something like: "Maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, next month, next year, you can be cool with me. Maybe then I can remember you for good. Right now, I just want to forget you bro. Give me some space."
- D. But Jesus doesn't talk about sometime tomorrow, or next week, next month, or next year. No! He looks over at this man who had just been railing on him and says: *"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."*
1. Not "Today you're going to purgatory where you can pay me back for what you've done."
 2. Not "Today you're going to limbo where I can decide what I'm going to do with you."
 3. But *"[T]oday you will be with me in paradise."* "We're all good, right now!"
- E. There is perhaps no statement more illustrative of the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone than this.
1. What past good works did this man have to commend himself? It would appear, none. He was a criminal.
 2. What future good works could he do to make up for this? None, he was going to die in a few moments.
 - a. And yet how does Jesus respond? "Today, paradise is yours!"
 - i. Why? How? Because your salvation isn't tied to you and your good works but to Christ and his!
- F. Gone, then, is the notion that God would save us to get something from us. This man has nothing to give and no prospect of that ever changing. No! God saves us not to get but to give. That's grace!
2. You tell me, how did the Father respond to the prodigal son when he came walking home, head hung in shame?
 - a. It wasn't work to get your place back. That's what the son expected. "Make me a servant, I shouldn't be your son."
 - b. But the father doesn't there. "Today! Let's put the ring on, let's kill the fatted calf, let's throw the party."
- G. What about us?

1. Some of us have been standing on the outside because we think we're not worthy. Christianity feels like some unreachable thing, for the clean and the respectable, but not for you.
 - a. But you're never going to be worthy. No one is . . . save Christ! That's what this criminal teaches us.
 2. Some of us have come in but we're still trying to pay God back for all the mistakes we've made. We're trying to make it right. And so Christianity feels more like a burden and a chore than a joy.
 - a. But you can't make up for you sin. You can only accept Jesus' atonement of it at the cross. It's finished. That's what this criminal teaches us.
- H. We've got to take this into our souls. Hear Jesus say not just to this criminal but to you: *"Today! We're good. Not because of what you've done, but because of what I've done."* And let your wave-torn ship finally find rest in that harbor. You're safe. You're loved. You're right with God. Today!

(4) You Will Be

- A. But Jesus goes on: *"Truly, I say to you, today you will be . . ."*
- B. Here's what I think is so amazing about this: Jesus is talking about what's coming for this man ultimately after his death here in a few minutes.
1. Think about that. Today, even though you will be dead . . . *"you will be."* Life goes on, the soul goes on, and you will not just be, you will be with me in paradise.
- C. Part of why we go so wrong in our pursuit of paradise is we forget to factor in eternity. We act like this life is all there is, like we have to find it all here and now. That's a big reason for our frustration.
1. So we win the lottery and die the next day.
 2. Or like that parable Jesus tells, we fill up our barns and amass all the world's goods and think now we're set, and then that very night our soul is required of us ([Luke 12:16-21](#)).
 3. We gain the whole world and lose our souls ([Matt. 16:26](#)). Because we forget eternity and the kingdom of heaven. We live like we should be able to find the fullness of paradise here and now . . . and we can't.
- D. So this is big. Jesus doesn't save this man from death, but he saves him through it.
1. The other thief is bent on getting his circumstances fixed: *"Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"* (v. 39).
 2. But not this one. He just says: *"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom"* (v. 42). *"Remember me in the age to come. I don't care if you get me down off this cross now. I want things to be right between you and I with a view to eternity."*

- E. And this really leads to the next little bit. You see it's not just that we get our timeline or perspective off so far as paradise is concerned, it's also that we get our definition off as well . . .

(5) With Me

- A. So Jesus says: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be . . . with me . . . in paradise."

1. Interestingly, in the Greek rendering of this sentence, it's this "with me" that is accented, put at the front. It would literally read: "Truly, to you I say, today with me you will be in paradise"—emphasis on "with me." Oh there's so much in this.

- B. But it brings us back to that original question I asked: How would you define paradise? What is it to you?

1. A white-sandy beach? A small mountain town? Vacation? Retirement? Good food? Good music? Good company?
2. Well Jesus gives away the answer here. Paradise, before it is anything else, is a person—and we're not talking about your boyfriend or your girlfriend, but your God. Paradise is a person, and his name is Jesus. "Today, you will be with me . . ."

- C. You say, "Well that sounds kind of boring. A relationship with Jesus? Personally, I'd rather take a relationship with my boyfriend."

1. Yeah, but hold on. I think we miss who Jesus is. Everything we'd ever hope to get from someone else or something else, we find in him in a fuller and lasting sense.
 - a. So with the boyfriend, you want to be known as you truly are, you want to be loved in spite of your flaws, you want to be cherished and protected and swept off your feet and all of this.
 - i. Well, that is the gospel you realize. And your boyfriend is going to let you down on that. The younger among us maybe still have hope, but the older know, we're all sinners and we hurt each other. But not Jesus.

- D. You say, "Ah, I'd take the beach or the mountains or something like this."

1. But again you forget, Jesus is the one who made all of that. That beauty and majesty it's not separate from him, it's connected to him, it flows out from him, it's an expression of who he is.
 - a. His invisible attributes can be perceived "in the things that have been made" (Rom. 1:20).
 - b. "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Psa. 19:1)!
 - i. So whatever you love about the beach or the mountains, he is the fountainhead of that beauty and shalom and goodness.

- E. This is why when the book of Revelation is describing heaven it talks about how all of this wonderful stuff, the street of gold and glass, the rivers of living water, the fruit from the tree of life, it's all coming out from ["the throne of God and of the Lamb"](#) (Rev. 22:1).
1. It's all connected to the person. If the person isn't there, the love, the beauty, the life isn't there. Paradise isn't there.
- F. I still remember, in the first sermon I ever preached one of my big points was heaven without Jesus is like a wedding without the bridegroom. You know that the end of the ages is described as a wedding right—the marriage between Christ and his bride the church. And I just thought, we get the analogy of this.
1. So many people would think of heaven or paradise as just fine maybe even better if Jesus isn't there. It's reunion with my loved ones. Health and wealth. That sort of thing.
 2. But think about it. If you go to a wedding and the bride is there, looking wonderful, but the groom never shows up, you're looking at your watch, the officiant's nervously trying to stall, and he doesn't come. Listen, that's not just awkward. That's tragic. That's devastating. It would go from being the best day of the bride's life to the worst in an instant, because the bridegroom isn't there, he didn't show up.
 - a. You don't stick around and eat the cake and sing the songs and dance the night away if the bridegroom isn't there. You go home and you weep!
 - i. Heaven would not be heaven if Jesus is not there. That's actually a fitting definition of hell (cf. [2 Thess. 1:9](#)). Paradise, brothers and sisters, before it is anything else, is first and foremost a person.
- G. And don't misunderstand me, though there is a sense in which the fullness of this paradise with Christ is off yet in the future, there is another very real sense in which it has also begun and is accessible to us even now.
1. So Jesus says to his disciples before he ascends: [" ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age"](#) (Matt. 28:19–20). Now and forever!
 - a. So through the Holy Spirit he is with us now, we have rivers of living water flowing to us and through us now, we have access to paradise in the person of Jesus now.

(6) In Paradise

- A. Now we come to that last little bit: ["Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."](#) And I've got just one point I want to make here.

- B. Paradise, in the Greek it's **paradeisos**, and I wonder if you know where else this word shows up? Well, in the Greek OT, the first time it ever appears is with reference to Eden—the garden, the paradise there in God's presence: **Gen. 2:8: And the LORD God planted a garden [paradeisos] in Eden . . .**"
1. So what Jesus is saying is: "What Adam lost for you there by way of his sin, I've come to regain for you by way of the cross."
- C. Do you remember when Adam and Eve in their sin are thrust out from the garden paradise there? They can't dwell in the presence of a holy God. What does God do? We're told he sets an angel on guard with a flaming sword, so that they can't just walk back in (**Gen. 3:24**).
1. Well, it's a very vivid picture getting at this idea that if we are to ever make our way back there, we would have to somehow pass through the blade of God's judgment. And you say, how? We don't stand a chance?
 - a. Oh but don't you see? This is precisely what Jesus is taking for us on the cross. The reason our Savior can turn and offer paradise to this sinful man is because he himself is taking the flaming sword of God's judgment in those moments.
 - i. Because the sword falls devastatingly upon him the door to paradise swings wide open to us. He takes the fire, I get the garden. He takes the wrath I get the grace. He takes hell, I get heaven . . . and paradise with him forever.
- D. So let me close . . .
1. If you're not a Christian, what's keeping you from coming in? The gates are open wide. Everything you're longing for is found in him.
 2. If you are a Christian, why are you always so busy trying to find paradise everywhere else? Doesn't that get exhausting? It's right here. Jesus is right here. Come!
 - a. **"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."**