***2: “Today You Shall be with Me in Paradise”  
  
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The second word which is spoken on the cross is in Luke 23:43: "And He (Jesus) said to him. Truly I say to you, today you shall be with me in paradise." Jesus spoke this to one of the thieves which was crucified with Him. These two criminals had at first verbally abused Jesus Christ along with the crowd. They joined in with the insults of the crowd that were being hurled at the Lord Jesus--the ridicule that was being expressed. Matthew 27:37: "And they put up above His head the charge against Him which read, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.' And at that time two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right, and one on the left. And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads and saying, 'You who were going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. Save yourself. If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.'"

There is no one so ignorant like a person who believes false doctrine and knows he's right. There is no one so abusive as somebody who thinks he knows what God thinks, but is completely mistaken. They are the most brutal vicious people on the face of the earth. Here these were the people who, in their arrogance and their mental superiority, were ridiculing the Lord Jesus for saying, "Destroy this temple, and in three days. I'll build it up. They so lacked discernment that they didn't understand that He was not talking about the temple building, but the temple of His body. Jesus was saying, "Jonah told it to you." Jesus said, "Jonah is the example. I will be put into the tomb, and 72 hours, to the very hour, later--not just part of 72 hours, but the whole full 72 hours I will be in that tomb--then I'll rise back to life. I'm going to be just like Jonah when he was followed by that huge fish." Jonah was in there for precisely three days and three nights--72 hours on the button.

That's why we know, in part (that's not the only reason), that Jesus was crucified on Wednesday. So we have Good Wednesday. We observe Good Wednesday at Berean Church. We don't observe Good Friday. At 6:00 PM Wednesday, they put Him in the tomb. And after 6:00 PM on Saturday, the Sabbath day was over--the second Sabbath day was over. That's the confusion. There were two Sabbaths--two high days that week. When the weekly Sabbath was over, Sunday began for the Jews, and Christ arose. So Jesus said, "If you destroy this temple, in three days I'm going to put this body back and it's going to come back to life. The Father is going to raise Me up. He will do that if I have executed the mission of providing a basis for human beings to be saved.

And indeed that is what happened. But they ridiculed Him. And, in the same way, the chief priest also ridiculed Him. Now we have the Bible scholars here, along with the scribes and elders who were mocking him and saying, "He saved others. He cannot save himself. He is the king of Israel. Let Him now come down from the cross and we shall believe Him" They couldn't even keep from lying at that moment. What did they mean when they said that He saved others? Well, He gave a poor widow back her dead son. He gave poor blind people back their sight. He put bones together that were out of joint in people who were crippled. He did all kinds of things for people, and they saw Him do it. Yet, these are things they used to ridicule Him.

Verse 43: "He trusts in God. Let Him deliver Him now if He takes pleasure in Him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.' And the robbers also who had been crucified with Him were casting the same insult at Him." So here we have the scene of these smug people. And do you know who is the smuggest in our society today? It's somebody who has been reared in a good Bible Church, and who now knows a great deal of Scripture. Therefore, he doesn't think that he needs any more information. This is the fundamental deception of Satan--that you don't need to restore and to recharge your doctrinal understanding. All these people that we see who'd never come into church here but who walked around like they were something spiritually, and they were in the know, and they understood the spiritual life: they're zeros on the outer orbit of their own deception.

Peter said, "I'm going to keep teaching you as long as I'm here with you alive, and I'm going to tell you things that you've heard before, so that I can refresh your mind on things that you might be careless about remembering. When I do it, I'm not going to apologize to you that I have instructed you on this before because it is not my Word. It is the Word of God. And that we cannot afford to forget." These people thought they had the Word of God--and the robbers, where did they get their confidence? From this mob--all these people, yelling, jeering, and making fun of Christ--they joined in with the crowd. It is a dangerous thing, even in Christian circles, unless you are really sure of the people you're dealing with, to go along with them. Most of them have a great deal of religion but very little spiritual discernment.

But suddenly something happened. After a time, one of these criminals had a change of mind. He repented. Something happened suddenly in his discernment. Some kind of illumination suddenly hit him. As he looked across at Jesus hanging there in such agony, the scales fell from his eyes, and he realized who it was that he was looking at--Israel's long awaited Messiah, the Savior of all mankind, as the Old Testament predicted and spoke of again and again. Luke 23:39-42: "And one of the criminals who was hanged there was hurling abuse at Him saying, 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself, and us.' But the other answered and, rebuking him, said, 'Do you not even fear God since you are under the same sentence of condemnation, and we justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds. But this man has done nothing wrong.'" He was saying, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom."

What a transformation! The justice of his own punishment was very clear to this man. "We are indeed condemned justly for our sin. We deserve this for our deeds. This man has done nothing wrong." What happened was what happens to every unsaved person when God suddenly says, "I'm taking you to heaven. I don't have to take any of you. You're all dead in sins. You're all headed for the lake of fire. You have no claim upon Me, but I want you." So it was on Golgotha's hill. You can go to Jerusalem today. The Jews have built a bus station down below it. Boy, talk about an awesome experience! To stand across and look at that. And sure enough you can see the two large sunken holes for the eyes and the cave for the mouth. And you don't have to imagine that that looks like a skull. It does.

And suddenly there, on that hill of death, God said, "I want this thief over here. The Holy Spirit moved and took the scales off. Suddenly, this man realized that he was a sinner; that he was condemned; that he was helpless; and, that he could not do a thing about this. Then he noticed that Jesus Christ was sinless. He finally grasped that fact. Therefore, He must not be on this tree for Himself. Perhaps the robber knew enough about Old Testament Scripture that said that the way that God makes a sign that somebody is guilty is that He hangs him on a tree. Yet this man is sinless. He's hanging on wood--the sign in the Old Testament that this is a guilty person. He must be here for someone else's sin. The Holy Spirit whispered in his ear, "You're right. For yours." Bingo! It all came together suddenly in his mind. For a moment, there's the thrill that surges through his heart. He forgets about his agony, and he realizes that Jesus Christ is God.

That's why in verse 42, he says, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom." He realized that Jesus was going to have a kingdom--your kingdom. He realized that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise of a Messianic Kingdom which will come about in a 1,000-year millennium, and the Messiah Savior will be reigning over it. And all of a sudden he says, "Dear Lord. This is the man. He is the king. He is the one that's going to set up this earthly kingdom. And I'm hanging next to Him rapidly going down into death." So he looks at Jesus, and he says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He was asking that Jesus would save him. He was trusting in Him. He, at that moment, was believing everything that Jesus claimed about Himself.

So here, in the last desperate hours, suddenly, the grace of God changes the negative volition of this believing criminal to positive volition belief for salvation, and he trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. And instantly he is saved from a destiny in the lake of fire to a destiny in the New Jerusalem in heaven. God brought the belief to the thief, and the thief accepted, and he went to eternal life because he accepted the forgiveness which Israel's Messiah has provided.

Why couldn't the leaders and the other people see that? Why can't the vast number of Jewish people today see it? They still believe that if they keep the 613 laws of the Old Testament, they will go to heaven for that. They can't keep them. They break them. But they hope that they do most of it right. But in John 14:6, Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me." So if you have a religious system that has told you that you can come to the Father by your water baptize, you're dead in the water. You're out. If you're in a religious system that says you can come to the Father by taking the Lord's Supper and eating the body and blood of Christ, you're going to go to hell. There's no question about that. You will negate the grace basis of salvation. God says, "I'll give you salvation as a gift. I cannot give it to you if you throw in some works along with it."

So there's no ritual by which we can find eternal life. And yet most of the religious world--all those who are going through all kinds of rituals even now, such as to remember Easter--are going through rituals of one kind and another so that they can approach God. Pat Robertson, on the 700 Club, has been observing Lent. It started on Ash Wednesday, 40 days ago, and it ended last Wednesday. They've had 40 days of fasting. He doesn't look thinner to me, so I'm not sure about what that fasting means. But here it is--this little ritual that you are to do in order to make yourself feel something wonderful about God. If you want to feel something wonderful about God, go to Jerusalem. Walk to the garden tomb and look at that slab. "Why do you seek him? He is not here. He is risen." That is an inspiration from God.

So Satan has victoriously ingrained the works system into so many people. Titus 3:4-7 says, "But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared (on Calvary's cross), He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior. That being justified by His grace, we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life." You cannot be justified by His grace and by your works. Any religious system that tells you that, dooms you to the lake of fire. You can only be justified by His grace gift.

So there was great comfort for the thief because Jesus, immediately upon hearing his expression of faith in Christ and his recognition of who Jesus was, the Lord turns to him in verse 43. Instead of this thief having this fulfilled in the future which is what he meant, "Jesus said, 'Truly I say to you. Today you shall be with me in paradise.'" Paradise--that was the compartment in Hades, which before the crucifixion and the resurrection, was where all saved people went. They did not go up into heaven. They went into this holding stage of paradise. The Hebrews (the Jews) called it Abraham's bosom. It is referred to in that way in Luke 16:22.

So what Jesus was saying was, "I'm going to go to paradise today. My body is going to go into the tomb" just a short walk through a garden there--maybe a block away. And there's Gordon's Tomb, as it's referred to. And He said, "My spirit will go to be with the Father. My soul will go into Hades, and I'll be there with you. And what I'm going to do there is that I'm going to stand up before all those people, from Adam to this day, and they're all standing there waiting to go to heaven, but their sins have not been paid for. Now the price has been paid, and I'm going to say, 'Folks, follow me.'" Paul tells us about this in the book of Ephesians. "We're all going up to heaven now together," and the Lord led them all out of Hades; out of paradise; out of Abraham's bosom; and, into God's presence in heaven. That's what happened.

Well, in that moment, the thief was assured that he was not going to end up in the other compartment of Hades called Torments. That's where his friend ended up that day. He was going to end up with Jesus in the Paradise side. With this statement, this thief had been given dying grace. Suddenly, the suffering was just as bad. The agony was terrible. Jesus controlled the point of His own death. And at the proper time, when all was completed for the suffering for sin, He gave up His life.

Crucifixion was used because sometimes it took two or three days to die. It was very excruciating. So because the Jews, in their religious ritual, wanted all of these bodies off the crosses before the high Sabbath of Wednesday began, they broke their legs. That was such a shock that that killed them. Jesus was already dead. So that was still ahead for this thief--that terrible last moment of suffering. But suddenly, as dying grace always does, it turned the suffering into joy. So now there was nothing but happiness ahead for him.

The negative volition thief probably now ridiculed both Jesus and the other thief, and treated them as fools. The negative volition thief foolishly failed to consider the consequences if he was wrong. I often tell something to people who have a false concept of salvation--a salvation which is not by grace; a salvation which is not by faith alone; and, a salvation which is not by faith in Christ alone. I ask them to consider the consequences if they are wrong about that. I challenge them to go back and look at the authority on which they base their belief. Your church--don't trust it; your priest--don't trust him; your preacher--don't trust him; your family--don't trust them; your society--don't trust it. Look only to Scripture. That you can trust. That is the mind of God.

So the negative volition thief did not consider why he believed what he believed. He had picked this up from society in general, and his human viewpoint simply reflected what the mob around him were saying. Imagine how that thief feels this Easter Sunday morning. Imagine how the thief that believed in Christ feels this Easter Sunday morning. The believing thief asked for future remembrance, but Jesus fulfilled his request that day. Many have been offered the forgiveness for which Jesus prayed for those who were murdering Him, but few have accepted it. A classic example of being saved by faith alone is expressed in Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace are you saved by faith. No works. Lest any man should boast." That's the key combination. Then Romans 11:6 says that grace is grace; works is works; and, the two cannot be mixed.

So Jesus Christ, at the moment of the thief's faith was really hardly the picture of a king who is sent to rule over a kingdom. Do you see how much God enlightened that man? Nobody gets saved until the Spirit of God gives you the sense to understand. When he looked at Jesus, this was not the picture of a king. This was not the picture of a conqueror. This was not a picture of the King of Kings. It was the picture of the Lamb of God. Yet, this thief knew that this was the One to trust. Only the illumination of God the Holy Spirit could do that. That's what he does today every time a person is saved. So Jesus knew the truth, and He could say to this man, "Truly, I say to you, today you shall be with me in paradise." That's the only comfort that he could have in the face of death.

So what's the significance of the second word? It is the guarantee of salvation to those who trust in Christ alone to save them. John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. Eternal life is a gift apart from man's duty. If you are uncertain about your salvation, it is because you are not trusting in Christ to save you, but you're trusting in something that you must do to be approved for entrance to heaven. If you are adding something to what He has done, you will not come in to eternal life. You cannot add any of your human good works to faith in Christ and still be saved by Him.

We close this session on this second word by reminding us that these two thieves represent all of the world today. It focuses our mission as Christians--we who know Him--we who know what the gospel is. A lot of Christians don't. Therefore, we can really point people to do what they must do to be saved. John 3:36 identifies two groups of humanity: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life, but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides upon him." Everybody in the world today either believes in Christ the Savior or they do not. They're in one category or the other. Matthew 7:13: "Enter by the narrow gate (that is Jesus), for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction." That is salvation by works. "And many are those who enter it." This is the mass of unsaved humanity. "For the gate is small (that is the Lord Jesus), and the way is narrow. He is the way. The way is narrow that leads to life. And few are those who find it."

Then Matthew 22:14: "For many are called, but few are chosen." All of the world is invited to be saved. If you are here as a born again believer, just remember that the reason you are here rejoicing in your destiny, as the thief who believed could rejoice in his, it is because God chose you. He chose you and He brought you into His family.

There are five, almost more increasingly, significant statements upon the cross that keep piling up one after another after another until at the end you get this tremendous impact of what Christ has done for us. The implications are endless. We begin with this: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Make a basis, O God, for them upon which they could be saved. And the Lord did. Secondly, Christ said to the believing thief: "This day you shall be with me in paradise." Whosoever comes unto Him shall not be denied. Believing is to be received. It's possible for the worst of sinners to join Christ in heaven.

The implications of this, as we have indicated, are tremendous. Let's start living like people who belong to the royal family. Let's make a very big distinction between the people of the world. Let's start taking that lonely road where you're not going to have a lot of people around you who are walking in step with you. They're all walking on that broad highway of spiritual ignorance. If you're going to walk on that narrow road of spiritual enlightenment, it's going to be just you and the Lord many times. But in the end, there is joy unspeakable and full of glory.

Dear God we thank you for this time of meditation upon Your Word.

Dr. John E. Danish, 1999

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