

LAST WORDS



WEEK OF 03/01/26

PROMISE OF PARADISE

LUKE 23:32-33; 39-43

Silence (1-2 minutes)

Sit silently together as a group for a minute as a way to center your heart and invite the Holy Spirit to help you listen to and receive God's Word.

Opening Prayer (2-3 minutes)

Read: Luke 23:32-33, 39-43

Devotional

We are currently in a series on the seven phrases spoken by Jesus on the cross. This week, we are looking at the second phrase, a promise given to one of the criminals that was being crucified with Him: *"Today, you will be with Me in paradise."*

We all have a picture in our mind of what "paradise" would be for us – the perfect job, moving to a warmer climate, finding the spouse, etc. These things have one thing in common: they are temporary. They do not truly fulfill the longing for peace and rest that we're seeking. Jesus presents an alternative that is infinitely better than anything we can imagine. And to an underserving criminal no less! What Jesus promises this criminal is that he will enter an eternal paradise in the presence of Jesus Himself.

1. What is your picture of "paradise", or the good life? What do you think would make you feel fulfilled?

If you are at all familiar with the Bible, it can be easy to pass through certain sections of Scripture without pausing to consider their full meaning, assuming we understand it. That could easily be the case with the story of the Crucifixion. As we walk through these verses, let us be careful to pause and observe all the details surrounding Jesus' word. Let's walk through five observations about this text – two about Jesus, two about the criminal, and one about the statement itself – all leading us to our Big Idea.

Read Luke 23:32-33 | The first observation is that **Jesus was the man on the middle cross**. Jesus was not crucified alone. He was hung between two criminals. The implication is clear: Jesus Himself was a criminal. He was crucified not just among criminals, but as a criminal.

This must have given great satisfaction to His accusers, the Pharisees and other religious leaders, as they watched it all unfold. But this scene points to something these leaders could not have considered – they were fulfilling prophecy!

2. Read Isaiah 53:12. What is the significance of Christ being crucified and “numbered among the transgressors?”

The second observation is that **Jesus lived on mission until the very end**. Consider these details of the horrors of crucifixion: His hands and feet were nailed to a cross, while His body mostly straddled a hornlike projection that carried the bulk of His weight. In order to breathe, He would have had to repeatedly push up His legs to lift His body weight to allow for exhalation. But even in midst of this excruciating moment, with people scoffing and mocking Him, He remains focused on His mission.

3. Read Luke 19:10. What does this passage tell us about Jesus’ mission?
4. This demonstration of grace and love communicates an important truth for us: Jesus will love us until the very end. He sees us and loves us. How easy or hard is it for you to receive this truth? Take a moment to talk with the Lord about Your reaction to His wondrous love.

Read Luke 23:39-40 | The third observation is that **one of the criminals had a total change of heart**. Luke’s account of this story is the only one that includes this detail. In both Matthew and Mark’s account, both criminals were mocking Jesus along with the crowd. But Luke provides us with an important insight – at some point, one of these men changed his mind. His mocking stopped, until he began to rebuke the other man and tell him to stop!

5. The text does not give us a reason for his change of heart, but there are many possibilities. Perhaps he was affected by Jesus’ prayer for His executioners (“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”). Or it was simply the presence of Jesus during those hours hanging on the cross without complaint, without reviling in return, but looking at his mockers with love. What do you think changed the heart of this man as he hung next to Jesus? What statements did he make that would indicate a true heart change?

Read Luke 23:41-42 | The fourth observation is that **the criminal was indeed truly converted**. In these verses, we see two signs of true conversion: honest repentance and a prayer of faith. He did not try to qualify or justify himself, minimize or shift blame. He was clear that he

was receiving what he deserved for his actions. He did not ask Jesus to get him out of his current state but to remember him. He demonstrated remarkable faith that Jesus was King – and all he wanted was for Jesus to not forget him.

6. What are some barriers to true repentance in our lives?
7. There was no opportunity for this man to right the wrongs he had committed. He could offer no good work or seek to payback those he owed. He had absolutely nothing to offer. He was saved solely by the mercy of Christ. It can be difficult for us to accept that we cannot contribute anything to our salvation. What do we seek to “offer” to validate ourselves before the Lord?

Read Luke 23:43 | The final observation is that **Jesus’ promise went beyond the request**. The request was simply, “Remember me.” Jesus’ response went above and beyond this – “Today, you will be with Me in paradise.” Jesus promises immediate entry into paradise with Him. He would enter into the dwelling place of God and the everlasting home of God’s children.

8. We imagine paradise as a place (heaven). But what if that is not the primary message. Reread the verse again, this time emphasizing the words **be with me**. How does this change the good news of this message? What does this tell us about the true promise of heaven?

This leads us to our Big Idea: ***Paradise isn’t a place, but a person named Jesus whose grace is available to all who believe.*** Heaven is paradise because Jesus is there. He is our reward, our promise, and our hope. He is the answer to our deepest longings. We will only be truly fulfilled when we are with Him forever.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we thank You for grace. We thank You that You remember us. You see us and You know us. And You invite us to draw near to You. You have set eternity in our hearts, a desire that only You can fulfill. Help us to keep our hearts focused on You and the wonderful promise of being with You in paradise. Amen.

Share Prayer Requests (10-15 minutes)