

IN PARADISE

Luke 23:35-43

Don't you hate waiting in a line only to have a new one open up and people who just got to the end of your line get to go to the head of that new line? Or it always bothers me when I go to an office and am talking to a receptionist after waiting for some time and having the phone ring. Now I have taken the effort to physically go to that office and wait for my turn, but the receptionist will make me wait even longer while talking to the person who is calling from the comfort of his/her home.

The thief on the cross was hardly someone who had been waiting in line. We think of the crowds who gathered to hear Jesus. Remember when Jesus had to go into a boat out away from the shore of the Sea of Galilee because of the people crowding around Him. Then there was the house in Capernaum so crowded with people that the friends of the paralyzed man had to carry him with his cot onto the roof of the house and lower the cot to Jesus. On Palm Sunday the crowds packed around Jesus as He entered Jerusalem. Many of those people in that crowd had followed Jesus for years. But certainly not this thief. He had no such connection with Jesus until he happened to be nailed to a cross on the same day and place of Jesus' crucifixion. Yet this man gets to talk to Jesus for just enough time for Jesus to say to him, "Today you will be with Me in paradise." Talk about the ultimate of stepping into the right line!

We are called to come to church, to give of our time and talents. The Ten Commandments are a guide for how we should live with God and others. But in the end, isn't all that matters is that we turn to Jesus like the thief on the cross and say, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom?"

Just think of all the work and effort, all the guilt, and all the struggle to stay awake during church we could avoid if like the thief we just to Jesus at the last moment. Think of all the "fun" we could have as long as we made that final "dash to the finish line."

In the story Jesus tells of the Prodigal Son, a son goes out and lives a raucous life. He does come back to the grace of his father, but what is his life like before he returns home? He lives at first for himself, living it up. Then he runs out of money and ends up finding only a job feeding pigs. It was like one of Mike Rowe's "Dirty Jobs" only he hardly got paid and even the slop fed to the pigs looked good to him. Yes, this son returned to his father at the end, but do you think he had "fun" while he was away? Or don't you think he wished he had never left home?

The thief was even worse off. He probably never had a loving father to start with. Often people were driven to crime by poverty and abuse from others. He probably had been caught before and punished by whipping and jail time. Now he was experiencing one of the most excruciating forms of execution known to man—crucifixion. Sure, he received before death that wonderful promise of Jesus. But up until then, what did he have?

We may not be in paradise yet. We may feel like we're standing in line. But what makes paradise "paradise"? If I am a Moslem I am told that paradise is a lovely garden where I have all the beautiful virgins I want. If that's paradise, then we're not there. Nor will we ever get there. Jesus' promise to that thief was, "Today you will be with Me in paradise." It would be paradise for that man because this man who had no relationship up until this point with Jesus had the promise that he would always have Jesus with him. Not too many moments earlier he had been mocking Jesus with the other criminal. Then his heart was turned. Pastor Dave taught me in one of our meetings with other local pastors that when Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing," He didn't just say this once, but continually. The thief heard this. He saw Jesus. But he couldn't touch Jesus. Yet Jesus' promise was, "Don't worry. You will be with Me. There will be no nails and a cross to separate us. You will be in My loving arms."

Unlike that thief we don't have to wait until death to touch Jesus. He is already with us. He touches us through the waters of Baptism. He touches us as our lips meet His cup. He holds us as we are held by His loving people. We don't have to wait.

It is not like we are just waiting in line or trying to keep from being bored until Jesus comes. No, right now we can be living in a joyful relationship with Jesus. Is going to church a chore? Is following God's commands a burden? Is it torture to help others? It can be if we do those things to get in line first and try to be better for God. But when those are who we are as God's people, then that's what we want to do. David said in the Psalms, "Better to be a servant in the Lord's house than a king elsewhere." The Prodigal Son, the thief on the cross, all of those who have lived apart from Jesus would agree with that.

My mom's Uncle Mike died in the nursing home at age 96. Mike had wanted to go for a long time. He was a gentle man who served in the army in Europe during World War II, lost his wife back in 1968, and faithfully helped in the church. Just days before he died, his great-great nephew came by to visit and told him, "Uncle Mike, don't worry. You know my great grandpa (Mike's brother Herman) and Uncle Henry (Mike's oldest brother) are up in heaven. They're trying to decide what color to paint your bedroom in heaven."

We know that we will rise on the last day. But until then what that little boy expressed is the joy we have because we are the Lord's. Unlike that thief we don't have to wait until after death to be with the Lord. He is with us right now. That's why we go to church, help others, live according to God's laws, and give of ourselves. We do that because Jesus is here, and He will be with us in paradise.