

***Luke 23: 40-43 “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.’”***

My brothers and my sisters in Christ Jesus,

I have a bit of a confession to make. I have a bit of a problem. I almost can never finish a show that I have started. I know I know, how dare you Pastor. But if you would look at our families streaming account, you would find title after title of TV series with episodes left to watch. It’s not always the same, sometimes I make it through the first couple seasons but by the time the next one is released I’ve lost interest. Or only made it two episodes in because some other shiny show has caught my interest. If TV shows could have hurt feelings I would have made quite a few enemies through my time on this earth.

When people ask me if I’ve watched something and then I promptly admit that I never finished the response is usually the same: “You’re missing the best part. You have to make it to the end! Trust me, it’s worth the wait.” And I suppose they’re right. I’m missing something. I’m missing the rest of the story. And in our text for today there’s someone who’s very popular, he shows up very frequently in the readings for the church year, but oftentimes we miss some things about him. I am talking about the thief on the cross.

And yet, despite his notoriety, he sort of gets lost. We never learn his name. But even more than that he gets swallowed up by this remarkable exchange. He pleads, ***“Jesus, remember me when you come into Your kingdom”*** to which Jesus replies ***“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”*** No more powerful words have ever been spoken. And when the Father heard that prayer, the Father answered that prayer. Not just for those surrounding that cross on that day. He heard that prayer and answered that prayer for the whole world. He heard that prayer and answered that prayer for you. ***“Father, forgive them”***, He prays, the

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Father does. That's the core of Christianity; Christ praying for our forgiveness and God answering that prayer. The Father gives to this day, what Jesus asked for on that day.

Now I suppose we might think we know the rest of the story. The rest of the story is that the man dies and ends up, as promised, with Jesus in heaven. That place which we see in our reading from Revelation. The place where the water of life, clear as crystal flows down the street of the shining city. Where the tree of life yields its fruit. Where the curse is gone and God's people see him face to face. Light radiating from God himself and reigning for ever and ever and ever.

But while that is the end of the story, it fast forwards through a short, but significant span of time. It fast forwards through a short, but painful span of time. You see the promise ***"today you will be with me in paradise"*** is not the same as now ***"you will be with me in paradise"***.

The man hanging on a cross just to the right of Jesus will appear again, not in the book of Luke, where our text is from, but in John's Gospel. Still nameless, this time silent. But the verses contain the rest of the story ***"Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other."***

Let's focus on the phrase ***"the soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other."*** Let's break down the events chronologically. 1) the thief recognizes Christ as the promised Messiah 2) Christ announces that, as Messiah, He will save the thief 3) Jesus endures the wrath of His Father and the pain of Hell, thus securing salvation for the thief as well as you and me 4) Jesus announces, ***"It is finished"*** and dies.

But what ends up getting overlooked is that the thief doesn't die, not yet anyway. Jesus dies, but he's still up there on the cross, having been delivered from the pain of damnation, yes, but not rescued from the pain

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of crucifixion. Having been redeemed from sins, yes, but not yet relieved from misery of criminal penalty. His hurt, though nothing like the catastrophic pain of Jesus, was nevertheless both very real and very intense.

And here we find a central truth of Scripture; the promise of ultimate deliverance is not the same as the promise of immediate deliverance. God will deliver you. He says it, it will happen, it can be no other way. It doesn't matter what your situation, you, Christian, will be delivered. You will be taken through those gates of the New Jerusalem, because your robes have been washed in the blood of the Lamb.

But the promise of deliverance is precisely that, a promise. And a promise is always a reference to something that will take place, not to something that has taken place. And oh, the interval between the promise and the fulfillment of the promises is so often saturated with pain, with very real pain, with very intense pain.

The thief hanging on the cross reminds me of Adam and Eve, who received the promise that the Savior would come and that the beauty of Eden would be restored for them once again, but still have to deal with toiling for food and crying in childbirth. The thief on the cross reminds me of the husband who has the promise of being reunited with his deceased wife in heaven but deals with the ache of waiting here on earth. The thief hanging on the cross reminds me of the woman who has the promise of deliverance from cancer but deals with the challenges of chemotherapy. The thief hanging on the cross reminds me of anyone battling temptations of any sort, longing to put away sin, yet having to wage daily war against it.

But what kept the thief going through his agony was precisely this promise; the pain would end, paradise would be his. Immediately? No. But soon enough. It didn't cancel the pain, but it did make it bearable.

What will keep you going through your agony (whatever form it takes) is precisely this promise: The pain will end. The New heavens and the new earth will be yours. The curse of this sins world will be gone. Immediately?

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No, but soon enough. It doesn't cancel the pain, but it does make it bearable.

We'll have to wait. We'll have to wait for the end of the story. It's the story that started when God gave that first promise to Adam and Eve. It's the story that was proven with Jesus' perfect death on the cross. It's the story that proven to the thief on the cross, when at the end of that day, he went to be with Jesus in paradise. There will be times it will seem that we are experiencing the pain the exists in between the promise and the deliverance of that promise. But God will is faithful. Our story will end, and it's worth the wait.