

Paradise Now

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone
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Luke 23:43

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise”

Good Friday – 2nd Word

Movement 1 – Finding Paradise

Paradise. Paradise is something we aspire for, we dream of, and we yearn to experience. Sometimes we go someplace to taste what we might think would be paradise. We go to Hawaii, or the Virgin Islands, or even to exotic places like Jamaica looking for just the right kind of weather, just the right kind of water, just the right kind of food. We look for paradise.

Paradise. Sometimes we try to create paradise in our lives. We build a home, add onto the home, and continue to make the home larger and larger thinking that the size of our home will correlate to paradise; the greater the home, the closer we are to paradise. Sometimes we purchase a car that might have more than we need. Maybe we don't really need the GPS, the movie screen, the leather seats, the heated seats, or a car that is five sizes larger than what we really need. But it feels good to ride in this vehicle, it feels good to coast along, it feels like paradise on wheels.

Paradise. We surround ourselves with stuff hoping that it will simplify our lives, and make our living more enjoyable; make our existence closer to what we imagine might be living in paradise. We do not heed the words of Paul Claudel, “When man tries to imagine Paradise on earth, the immediate result is a very respectable Hell,” which makes sense when you think about the amount of stuff we add to our lives in order to achieve paradise. The more stuff we have, the greater the complexities and the more things that can go wrong. All for the sake of paradise.

Paradise. We dream of reaching paradise when we retire, we dream of playing on the perfect golf course, we dream of a buffet filled with the most wonderful food, and not a calorie in one of them. We dream of paradise. In the movie, *The Shawshank Redemption* the main character is wrongly sent to prison for the murder of his wife. While in prison he dreams of where he is going to go when he gets out, and it is a dream that sustains him. He dreams of a deserted island a white sand beach, and a boat on which he can spend time working. It is secluded and idealistic. It is that dream that gives him strength during his trials in prison. It is paradise.

Paradise. We all have dreams of the elusive ideals of paradise. We all have ideas of what might be a taste of paradise – a place, a lifestyle, or a food. We all yearn to touch, to experience paradise. Are you looking for paradise?

Movement 2 – The World Mocks Jesus

In our search for paradise, in our search for paradise in the world, you can almost taste contempt for the ideals of Christ, and the Kingdom of God that he heralds in his ministry. In the world, in our culture, we want to experience paradise now on our terms and as we expect it. We want to experience the glory of a majestic kingdom but not the one that Christ has been proclaiming. We want grandeur, not a leader on a cross. We want power, not submission. As the world watches Christ on the cross, the satisfaction,

the paradise that so many are racing to receive is not found in this picture of suffering and brokenness. We want to experience the kingdom of God now in the way that we see fit, and when we don't we decide to go off and create our own paradise. Those chasing wealth often look down upon the promises of the church, the promises of Christ and scoffs. The proud individual who is looking to gain economic power, political power, social power, looks at the life of Jesus with puzzlement and bewilderment and mocks. The scorn of the world cuts through with the voice of the soldiers mocking Jesus, calling him to save himself with a sarcasm that cuts as deep as the whip. The scorn of the world lashes at Jesus as even one of the criminals on the cross next to our Lord mocks Jesus, asking to see glimpse his so called power.

"Save yourself." "Show us your paradise!" The world cruelly demands results and receives none. The expectations of the world are set, and they are set high. What does Jesus have to offer if we do not receive money; for can money not give us paradise? What does Jesus have to offer if we do not receive a remote island upon which we can find rest; for can that not give us paradise? What does Jesus have to offer if we do not receive the power necessary to create and protect our own little paradise? Our Lord is on the cross, and the world mocks Christ because power, wealth and prestige cannot be found in such a display of brokenness.

Some churches have even tried to counter the critiques of the world and promise a paradise that they claim can be found in the gospel, but it is not the paradise of Christ. These churches promise that God will take care of your wealth, will take care of your checkbook, and will take care of your possessions and expand your resources. These churches are pushing a gospel of prosperity that makes sense to the world that can be sold to the world. It is a gospel of accumulated wealth, of tangible success and possessions that one can hold onto. It is a gospel that promises that you will gain in resources as you offer your prayers and your praise to God if God favors you. Yet I cannot see any room for our crucified Lord on the cross in such a gospel of prosperity. Our Lord was not crucified on a gilded cross. Our Lord did not spend his final days in lavish attire. There are no gold adornments on the broken body of Jesus. There is no room for the cross in the gospel of prosperity. That gospel offers a paradise that the world can understand. This gospel has nothing but contempt for the Lord I know, but joins the world in the mocking and scoffing at our crucified Lord.

The world offers nothing but contempt for the Lord I follow, as those in power look down from their high pinnacles thinking they have found paradise, wondering what Christ can offer as he draws his last few breaths.

Movement 3 – Our Need for Paradise

We look for paradise, we search for paradise, and I believe that we all need paradise. I'm not talking about the paradise of the world. I'm not talking about a paradise of things or of possessions. I'm not talking about power or prestige.

I'm talking about a place where we can rest. I'm talking about a place where we can find substance and hope. I'm talking about a place where we can be redeemed, a place where we can be with God. That is paradise, and my brothers and sisters, we all need paradise. And maybe, when you look at Jesus, you realize that he can offer you rest. Maybe, you realize that when you walk with Jesus, there is a peace that washes over you. Maybe you realize that when you let Jesus lead your life, then you are in the

presence of God. There is something about being with Jesus. There is something about standing in his presence. The disciples sometimes got it. Mary and Martha got it. The blind man, Bartimaeus, without even seeing Jesus, he got it. There is something that Jesus offers, that gives you hope and peace and grace. It is a taste of paradise.

Maybe, maybe that other thief, next to Jesus got it. Maybe he realized that there was something more to Jesus than just another man, and he asked Jesus to remember him. Just like asking an up and coming star, just like asking an emerging athlete to remember you when they come into fame, this thief asks Jesus to remember him with Jesus comes into glory. "Remember me Lord, and let your favor fall upon me when you are in glory." Remember me Lord, for I need your help and your mercy. Remember me, and let me taste just a sliver of your glory, let me just experience a fraction of paradise.

The thief is not alone in his cry. There are others who are calling out to Christ to be remembered. There are those who are hurting, those who are carrying great weights, those who are crying. "Remember me, Lord, when you come into glory."

Listen for those who are crying out to be remembered, listen for those who are crying out for just a sliver of the glory and the divine. Listen for those who are crying out for what Christ has to give. Listen for those who are crying out for something, that they are without. They are crying to be remembered. They are crying for paradise.

There are children who are facing hunger every day crying for just a fraction of paradise. There are mothers who are struggling to care for their families who are longing for just a sliver of hope. There are fathers who are trying to do right by their family but cannot get ahead and are yearning for some peace. There are young adults who are surrounded by violence, hatred, pressure and dead-ends who are looking for a way out. There are grandparents who cannot make enough to pay for the basic bills and medication. There are women and men who are trying to find a job, trying to find an honest wage, but cannot find one. There are people who are cast out, cast away and cast aside because of who they are. There are people who are living without a home, people trying to find just enough to live for one more day. There are young boys handed guns and told to kill, there are young women who fear for their lives or worse every hour and every day. There are children who only know the rhythm of mortar shell and falling bombs. There are millions of orphans because of AIDS. There are those who are not receiving the education they deserve, the health care they deserve, the basic human necessities they deserve. There are multitudes crying out to be remembered, to never be forgotten.

Do you think that maybe these are the people who should be crying out for paradise? Do you think that these are the people who need paradise? Can you hear their calls, can you hear their cries as they struggle through the darkness of this world crying out to just be remembered. Just to be remembered by the rich, just to be remembered by the wealthy so that they can have a small piece of the pie – just enough to get by. But receive nothing. They need paradise. They need God's paradise.

There are those who are silent. There are those who are holding their cries in, but still yearn for hope. Those who are carrying a weight, a burden that is holding them down. There are those who are carrying a guilt or a concern that is weighing them down. Those whose hearts are weeping out of grief, whose hearts are breaking out of concern. The family is breaking apart, life is breaking apart, and there is a yearning for paradise.

We are surrounded by the woes of the world, we are surrounded by the brokenness of the world and it is hard to even imagine hope. We need paradise. All we can do is say with the criminal on the cross, “remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Remember me and show me mercy. Maybe you have those days when you feel like the thief on the cross, you have done so many others wrong and you have lost hope for yourself. Maybe you feel like your heart is breaking because of the chaos in your life. Maybe you feel like you don’t deserve to be with Christ. You need paradise, paradise from Christ.

We’re not asking for a car or a house or an island, we are asking for the grace of God. We’re asking for something that money, that power, that influence cannot buy. We are asking for a peace, and a presence of God.

There is a real, a spiritual yearning, a tangible yearning for paradise. A paradise for the spirit and a paradise for the body. We are indeed yearning for God’s paradise.

Movement 4 – Jesus Offers Paradise

Jesus offers us paradise. From the cross, from the place of suffering and the point of glory Jesus offers us paradise. It is not just a sliver, it is not just a fraction, it is not just a taste, but the fullness of the glory of the Lord. Jesus offers us paradise.

Jesus, in his suffering and in his pain, responds to the repentant thief, hears his call, his petition for mercy, and answers, “truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

This is not a promise of the future. This is not a pie-in-the-sky hope to look forward to. We are not given a flimsy hope to hold onto. Jesus does not say, I will consider your life and your sins. No, Jesus instead, Jesus takes the request of the thief and responds with a greater offer. No, I will not remember you, I will take you. I will not consider if I will help you, I will carry you with me to paradise, the peace, to rest and to glory. Today, you will be with me in paradise.

The scholar Fred Craddock describes paradise, in the imagination of a first century Jew, as a place where the righteous gather after death. It is a place where those who have walked with God can go and find rest. Listen again to the call and the response of the thief and Jesus. The thief, with a heavy repentant heart calls to Jesus, pleads with Jesus that he be remembered when Jesus reaches his kingdom. Jesus does the amazing thing, and responds to the thief with words of grace and forgiveness. Even as he is suffering on the cross, our Lord takes the guilt and the shame and the suffering of others and brings them to be with the righteous. Today you will be with the Lord in paradise.

We are offered paradise today, now, here in this space and in this time, Jesus offers us paradise. Are crying out with a great weight, are crying out with a pain, are crying out with brokenness? Jesus responds by taking your weight, healing your wounds, and setting you free. Jesus responds by taking your burden and letting you soar. Jesus offers you paradise today.

Turn to Jesus, give your fears and your tears to Jesus and you will be made righteous, you will be brought into paradise. Give your suffering to Jesus and you will be in paradise. Give your hurts and your pains to Jesus and you will be in paradise.

I’m not saying that you will immediately go to heaven. I’m not saying that all of your problems will go away. But I am saying that you will have a hope to stand upon, a

faith to lead you and guide you, and a love that will not let you go. Turn to Jesus, and realize that strength that you can have and the courage you can have with your trials and your struggles.

Realize that in your struggles, you are not alone. In your trails, you are not alone, for Jesus has struggled and has suffered as well. Realize that even in the greatest struggle hope will prevail, because we know that Christ's suffering on the cross is not the end. Realize that the way to the cross is the way to glory, that suffering for the sake of the Lord will be made perfect. Today, in your own struggles, in your own suffering, you can be with Christ in paradise.

Realize that through the cross, you are made righteous; through the cross you are redeemed. Realize that through the cross the love that Christ has for each one of us is show and shines. Through the cross you are free to live. We are free to go and serve regardless of any obstacle or any trial because we have faith in the Lord. This is paradise. This freedom, this redemption, this salvation that we live today, here, now. This is paradise that we are washed with the grace of God, that we are surrounded by the love of Jesus and nothing can separate us from that love. Not "death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." That truth, that peace is paradise. You will never be alone, you will never be forsaken, and today you are in paradise. It is that moment when you fall on your knees before the cross and offer your heart, your sins, and your heavy spirit.

Be with the righteous today by the grace of God. Be with Christ today. Be in paradise today. Accept the grace of our Lord, accept the peace of our Lord, and enter into paradise.

Movement 5 – Bringing People to Paradise

Yet don't stay by yourself in the peace of God. Don't stay still in the glory of the Lord, for others are still yearning and yelling for a slice of hope from the Lord. Go to them and take the cross with you. Go to the child crying out for food, go to the child crying out for mercy, go to the child crying out for love and bring them Jesus.

Go to the mother struggling and the father trying to provide and bring them Jesus. Go to the angry youth and the misguided young adult and bring them Jesus. Go to the suffering, the poor, the outcaste, and the marginalized and bring them Jesus. For just as Jesus' suffering gives us hope in our own suffering, Jesus' suffering can offer a peace and a grace for so many more who are crying out for paradise. Liberation theologians like Gutierrez, Boff, and Segundo and Goicoechea argue that through the suffering of the cross Christ's presence with the suffering is revealed. Christ is with the suffering, the poor, the outcaste and the marginalized. Christ is with them, sharing in their suffering and offering a very real paradise.

We need to go to the suffering, go to the hurting, go to the ones crying for help and find Christ's presence there. All you have to do is open your eyes and their eyes to the presence of God, open your eyes and their eyes to the presence of Christ, open your eyes and their eyes to the presence of the Holy Spirit and experience the peace and the paradise that Christ offers.

Realize that those who suffer do not suffer alone; Christ suffers with them. Realize that Christ is with the hurting, the crying and the suffering. What a strange thing

it is to think that with the least of our brothers and sisters will you find the glory of God, but on this day, as we gaze at the cross, as Christ is at his lowest, it seems right and fitting that we find Christ with those who are also suffering, offering them paradise.

Do you see, the glory of the Lord only starts with your own repentance and receiving forgiveness? It continues as we bring others to the cross and offer the consolation that only Christ can offer. Bring the hungry, the naked, the sick, the homeless, those in prison and you will be in paradise. Tend to their wounds, and you are tending the wounds of Christ. Feed them and you are feeding Christ. Advocate for them and you are rebuking the world on behalf of Christ. Shelter them, care for them, and you are caring for the suffering of our Lord. Do this with the hope, with the courage and with the conviction that even as you suffer, even as you falter and fall, you are in the presence of our Lord. You are in paradise.

Are you looking for paradise? Are you hurting? Are you crying out for hope? Are you holding your wounds tight? Today, on the day that he is crucified and dies, Christ offers you paradise. Today, on the day of the death of our Lord, Christ offers you the hope and the glory of paradise. It is a paradise that cannot be matched by any island, by any car, by any home, my any golf course, or by anything of this world. It is a paradise that lifts you up with the righteous, a paradise that lifts you up to be with God.

Come before the cross with your brokenness, with your hurts, and accept Christ our Lord as your savior. Gather around the cross and look at those who are with you in paradise. You are surrounded by sinners, you are surrounded by outcastes, you are surrounded by marginalized, you are surrounded by the young and the old, and all those in-between. Some are limping, some are crawling, some are crying, and all are gathered around the cross. All are looking up at our crucified Lord, who is suffering as he hangs from the wood. Look around you. Look up at Christ and realize that this, this is paradise. For here you can witness and receive the glory of the Lord. Today, on this dark day, on this day of suffering and despair, we can, we will be with our Lord in paradise. Come to the cross as you are and be with Christ in paradise.

AMEN