

Today You Will Be With Me in Paradise

by John Piper

The sermon emphasizes the importance of responding to personal suffering with penitence and humility, and trusting in Jesus' goodness and power.

Scripture: Psalm 51:17, Matthew 11:28, Luke 23:43, Romans 6:23, 2 Corinthians 12:3, Philippians 2:10, James 4:10, Revelation 2:7, Revelation 22:1

Topics: "Suffering And Faith", "Repentance And Mercy"

Description

John Piper preaches on the two responses to personal suffering as seen in the story of the two thieves crucified with Jesus. One thief represents those who selfishly demand deliverance from suffering without repentance, while the other thief exemplifies humility, fear of God, confession of sin, acceptance of deserved punishment, acknowledgment of Jesus' righteousness and kingship, and a plea for mercy. Jesus promises the repentant thief immediate entrance into Paradise, highlighting the reward of responding to suffering with faith and humility.

Transcript

April 17, 1981

Luke 23:43

There are two kinds of responses to our own personal suffering: 1) We can rail against God and say, "If you are such a great and powerful and loving God, why am I in this hellish mess?" 2) Or we can acknowledge that we are sinners and don't deserve any good thing, and cry out for mercy and help in our time of desperation. The world is full of those who rail against God in their self-righteousness and presume that the creator of the universe obliged to make their life smooth. But there are only a few who own up to the fact that God owes us nothing, and that any good to come our way will be due to his mercy, not our merit. I think Luke records this text for us about the two thieves to teach us that there is great reward for responding to suffering like the first sort of person. The two thieves represent these two ways of responding to suffering and relating to Christ in suffering.

Notice first how similar they are. Both are suffering the pain of crucifixion. Both are guilty of crime ("We are receiving the due reward of our deeds," v.41). Both see Jesus, the sign over his head ("King of the Jews," v. 38); they hear the words from his mouth ("Father forgive them," v. 34). And both of these thieves want desperately to be saved from death.

Most of us have all these things in common with these two thieves: there has been, is, or will be suffering in our lives. And none of us will be able to say: "I do not deserve this." Most of us have seen Jesus on the cross and have heard his claim to kingship and his gracious words of forgiveness. And all of us want to be saved from death one way or the other.

But then the ways divide these two thieves and between two categories of people. The first thief says, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" What a picture of a spiritually destitute, worldly man. It is a matter of total indifference to him that he is suffering "the due reward of his deeds." To him right and wrong, praise and blame, good and bad are of no interest: his one objective is to save his earthly skin. He might even believe Jesus is the Messiah, the King of the Jews. But, it's only a matter of convenience to him: he'll take anybody as king who can get him off the cross. Just another patsy to serve his own worldly purposes.

That's the way one whole segment of humans relate to God in suffering. Suffering interrupts their own private worldly goals and pleasures. So why not try God; if you are king, then get me out of this mess. It's the old car-jack theology. A car-jack is a dirty, useless thing to be kept out of sight in the trunk until you have a flat tire (a little suffering). Then you get it out, let it do the dirty work and put it away again. "If you're such a good jack, jack me down off this cross, Jesus." "If you're such a good jack, jack me up out of this sickness, out of this financial mess, out of this lousy job, out of this crummy marriage. "

The thief had no spirit of brokenness, or guilt or penitence or humility. He could only see Jesus as a possible power by which to escape the cross. He did not see him as a king to be followed. It never entered his mind that he should say he was sorry and should change.

But notice the other thief: this one is the one Luke wants us to be like. First, he is not sucked in by the other fellow's railing. And if we are to follow his example we will have to stand our ground and not be sucked in by the people all around us who say, "If your God is so great and loving, then why the 20 kids shot in Atlanta?" "Why sixteen miners buried in a cave?" "Why a village slaughtered in El Salvador?" "Why doesn't he come down off his helpless perch on the cross and do something?" The first thing the repentant thief does is not get deceived by all this talk.

"But he rebuked him saying, 'Do you not fear God?'" This is the second thing about this penitent thief: he feared God. God was real to him. God was his creator, and he knew that a pot can't take up arms against the potter and come away victorious. It is fitting that creatures bow in submission before their creator and subject all their life to his wisdom. It is even more fitting that sinful creatures bow before God in holy fear, instead of railing against God as if a rebel ant should kick against the foothills of Mt. Everest and demand that it flatten out so the ant can walk across.

Third, the penitent thief admitted that he had done wrong: "We are receiving the due reward of our deeds" (v. 41). He had no desire to save face any more; he had no more will to assert himself. He was here and laid open before the God he feared and there was no way to hide his guilt. I know people right now who are in trouble. But instead of laying down their self-righteous defenses, they are devising every means to finagle and distort so as to appear innocent and cool. The penitent thief gave it up. It's a hopeless tack, anyway, before an all-knowing God!

Fourth, not only did he admit to wrong and guilt, he accepted his punishment as deserved. "We are under the sentence of condemnation justly." This is the real test of humility before God. Many will mouth the confession of sin: "God be merciful to us miserable sinners," but when some trouble comes, they get

angry at him. And this anger reveals that they do not really feel undeserving before God. They still feel, deep down, that they have some rights before God. There are not many people like Job, who, when he lost everything, said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked shall I return; the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." But this penitent thief did become like Job in the last minutes of his life - he took his suffering without complaint, and feared God.

Fifth, the thief acknowledged Jesus' righteousness: "This man had done nothing wrong." It didn't make any difference to the first thief if Jesus was right or wrong. If he could drive the get-away car--that's all that mattered. But it matters a lot to Jesus if we think his life was good or bad. Jesus does not want to drive a get-away car; he wants to be followed because we admire him. We must say with the thief: "This man has done nothing wrong." This man only does what is good. This man only speaks the truth. This man is worthy of our faith and allegiance and imitation.

And then, sixth, the thief goes a step further and acknowledges that indeed, Jesus is a King. "Remember me when you come into your Kingdom." Even though he is suffering now, Jesus has the mark of a King. For those who have eyes to see, he has a power here on the cross--a power of love that makes him King over all his tormentors. He is not only good, he is powerful, and one day will vindicate his great name, and every knee will bow and confess that Jesus is Lord--to the glory of God, the Father.

And finally, the penitent thief does one more thing. He fears God, admits wrong, accepts justice, acknowledges the goodness and power of Jesus. Now he pleads for help. "Jesus, remember when you come into your Kingdom." Both thieves wanted to be saved from death. But O how differently they sought their salvation: 1) "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" 2) "Jesus, remember when you come into your Kingdom!" There is an infinite qualitative difference between "Save me!" and "Save me!"

Now what motive does Jesus give us to follow in the steps of the penitent thief? There is a fearful silence toward the railing thief: not a word recorded of Jesus to him. Perhaps a final pitying glance. But no promise. No hope.

But to the penitent Jesus says: "Today you will be with me in Paradise." This was almost too good. There would not even be a delay. Today the Spirit of Jesus and the renewed Spirit of the thief would be in union in Paradise. The promise would be without delay.

What is this paradise? The word is found in two other places in the New Testament. First, in 2 Cor. 12:3: Paul says, "I know a man in Christ, who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven - whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know; God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise--whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know, God knows--and he heard things which cannot be told, which man may not utter." Thus Paradise is the heavenly abode of God where there are found things prepared by God for those who love him, which are utterly indescribable (1 Cor. 2:9). The second place the word "Paradise" is found is in Rev. 2:7. Here Jesus says to the church at Ephesus, "To him who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God." And if we look at the end of the book of Revelation we find that the tree of life is in the heavenly city of God. In Rev. 22:1 John said, "Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations."

But in all this, the one thing that Jesus chose to mention to the repentant thief on the cross (if you can only say one thing, what do you say?) "You will be with me today." You have to love and admire Jesus a lot for that to be a solace when you leave this life behind. It reminds me of that great spiritual, "When I come to die, give me Jesus... You can have all this world, give me Jesus."

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-piper/today-you-will-be-with-me-in-paradise/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net