

Lent 2: February 20/21, 2016

Words of Life: Paradise

Text: Luke 23:43: *Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*

Words can have incredible power. The place and the person speaking the words can give them particular power. When that place is the cross and that person is Jesus, remarkable things happen. Today a couple of criminals discover that power. The exchange that Jesus has with them is as memorable as it is powerful. His powerful word? *Today you will be with me in Paradise.*



You're in a crowded theater, someone shouts "fire," and there is a mad dash for the exits with many people trampled in the process. *Every man for himself.* A terrorist rushes into a crowded restaurant firing indiscriminately, people scramble for cover, and many perish before the attacker is subdued. *Every man for himself.* The Titanic hits an iceberg in the North Atlantic, the ship rapidly takes on water, and many people leap into the ocean only to freeze and drown. *Every man for himself.* It's the best we can do when we are in



peril. "Save yourself." Exactly the words hurled at Jesus, first by Roman soldiers and then by a criminal on one side. It's the best word we can come up with when imperiled, and it is hollow counsel. There are simply too many things in life over which we have no control. When the soldiers mocked Jesus enjoining him to save himself, they no more thought he could do that than that he could withstand the might of Rome. *What a dreamer if he thought he could be Rome's conqueror!*



Yet "save yourself," when it comes to things eternal, has not discouraged many from trying, despite the inability to do so. Long before the time of Christ the Egyptians practiced mummification, at least for royalty, as a means to ensure safe passage into the next life. Egyptian care with embalming and wrapping bodies, combined with the dry desert air, has preserved many mummies up to our very age. Unfortunately, what was done with such

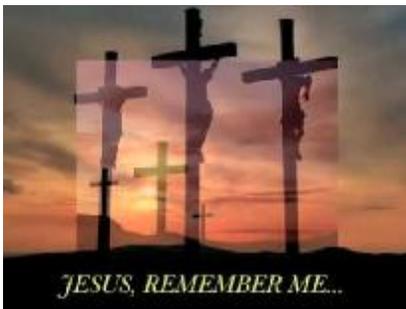
care for the body had no capability of preserving the spirit for the next life. Lest you think such practice only ancient history, in our present age we have but a new form of it.



It's called cryopreservation. Cryopreservation is a process whereby the body is preserved by cooling to sub-zero temperatures. At low enough temperatures, any cellular degeneration is effectively stopped; which is not to say that cells are not damaged in the process. Like mummification, it is only for the elite due to the expense. Perhaps the most notable cryopreserved individual is Boston Red Sox outfielder Ted Williams.



Since “save yourself” by these means is out of reach for the rank and file, many console themselves by viewing life as a “zero-sum game.” Meaning what? We were nothing before and brought nothing into this world. We will be nothing after and take nothing from this world. To my point, how many obituaries do you now read in which there is no funeral. I scanned the obits last week to find among others this one, with the name changed: “*Anyone*, Patrick J. age 79, of St. Charles, MO, died Sunday, February 14, 2016. Contact (636) 123-4567 or visit baue.com.” Nothing more. A zero-sum game. How sad. Especially when you consider that God offers a positive-sum outcome.

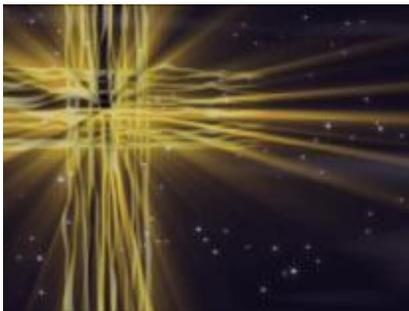


One criminal railed at Jesus. “Are you not the Christ?” he says with scorn. “Save yourself, and while you’re at it, save us!” But don’t forget, there are crosses on both sides of Jesus. The other criminal has had a revelation. We don’t know what he had heard about Jesus before this. We don’t know his background, his family, his religious instruction. We do know that something went wrong. Something that landed him under judgment by the Romans and guilty of capital punishment. He’s used his final hours to do some

soul searching. And that search has not been fruitless. For along the way the Holy Spirit has opened his eyes to the man on the center cross. And as he gazes on Jesus his eyes get wider and wider. He cannot but speak when abuse comes pouring from the other criminal. First comes censure: “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?” Then, comes confession of sin: “We indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds.” Finally, comes confession of faith: “This man has done nothing wrong.” Faith gives voice to a plea that has always been on the lips of God’s people in their hour of great need: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Remember me. Treat me not as my sins deserve but according to your tender mercy. Remember me.



Ever been there? At the end of your rope with no place to go? *Jesus, remember me.* Your spouse has left you and your future looks bleak? *Jesus, remember me.* You’ve lost your job and your bills are mounting? *Jesus, remember me.* You’re going into surgery and you’re scared beyond belief? *Jesus, remember me.* There is no further therapy and the cancer wins. *Jesus, remember me.* It is a prayer that Jesus longs to hear above all other prayers. When we fall on our knees before his throne of grace and throw ourselves totally upon his mercy. *Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to thy cross I cling.* To “Jesus, save yourself,” he replies, “No, my beloved, I will save you.” And then he proceeds to do exactly that, as God lays on him our sin and rebellion. By the time Jesus’ ordeal on the cross is done, sin will be paid, justice will be satisfied, and forgiveness will be won, No, my beloved, I will save you.



And what a salvation it is! What do we know by Jesus’ simple declaration to the criminal who had the audacity of faith to pray, “Jesus remember me.” He heard words that were for him the best words he had ever heard. Not “your husband has returned in tears,” though that be a good word. Not “you have landed a new job,” though that would be most welcome. Not even “the cancer is in remission,” though that be the prayer of countless people. Jesus tells the penitent thief, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” Three things we learn from Jesus’ promise. First, the last breath of this mortal life is the *first breath* of eternal life. We do not languish in prolonged sleep like space farers put into sleep chambers. *Today* Jesus promises. It’s why at a Christian funeral we can celebrate the present possession of salvation by the departed. Second, the first breath of eternity ushers us into the *presence of Jesus.* *You will be with me,* he says. That’s where Jesus is. It’s where we want to be. Forget the clouds and harps, the mansions and golden streets. Jesus is who we desire, and to see him is to

have the fullness of joy. And lastly, we join him in the *Paradise* of God. Where he gathers all the believing redeemed until that great day of the Lord when he rolls up human history to its

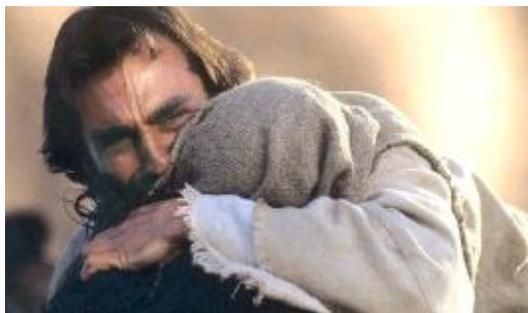


climactic finish.

Paradise. From an ancient word meaning “park” or “garden.” Reminiscent of anything? Like “Now the Lord God planted a garden in the east, in Eden, and there he put the man he had formed. And God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” God’s description of his garden, his paradise, is of a garden restored. As it was in the beginning. When all creation was in perfect harmony, and we enjoyed perfect companionship with God.



What could be better than that? Only the glory to be revealed in us in God’s great day of resurrection. For in that day we will be reunited body and soul as God intentioned for us to be. In that day the perishable will be clothed with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality. That imperishable and immortal self will have one striking difference from the body and soul that we now possess. In that day we will have glorified bodies like unto Christ’s glorified body. Bodies that are not subject to the ravages of disease and aging. Bodies that are freed from bondage to sin. Bodies in which we will be totally at ease, comfortable in our own skin. It will be as Henry Ward Beecher uttered in his last words, “Now comes the mystery!”



Whatever that life looks like, it will be lived in perfect fellowship with Jesus. Like the relationship Adam and Eve had with God as they walked in the cool of the garden. Like the closeness that Moses had, whom the Lord knew face to face. Like the intimacy David had, he who was a man after God’s own heart. This is our destiny. Brought into striking focus by the plea of a penitent thief and the grace of a loving Savior. *Today you will be with me in Paradise. Amen.*

