

An email comes in on your computer. It is from a man who claims that his government has been toppled in Nigeria, and he has 20 million dollars in a bank that he wants to transfer to your bank account, while he flees the country. If you are willing to help him, he will pay you 10% of the money or 2 million dollars. Just respond to his email and give out necessary personal information about yourself. A promise for 2 million dollars. It sounds too good to be true. And it is. No 2 million dollars is going to come your way. The crook is just trying to get personal information about you, so he can drain your pocketbook in some way.

Just about every day some sort of junk mail comes via email or via our mail carrier to our homes and it promises us quick riches if we just return the entry form. I still remember the time when I went to a Time Share 2 hour meeting in Massachusetts, where I was promised a rubber life raft. Oh, I got the life raft, but I am lucky that I got out of there alive without signing my life away on an endless Time share vacation. That life raft was no Lake Michigan quality, rather bathtub quality. It ended up in one of my wife's garage sales.

This week, we are going to take a look at a promise that comes to us, not via email, USPS, or via a magazine. Rather this promise comes to us from the Cross of Calvary. To the penitent thief on the cross, who first heard them, these words must have seemed too good to be true. But these words are far too precious to throw away or discard as a scam. For Jesus Christ himself said, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus spoke a Word of Promise. A Promising Word.

Two thieves were crucified with our Savior. One on his right. One on his left. Both joined the crowds in mocking him. Scoffing at him. They even dared to blaspheme him. But then one of the thieves grew silent. By the grace of God, he had a change of heart. He met Jesus face to face and heart to heart. Already on the way to Mt. Calvary he began to notice how different Christ was. He fussed and cursed, Christ endured everything without saying a word. When he was crucified and his own heart was filled with nothing but resentment and anger, he heard Christ pray: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." While he was wondering who this man on the center cross might be, the Roman soldiers came with the superscriptions which would state the reason for their crucifixion. The notice tacked above his own head and the other criminals head read simply: Robber. To his amazement the notice above Christ's head mentioned no crime. Instead it read: Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. Suddenly, moved by God's Spirit, he remembered the Messiah who was to come, who would deliver his people from sin and establish an eternal kingdom.

He proceeds to rebuke his partner in crime. He admits his guilt. He defends his Savior. All with the words, "Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But his man has done nothing wrong."

Did the Roman soldiers hear the thief's confession? Maybe. But it wouldn't make a bit of difference. I'm sure they had heard many confessions before. The excruciating agony of crucifixion would drag out words of remorse from the most hardened criminal. But the soldiers didn't care. Even if this criminal did have a last minute change of heart, he was still going to die. He was getting what he deserved. An execution for crimes against the state. And then, a pauper's grave, if that. By tomorrow or next week, this criminal would be forgotten.

But what about the crowds that day? The passerbys? Did anyone pay attention to the thief's change of heart? Did anybody care? Or did the crowd just breathe a sigh of relief that such a terrible criminal was finally taken off the streets? Did someone say, "Good riddance you bad rubbish!"

Who 'd bother to listen to a thief, a crook? Who would want to remember such a wicked sinner? Nobody, repeat nobody, except Jesus.

The man, somehow converted in the 11th hour, offered a simple prayer of faith. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Why should Jesus remember him? If ever there was a man who fit the words of hymnwriter, nothing in my hands I bring, it was this thief.

But Jesus didn't turn away from this sinner. He couldn't. For Jesus was hanging on the cross because he came to seek and save that which was lost. Even the badly lost. The hopelessly lost-like this criminal.

And sinners like you and me. We don't deserve what Jesus came to do for us either. But we don't like hearing it! Me, like that thief? I don't think so. I'm a hardworking productive member of society. I love my spouse and dote on my kids. I go to church on Sunday. I even tithed. Sound familiar? Our Savior once talked about a Pharisee who stood up and prayed about himself: God, I thank you that I am not as other men are-robbers, evildoers, adulterers-or even like this tax collector. Smugness and self assurance. Too often these are our sins.

Not that the list stops there. Adultery and divorce smash homes of church members too. Alcohol abuse and drug abuse plague some of us and some of our children too. Envy, murder, strife, malice, gossip. Ouch. That too. And did I mention greed? We need to see ourselves in that thief on the cross. We are every bit as guilty. Every bit as undeserving.

Then marvel all the more at the word of promise Jesus spoke from his cross. Today, you will be with me in paradise. Did the thief cry tears of joy when he heard these words? I don't know, but I do. How undeserving I am of my Savior's gracious promise. But of course, Jesus knew that. That's why he went to his cross in the first place. And that's why he hung there. He hung there for me, so that one day I could be with him in paradise. As Paul once said, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-of whom I am the worst."

This word of promise is so much more than I deserve! And it is so much more than the thief expected.

What did the thief ask? Lord, remember me. He deserved nothing, so he asked for very little. His simple prayer reminds me of the Canaanite woman who once came to Jesus. She sought healing for her demon possessed daughter. She prayed, "Lord Help me!" Jesus replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and to toss it to their dogs." She said, Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters table. Crumbs of grace. That's all the mother wanted. Jesus healed her daughter, that very hour. A feast of grace! That's what mother and daughter received from their Savior.

Lord, remember me. Crumbs of grace. That's all the thief asked for. Christ's answer. "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise. Come again? The thief asked only to be remembered! What did Jesus give? A word of promise as big as eternity itself. To a man in excruciating pain, Jesus promised complete relief. Today!

Not tomorrow. Not after a few thousand years in an imaginary divine rehab some call purgatory. Today, the thief would be free! Free of his pain! Free of his guilt. The thief only asked, Lord remember me. But Jesus gave him so much more than he expected. You will be with me in paradise.

With me. When a young man asks his girl, "Will you marry me?" he dreams of spending the rest of his life with her. What is the believer's dream? As the bride of Christ, we dream to be with our groom, the Lord Jesus, forever. By God's grace to us in Christ, we will be.

Where? In paradise. Imagine how sweet those words were to the thief! To be far from that cross! Far from the Place of the skull littered with bones of past executions, filled with the stench of Gehenna, Jerusalem's garbage dump. But even more important for the penitent thief? To be far from his sins. Far from his guilt. Far from the everlasting fires of God's Judgment. Instead to be in paradise. To be in Eden regained. To be in a perfect place, where there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain. A safe and secure place so holy and pure, that the city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.

Overwhelming! I have often said I will be more than happy to spend eternity on the very edge of heaven. In an unassuming little shack. For even shacks will be perfect there. I know I don't even deserve that much. Yet Jesus gives me so much more. Gold-paved streets, walls covered in jewels, and a mansion. That's what he has promised me. He said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."

Several years ago, I read a book called, "90 minutes in Heaven", that Lorraine Ervin from church asked me to read. It was a book about a Baptist minister who was clinically dead after a car accident on a bridge, but came back to life on this earth 90 minutes later. During the time he was dead, the minister describes how he was approaching a beautiful city, with a large gate. How Christian friends and family members that he had known from long ago, came up to him and welcomed him to heaven. They didn't talk to each other, but were reading each other's thoughts. He could just feel their love. In the book he spoke about how he heard the most beautiful music and singing he had ever heard before. 10 different songs being sung at one time, but all blended in beautifully. He was so at peace, so filled with overwhelming joy. The book emphasized that Paradise was immediate. In other words, Today.

Today, you will be with me in paradise. This was Jesus' word of promise to the penitent thief. But was it too good to be true? After all, just a few hours later, Jesus would die on his cross. How could a dead Christ keep his promise?

A dead Christ couldn't. But a Living Savior can. We have Easter as our proof. We have a Savior's resurrection as our Father's guarantee. The thief enjoys paradise even now. A grinning ex-con is walking the golden streets of paradise. One day you and I will too. We have our Savior's word on it. Here is a promise you can really count on. Amen.