

The Second Word: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

As Jesus was hanging there on the cross – suffering horribly in the scorching noonday sun – He had on either side of him men convicted of capital crimes. Unlike Jesus, we understand these men to have been lawfully convicted – not that their punishment fit the crimes, just that they were, indeed guilty of the crimes with which they were charged.

One man took no responsibility for what he had done. He hung there on the cross, in pain, but also angry that he had gotten caught, and even angrier that the people who milled around the foot of the crosses were talking about this Jesus who was hanging next to him. The sign over **His** head read, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.”

“Hey. King of the Jews! They say you’ve been prophesying and healing people. Someone said you even raised somebody from the dead. If that’s true – if you have God’s power – why don’t you save yourself? Or better yet ... why don’t you save us all? Hey! King of the Jews! What’s the matter? Are you out of God power? Yeah. That’s what I thought. There’s never been a God. He is a made up thing that you people who don’t know how to take care of yourselves fall back on when you don’t know what else to do. Nobody ever took care of me. Nobody. It’s always been just me.”

Then the other criminal spoke up. “Why don’t you shut up?! Are you so stupid, or so blind that you can’t see that this man is not like us? We deserve what we are getting. We did the crimes and now we’re paying for them. But this man has done nothing wrong. They just hate Him for who He is.” Then he tried to crane his neck and look over at Jesus, and he said, “Jesus. Please remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Through the pain, through the humiliation, through the sense of abandonment, Jesus looked at this repentant criminal and with all of the grace and love of the Father who loved **Him**, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Today you will be in Paradise ... the place that the Father made for Adam and Eve. Today you will be restored to that perfection from which all humans came, before they chose to be like the other criminal. Today, you will be **with me** – which, in itself, is the ultimate definition of Paradise.

On one side of Jesus was that part of the world that will never believe, no matter what happens, or what doesn’t happen in their lives. That criminal is emblematic of the only people in all of creation who are beyond the healing and redemptive power of Jesus’ love – those who refuse to acknowledge or accept it. The unrepentant criminal is that part of the world that believes itself to BE its own God. And even as he hung there, he refused to see the emptiness he had chosen for himself. He refused, even at death’s doorstep, to see the gaping hole where the life he lived had created where his soul should have been.

But Jesus offered – and offers – Paradise; communion with the Father in Heaven for ALL those who repent and seek admittance.