

## “Today, You Will Be With Me in Paradise”

How do we live a life of faith? What are the characteristics of faith in God? Are there ordinary people in the Bible who can give us an example to follow?

I'd like to suggest an unlikely person to be a role model for our faith... for an example of faith we can look to one of the criminals who was crucified with Jesus.

To learn more about him, we need to think back to the day we call Good Friday, when Jesus was put to death on the cross. As Jesus was dying, he spoke 7 times (traditionally called “Jesus’ 7 Last Words). Do you remember what he said?

His first word from the cross was, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” He said this after he had been nailed to the cross by the Roman soldiers, there on the hill called “The Skull,” just outside the city walls of Jerusalem. Jesus was not the only one crucified that day. There was a cross on his left, and one on his right. The men who were dying there alongside Jesus were thugs... hardened criminals; today likely they'd be called terrorists. We don't know the exact nature of their crimes, but they were probably in one of the lawless gangs that violently robbed travelers and were trying to overthrow the Roman government.

Now, one of these criminals joined the voices of the crowd and the soldiers in mocking Jesus as he was dying. With sarcasm, he said, “You thought you were the Messiah, didn't you? Well, prove it: save yourself and us!

But then, the other criminal responded with a rebuke: “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”

With these words, this criminal sets an example of faith for us. There are 4 characteristics of his faith—4 characteristics we can copy.

First of all, he shows compassion. He shows compassion to Jesus. It's not what we would have expected. After all, the man is dying a terrible, painful death. It would be natural to lash out in anger, bitterness, and fear,

as the first criminal did. Or at the very least, to remain silent, not to get involved, not to speak up for what was right. But instead, this man sees Jesus suffering; he hears Jesus' amazing words of forgiveness for his tormentors. He realizes deep in his soul that Jesus is innocent. The heart of this hardened criminal is softened; he allows himself to feel empathy & understanding toward Jesus and he speaks out on his behalf.

That's where the life of faith begins for us, too: as we show compassion. All around us, there are people who are suffering. For some, the pain they carry is obvious. For others, it's just below the surface—we see it reflected in their eyes, or hear it behind the words they speak... And for still others, the pain is deep within; at most we catch a fleeting glimpse.

God calls us to respond with compassion, to take the time to listen, to try to understand, to find ways to show our support, to provide encouragement, to reach out with helpful actions. This week, as we go about our daily lives, let us look for places where God is nudging our heart toward compassion.

This, then, is the first characteristic of faith which we learn from the criminal on the cross: to show compassion. The second characteristic is to confess our sin... confess our sin. The criminal's words reveal his awareness of his sins: "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong."

We hear these words, and we think of our own sins, our own misdeeds, all the ways we have turned away from God, all the ways we have hurt those around us. We have broken God's laws, in ways both big and small, and we are deserving of death.

Of all the people who ever lived, only Jesus lived a sinless life. Yet, he died on the cross—not for his sins, but for ours... so that our sins would be forgiven, and we would be made right with God, our relationship with God restored.

Because of Jesus' death on the cross, the way is open for us to confess our sins to God, knowing that through Christ, our sins are forgiven. The words of 1 John 1:9 in the Bible put it clearly: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Thus, we see in the criminal crucified alongside Jesus the characteristics of a life of faith: to show compassion and to confess our sins. And then, a third characteristic: to trust in Jesus. On Good Friday, that's what happened next. The man spoke, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." What an expression of faith! This hardened criminal believes: he believes that Jesus is the promised King, the Messiah, and that his kingdom is at hand—even though all the evidence seems to be to the contrary. So what does he ask of Jesus? Not to be rescued from the cross, but simply this, that Jesus will remember him.

Have you ever said this prayer, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom"? There are so many situations in life that can overwhelm us: health issues, personal problems, addictions, family difficulties, financial burdens, fears about the future, grief... Jesus knows all about the struggles in our lives. We can bring all our needs to him in prayer, trusting him: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

I think of St. Paul's words in his letter to the Romans: "It is Christ—Christ who died, and, more than that, was raised from the dead—who is at God's right hand, and indeed pleads our cause." (Romans 8: 34) Jesus remembers our needs there in the heavenly kingdom, before the throne of God. We can put our trust in him.

This, then, is the 3<sup>rd</sup> characteristic of a life of faith. The 4<sup>th</sup> characteristic is to receive Christ's promise... to receive Christ's promise from the cross: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." The criminal, dying alongside Jesus, simply asked Jesus to remember him. But Jesus' response, Jesus' promise, went far deeper; he promised him a place in paradise, in heaven. Death would not be the end for the criminal; he would live forever in heaven. Jesus gave him the gift of salvation, not by saving him from death, but by offering him eternal life.

"Today you will be with me in Paradise." We notice some amazing things about Jesus' promise here. First, there was nothing that this criminal did to deserve a place in heaven. This was not something he earned through holy living or good deeds. It was fully a gift of Jesus' grace.

Second, this was not a promise for some distant future. It was an immediate promise. The criminal would die on the cross, and in the next instant, he would be in heaven with Jesus. Today, he would experience the complete joy and peace and love of heaven.

Third, there is no description of paradise here, no details about heaven... except for one: the criminal will be with Jesus. With Jesus. And that's everything he needs to know. Heaven is not a vague dream-like state, but a place where he will be with Jesus, where he will see Jesus face-to-face (1 Corinthians 13:12), in deeply personal way.

The promise Christ gave to this criminal from the cross is the same promise he offers each one of us: "Today, you will be with me in paradise." It's nothing we can earn, it is a free gift of his grace. He already has a place prepared for us in heaven. A pastor explains it this way: "There is nothing we can do that will make God love us more. And, there is nothing we can do that will make God love us less." Jesus' love for us is full & complete. All we need to do is to accept his love.

We don't know a lot of details about heaven... but this we do know. Jesus has promised that we will be with him. Think of the words of the favorite hymn:

God sent his Son, they called him Jesus; he came to love, heal, and forgive;  
He lived and died to buy my pardon, an empty grave is there to prove my Savior lives.

And then one day I'll cross the river, I'll fight life's final war with pain;  
And then as death gives way to victory, I'll see the lights of glory and I'll know he reigns.

Jesus promised, "Today you will be with me in paradise." To live a life of faith is to receive this promise.

And so, in the days ahead, let us look to the example of the criminal crucified alongside Jesus as a role model for how to live in faith. Let us show compassion, and confess our sins, and trust in Jesus, and receive his promise: "Today, you will be with me in paradise." Amen.