

The man and woman stumble out of the garden into a strange, harsh world. Before this, everything had been beautiful. God had come and walked with them in that garden, and God even went so far as to entrust them with this Word: "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (Gen. 2:16-17)

But when the moment of truth came; when the serpent spoke to them by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; Adam caved. He let Eve eat. He ate, too. Everything changed.

When God finds them hiding, He announces some harsh new realities.

The woman will experience pain during childbirth. Eve was given the privilege of bearing physical life into the world. Now that moment of joy will be clouded instead with agony--a reminder that every child will face death because of sin. The man's work is cursed: As Adam tills the ground for food, the ground will produce thorns and thistles instead; these will be constant reminders that sin is in the world. For both, and for their offspring, death is now certain. They will return to the dust.

The consequences continue. To clothe Adam and Eve, the Lord uses animal skins; a sacrifice must be made to cover up their shame. Furthermore, they are evicted from the Garden of Eden, cast out of Paradise. The chance to eat from the Tree of Life is gone, and they make their way out into the fallen world.

But God is not done yet. He promises the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel" (Gen. 3:15). There will be sin and pain and death. But Someone is coming to crush the head of evil and restore Paradise. There will be a new Tree of Life someday, though it will look far different than the one Adam and Eve left behind.

On a hill called Golgotha, three men are hung on crosses one Friday. Two of the men are convicted as robbers, and there is little doubt that these are violent men who are getting what they deserve. The One in the middle, however, is hardly a violent man; He hangs on the cross because He claims to be the Son of God, the King of the Jews.

He certainly doesn't look like a King, much less the Son of God. There is no cloud of glory around Him; and if one believes that gods don't bleed, He certainly fails the test. He is completely exposed; perhaps the crown of thorns remains. His hands and feet are spiked to rough wood, and he appears helpless to all who look at Him. No one sees the truth. Except one. One of the robbers sees.

The Roman soldiers have preached the law to this robber in a most effective way. He has sinned, and he is getting his paycheck for those sins, right now. He has heard Jesus speak twice; the first time He has prayed forgiveness for His enemies, the second time He has cared for His mother. So the criminal speaks to his fellow convict: "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward for our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." Then he says to the Savior, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

It's incredible. He agrees that he has sinned, and that he is only getting what he deserves. He goes on to declare that Jesus is completely innocent and sinless, for He has done nothing wrong. He also acknowledges that Jesus is Lord, and that He will live after this death and come into His kingdom.

This thief's heart has been broken open by the innocent suffering of Jesus.

The Lord will not leave the world without a preacher. If the religious leaders, civic officials, disciples and worshipers fail to proclaim the Gospel, Jesus will call a criminal at his death to announce the truth: that He is the Lord of a kingdom of grace.

It is then that Jesus speaks a third time: "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Paradise is back, regained for the thief on the cross. It is certainly not his because of his life of good works and service to his fellow man. It is most certainly his because of the service of the Savior. On that cross, Jesus is suffering God's wrath for that thief. And for Adam. And for all the world. If Jesus suffers all of God's wrath for sin on that cross, then God has no wrath left for us. Therefore, the thief is welcomed into Paradise, for the sake of Jesus. Paradise regained.

This is hard for us to comprehend, since we lack one advantage of Adam and Eve: We have never been to Paradise. We've never seen things the way they ought to be. That makes it extremely important that we pay attention to these words spoken at the cross.

Whatever else Paradise is; whatever else heaven is like, we get the best definition right here. Jesus says to the thief, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." Did you hear that? With Me. With Jesus. Paradise means being with Jesus without anything to stand in your way. When paradise was lost, Adam and Eve ran from God and hid. With Jesus' death on a cross, the gates to heaven have been thrown open, and you can run to God. The Bible repeatedly tells us that this is the substance of paradise. St. Paul writes: "And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore comfort one another with these words." The book of Revelation describes paradise as the City of God, where God, the King of Light, lives right there with His people. That's getting very 'wide angle,' though. All the thief knew is that He was going to be with Jesus in his kingdom, and that was enough.

And you know what? Some of the deepest growth happens when you learn to accept that Jesus is enough.

People may mistreat you; disrespect you; withhold their affections from you; but Jesus has held nothing back. His cross is proof that He wants you to be with Him.

You may not have the biggest, best, newest, shiniest or fanciest; but Jesus says that you are more valuable to him than silver or gold. His cross says that He would die to gain you.

You may feel like you're never going to find the love you want; and you won't, until your heart is broken open by the innocent suffering of Jesus. You won't be able to love another person well until you find completeness in Jesus; until you find yourself unconditionally loved and accepted at the cross. But once you are convinced that Jesus really is enough, then you can move out into healthy relationships. Your expectations won't crush the relationship because your deepest needs are already being met in the love of Jesus.

I could keep going, but instead I want to just challenge you to take a moment, right now, to apply the message to yourself. In what part of your life do you really need to grab onto the truth that Jesus is enough? Of course, He is more than enough; Jesus is God's generosity in the flesh, but you understand what I mean, don't you?

Where do you need to work on making Christ your contentment? Where do you need His opinion of you to matter more than anyone else's? What area of your life needs to be invaded with the thought that "Jesus is enough"? And, do you believe that He is?

How could you not? I mean, as his life is slipping away, he's preaching the gospel. He's comforting the conscience of a brokenhearted convict. He opens the kingdom to everyone who wants to be with Him. To know this love is to have one foot in paradise already.

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St. Mark Lutheran Church, Chesterland, Ohio

Pastor Mark Matzke

