

Luke 23: 32-43

The Two Criminals

Introduction

- Have you ever heard the Latin expression 'Memento Mori'? (There is actually a smartphone game application called Memento Mori that seems popular recently.) The expression actually means: 'Remember that you have to die' or 'Don't forget that you will die someday'. It reminds us that we will all eventually die, that our lives are transient. It reminds us of sin and death. And it tells us to live a meaningful life. We could even say that it recommends us to humble ourselves before God, who controls our lives, and urges us to accept his grace and salvation.
- There are also occurrences when this sentence 'Memento Mori' is used with the opposite meaning. In these cases, it would mean that since we're going to die, life is short and we should do as we please and indulge in the pleasures of the moment. It would praise a hedonistic view of life. It would advise us to eat, drink and get merry, because no one knows what will happen tomorrow, because we might die tomorrow.
- In today's Bible passage, we encounter two criminals. Just as the saying 'Memento Mori' has two opposite meanings, these two men end their lives with very different attitudes. They are both on Jesus' side on the cross, but one of them mocks at Jesus, while the other accepts and believes him. The first one heads to an empty and desperate death. But the second one receives hope in the promise to be with Jesus in paradise. We will all have to face death some day. Nobody can escape from it.

Luke 23: 32-43

32 Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 33 And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. 34 And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. 35 And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" 36 The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine 37 and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" 38 There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." 39 One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" 40 But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." 42 And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43 And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

- Let's focus on Jesus and the two criminal beside him on the cross. The three of them are facing death. First of all, let's talk about how we should accept death, since we will all have to face it some day. What is the meaning of death? And what should our behavior be like when confronted to death? Secondly, I want to encourage you to look toward Jesus, who defeated death through the cross. He offered us forgiveness for our sins, he made us free from the fear of death, and thus he showed us how much God loves us. This is the Gospel: the good news.

- And thirdly, I want to encourage you to engrave in your heart that your life is transformed through Jesus' death on the cross. We'll talk about how the good news of the cross impacts the course of our life. To summarize, here are the three points of today's message: 1) our attitude toward death, 2) Jesus, who defeated death, and 3) the power of the cross.

1. Our attitude toward death

- According to the Bible, when Jesus was crucified, he was surrounded on his right and left by two criminals, who were condemned to the same execution. At the time, the cross was a way of inflicting the capital punishment. It was applied to national traitors, political offenders, and especially to people of low social status, like servants. It was also feared by the people as it was the cruelest and most painful form of execution. In the Bible, the cross was considered as a curse from God.
- These two criminals are on the cross, suffering the same agony, but they both have a very different attitude toward death. We can think of it as an image of the diverse feelings and attitude we have toward death. Let's read verses 39 to 41 again.

Luke 23:39 One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" 40 But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong."

- One of the criminals is half desperate. He is cursing Jesus and letting explode his fear and anger because he cannot hold it anymore. It seems like he wants to say that his death is unreasonable, that it is an unfair and impossible judgment. On the other hand, the second criminal is looking back at himself as he faces death and he is humble. He realizes that he cannot avoid death, and he understands that the cross is the penalty he deserved. He has an attitude of repentance.
- How about you? Do you accept death? What is your attitude toward death, toward the death of people close to you? What are your feelings? In a sense, people today often try to control death, and think of it as something to overcome.
- We can make efforts to think of death as something natural and inevitable that ends our lives. We are like plants and animals, when they die, they return to the earth that absorbs them, and nothing is left. So we try to think of death as if it was nothing, as something we should not fear. But our problem is that we cannot get rid of the fear and sadness that come with it.
- Another problem is that it is difficult to accept death as something natural. Imagine that a teenager dies. His family had expectations for his future, he had many talents. Would we really say in that case that death is only natural, and that nothing comes afterwards? Death takes everything away: the meaning of life, the fun, the joy, the purpose of life.
- That's not all. Just like the other criminal admits his guilt and shows regrets, we also feel remorse, the weight of our sin, when facing death. We become more conscious of our sin. As a pastor, I have spent much time with people who were dying. When death approaches, people look back on their own lives. And they are often full of regrets.
- It is like a deep dissatisfaction with themselves that comes to the surface. When death approaches, we think about the things we did not say to the ones we love, what we didn't do for them, the things we didn't apologize for, the things we did not show thankfulness for, the

moments when we refused to be kind or when we hurt others. We think about what we couldn't forgive, the opportunities we missed, the guilt we feel for wasting our lives.

- We are also overwhelmed with our fears and uncertainty about the future. We are afraid of being judged. This feeling can be more or less strong depending on the kind of life we lived, but death also makes us aware of and shows us clearly the dissatisfaction with our own selves deep down in our hearts.
- In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul speaks at length about death, and says that the sting of death is sin.

1 Corinthians 15: 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

- We all know in our hearts (even if it might be hidden deep down) that God is our Creator and that he is worthy of our worship, that he deserves our obedience. But we have repressed that knowledge in order to claim sovereignty over our lives. That is why death produces regrets, remorse and fear.
- But don't forget that between the two criminals on the cross, there is Jesus. He knows how painful, how fearful death is, and he is right beside us. Even though all things are transient, God's love for us never changes. And God showed us his love through Jesus on the cross.

2. Jesus, the One who defeated death

- The two criminals were looking at Jesus, who was crucified like them, right beside them. It was as if Jesus himself was also a criminal. They were both looking at Jesus when they heard his words. They knew what suffering his was enduring.

Luke 23:34 And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments.

- Wouldn't you surprised to hear such words of forgiveness and love from a man who is suffering on the cross? He is praying for forgiveness for the very ones who are cursing him and who crucified him, and they are right in front of him. Perhaps a number of criminals were crucified at that time. But none of them manifested love like Jesus, seeking forgiveness not for themselves but for those who wrongfully tormented him.
- The criminals on the cross said about Jesus: "This man has done nothing wrong." After Jesus died, the centurion in charge of his execution said: "Certainly this man was innocent!" (Luke 23:47) and he praised God. We also read in Mark 15:39: "When the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"
- What we can see here is the love of God. Rather than living in fear of death, or telling ourselves that death is natural, isn't it much better to turn toward Jesus' death, and understand that we are protected by the love of God that never changes? Death takes away everything, except the only thing we can truly trust in: God's love. If we do not let God's love embrace us, we will constantly and fundamentally feel insecure and threatened by death.
- Jesus was crucified like a criminal in order to free us from our fate of death. He became our representative. When Jesus died on the cross, he defeated death for us, and he made us free from it. What does that mean?
- In the past few weeks, everyone was excited about the World Baseball Classic. Even my wife, who is not so interested in sports, was overjoyed when she saw Japan win the game against

Mexico on the 21st. This kind of excitement is just as if we were part of the game and won. Those who represent us fought and won, and those who were just spectators are also part of the victory.

- This is also how Jesus took our place and our sin on the cross. Through His death, He overcame the judgment that we deserved. Therefore, we too rejoice in His victory. Jesus challenged and won against our greatest enemies, sin and death.
- Jesus not only took a risk, he offered his life, and in doing so, he defeated sin and death. In taking our place, Jesus bore the penalty we deserved for our sins, the penalty of death.
- The incredible thing is that because Jesus is a man of perfect and blameless love for God and for his neighbor, death could not have a hold on him. Hallelujah! Jesus rose from the dead.

Acts 2:24 God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

- Most religions talk about death and the afterlife. In general, they teach that we must live a good life in order to enter eternity. But as death approaches, we all see more and more clearly that we have not done our best, that we have not lived as we should have. And so we are haunted by the fear of death until the very end.
- The message of the Bible (Christianity) is different though. Christians do not stand alone in front of death, hoping that their life history will be enough. Look at what the second criminal says in verse 42: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And verse 43, Jesus replies: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."
- We do not face death on our own. Instead, we are given Jesus, who has victory over death, who forgives us, and protects us with his love. We face death "in Christ alone," with the perfect resume of Jesus.

3. The power of the cross

- When facing death, Jesus give us hope: that is "being in Paradise with him". Paradise means 'garden of God'. Heaven. We can find two meanings to this word.
- First, it reminds us of the Garden of Eden, where humankind lived in peace and safety with God. In Eden, there was neither sin nor death. There was no obstacle between God and us. We were free to enjoy God's creation to our heart's content.
- But we ceased to trust in God and have come to trust in our own power and freedom. We have tried to win happiness through what we consider good in our own eyes (money, power, relationships, success, work, love, family...). And in this way, we have moved away from God and lost Him. As a result, we have allowed sin and death to spread in our lives and in this world, through lies and deceit, conflict and hatred, war and hunger, envy and selfishness, murder and pride. Ultimately, separation from God is death (the consequence of sin).
- Through Jesus, God has restored paradise (heaven). It simply means living with God in Jesus. So when Jesus speaks of paradise here, he is not simply referring to a certain state of being after death, but about something that begins right now, in the broken and damaged life on earth that we have now.
- Last year in July, our son Yuya passed away. He was 32 years old. But we believe that Yuya is now in paradise, with Jesus, enjoying safety and happiness far richer than on this earth, and waiting for the time of the resurrection, when the new heaven and new earth will appear.

Yuya was a talented actor. He was a kind and loving young man who made people around him feel comfortable and happy. He sometimes surprised us by going too far, but... He got married and had children. But his life was plagued with betrayal and suffering, and he fell into a deep depression. I became unable to work, addicted to sleeping pills, and attempted suicide several times.

- He used drugs to try to escape from these sufferings, and got arrested because of this. But while in detention, he really met Jesus, and understood that He died on the cross for him and rose from the dead. He couldn't stop reading the Bible, and he also read the book "The Prodigal God," twice. This book explains about God's love and the grace of the Gospel. He became fascinated by Jesus. Yuya loved Jesus. He knew that Jesus loved him despite his many mistakes, despite his weaknesses. He knew that Jesus had sacrificed for him. He was just like the criminal who was saved on the cross. Once he realized this, Yuya loved Jesus and took great joy in worshipping God.
- The second meaning of the word paradise is a description of the fully restored world (the new heaven and new earth, the Kingdom of God) that will soon come. Perhaps many people doubt this. You might be wondering why is it that there is still death and suffering, disappointment and sorrow, even though Jesus came, died for us on the cross, accomplished salvation, rose from the dead, and is working among us. Even though we believe in Him.
- The answer to these doubts is that eventually a perfect paradise will be fulfilled. Jesus will come again. Everyone will raise again. And Jesus will welcome those who believed in Him into a perfect paradise. We will then be completely healed and comforted.

Revelation 21:3-4 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

- It is true that no one can avoid death. But we can all accept God's love and grace in Jesus Christ alone. For not even death can separate us from the love of God.