

John Donne, a famous English poet, wrote these words: "Is there a king of earth with dominions so vast from north to south that he hath both winter and summer together? Is there a king of earth with dominions so vast from east to west that he hath both night and day together? So much more hath God both judgments and mercy together." Such is the massive expanse of the Lord's dominion, like a vast region, a wonderful country that has within its borders the most incredible beauty and complexity. The Lord of the Bible is the Lord who holds in his hands the authority and the power to open or close the doors of his vast kingdom. As a church that preaches the gospel, that seeks to experience and extend the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, we speak much every Sunday of sin, grace, and mercy. But to what end is all of this headed?

I found a quote in my reading and research this past week. It's from Woody Allen, who said this: "The trick is to start at the ending when you write a play. Get a good strong ending and then write backwards. So for the months of July and August we will fix our eyes on the drama of our ending, where all of this is heading. Because without an ending Christianity comes apart at the seams. Without heaven and hell, without an eternity of which the Scriptures speak, Christianity is worthless.

And so, as we spoke about these last number of weeks, as our own body has gone through various trials and is going through the process of various trials, we wanted to take a break from our series on the Book of Acts and spend the month of July and August---July on heaven and August on hell. So what's going to happen over these next four weeks is we're going to be looking at the different biblical truth and teachings regarding heaven. And then, before we move on to the series on hell, we'll spend a week looking at the Last Judgment, what the Scriptures call the Day of Judgment, the final Day of the Lord. And then we will spend four weeks on hell.

I encourage you to take this time of July and August---if you have not---to think much of eternity. If you are a believer, to fix your eyes on things that are above and not on earthly things---to fix your eyes, as Paul says, on things above, where Christ is seated. But even if you are not a believer, I encourage you to contemplate whether or not eternity is a reality. And so I'll begin this morning with the end, the end that is Christ's ministry and his going to the cross where we hear the invitation to the criminal to join him that day in Paradise. Hear now God's word. Luke 23:32-43.

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. 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. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. 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." The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "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." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God. Please pray with me this morning. Lord, I pray that you will help all of us to contemplate the reality of death that is coming on everyone who can hear my voice. But beyond that, oh Lord, I pray you would, by your Word, give us a vision and a truth from your Word for what lies beyond death, and in this case, the offer of heaven to those who believe. So Lord, we pray, open our eyes, open our ears, open our hearts by the power of your Spirit that we

might fix our eyes on Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.

I am now 44, and I learned, even at this age, the value of AAA. Some of you who are old enough know exactly what I'm talking about. You remember those little guides that you could get at your local office or you could order over the phone. You could tell them the distance or the place where you were traveling, and they would send you in the mail the Triptik, you'll remember. And I remember learning how to drive, and I remember my first cross-..... well, for me, cross-country was really from North Carolina all the way over to Chicago. And my parents ordered up a Triptik: Charlotte to Chicago. And this year I gave thought to what I not given thought to in years, and that was AAA. I only gave thought to it because my wife was preparing me to travel to Japan. She said it might be good for you to go to the AAA office here in Columbia and see if they can give you, you know, some information. And so I did what I believed to be a good husband thing. I said okay, I'll go. I don't want to go, but I'll go. And so I went to AAA. I sat down at the office. I sat down at one of these little kiosks, and she said, "How may I help you today?" Because we have a AAA membership, but who uses that anymore? But anyway. So I go in and I said okay, I'm traveling to Japan. Do you have any information for me? She said well, let's see. And I was expecting her to go over and just grab a book, and she didn't. She sat her computer screen. And I'm sitting there in a seat across the desk from her, and she began typing in to her computer. Imagine what was going through my mind at that moment. Here's what was going through my mind: Why am I here? I realized I was asking her to do what I could simply take my phone out and type into Google. Which is exactly what I did. I typed in to Google: traveling to Japan. And I came up with a number of websites---oh, I don't know, half a million or more. And so while she took the ten minutes to look at her screen and to order it up, send it to print, I'm already exploring the ten top tips for those traveling to Japan. But she then ordered up for me this trip information. She brought it back to me, a nice little spiral-bound---oh, I don't know---roughly thirty pages or so. I didn't look at it at the time. I took it home. Kate, being a wonderful travel guide that she is, a loving wife, she just glanced through it. You'll want to read through this. I said yes, dear. I will do so. So I put it in my bag and I got onto the plane. And after eleven long hours---right, Robbie?---I decided in the last hour maybe I should give that a look. So I did. And it was so actually really, really helpful. I was so embarrassed that I was so prideful, that, you know, this was so helpful.

Wouldn't it be great if the Bible worked like a Triptik? And isn't that what we want? We want to be able to turn open to the Bible, right? Because we're talking about going to a land that none of us have traveled, the descriptions of which are beyond belief, highly symbolic, and surely far better than anything that has been written down. This is what one commentator called the Bible: It's God's baby talk. It's his way of communicating with us in ways that we can understand. And we'll be getting into it in the weeks to come, but I believe that, indeed, heaven is far more complex and beautiful than what is written here, and it is certainly beautiful. But we want it to operate like a Triptik. We want to be able to turn there and look for the top ten things to look forward to. What's it going to look like?

And this is a good place for me to address something. I know that there are a number of books that have been written about 'My Trip to Heaven and Now I'm Back' in various ways and things. Now let me say first, if you are a Christian, professing faith in Jesus Christ, and you have your Bible---let me strongly encourage you not to spend much time with such books. Because first, their writing is far beneath the beauty and the writing of Scripture, number one. It's just bad literature, if I may say that.

Number two. If you are a Christian and you want to take on testimony a toddler's memory of what heaven was like versus the authoritative Scriptures, I would encourage you---and I say this with all love, without an ounce of condescension---brother and sister in Christ, *I feel for you*. Because I say to you, one of the most prolific authors of all of Scripture, Paul---in the letter to the Corinthians, the second letter, in the 12th chapter---wrote of a man who was taken to the third heaven, or the ultimate heaven, the intermediate state, of which I will be preaching on today, and he said that man was not allowed to speak of what he saw. If that is what Paul's testimony was, why, then, should we give an ounce of time to someone who is giving us the fantasy of a book that is now still largely read by so

many. I encourage you, do not---do not waste your time there. Take the Bible on its own merits. For this is the only thing that has been given to us as a rule of faith, our authority, and its testimony has been tried and true among many witnesses. Turn to this.

So that was my brief moment, there, so let me move forward. So therefore what we're going to be looking at today is we're going to be looking at the first thing, which is the intermediate state. Christians believe in the intermediate state. What is it? What do we believe? And what do I mean by the intermediate state? What I mean is, between Christ's final return, his second coming, and now, what happens to those who've gone before us---our own loved ones, our dear friends, even those we have lost in this congregation. As those who gave strong profession and the fruit of faith, we would see where are they now. Are they with the Lord? And what way are they with the Lord? What do the Scriptures teach us?

What the Scriptures teach us is that they are, indeed, in an intermediate state. They are not in the final heaven which will be the new heavens and a new earth and a new Jerusalem, but they are with the Lord. And so we have this passage where we hear this teaching. So what we want to do is look at it together and what it teaches us. First: Confession and Compassion; Death and the Intermediate State.

Let's look first at Confession and Compassion. We see the rejection of Jesus Christ at the cross from those who took him there and even from those who were hanging there with him, particularly one. But what we hear in verses 33-39, is we hear, as I have read, the taunting of Jesus. And here is what they are taunting him to do: Save yourself, they say. But what's so ironic about their taunts is this---is that it's taking all of what Jesus has said regarding his earthly ministry and his going to the cross and turns it on its head. Because they say to him 'If you are the Christ, save yourself.' But the irony of the taunts is this: that is precisely what Jesus does not plan to do. That, indeed, Jesus takes what seems to be the taunting power of the ruling structure, which he knew was coming for him, and he gave himself up to them, and he was turned over to them and placed on the cross---he takes their taunts and turns them on their head. Because the irony is, at the moment that they are saying, 'Save yourself,' Jesus is showing that what he came to do was to give of himself that he might save others.

Indeed, we see that Jesus was indeed saving. He was saving by dying. Jesus was giving himself for our sin. Jesus dies forgiving, as I said a couple of weeks ago, when he says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." This taunting, this rejection, Jesus uses to bring into bold relief precisely what he said he would do from the earliest moments of his public ministry---that famous passage of Scripture, which I can remember the day I first heard it: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned. Whoever does not believe stands condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God." Indeed, Jesus dies to save, but they reject him. But Jesus turned it on its head.

But then we also see the argument. And here we see the playing out of what Jesus said. Jesus came. For God so loved the world that Jesus would give up himself. He would die to save. But the other part is that you either love the light or you love darkness. And those who believe him love the light. Those who rejected him, loved darkness. Is that not the picture of the argument in verse 40? In verse 40 we hear the argument between the two criminals. After he has said to him, "'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?'" Do you see, the picture of that criminal who was taunting Jesus

and having this argument shows sin for what it is in all of its nakedness. It is nothing but profound human pride. Isn't that what this man is doing? For instead of loving light, he loved the darkness, because the darkness seems to be light to him. And that darkness is the blindness of his pride.

I've heard it this way. The picture of pride is so glaring in this passage. The criminal looks down his nose at Jesus. You hear it in his words. He is judging Jesus. He's standing as the one who is looking over at him and saying if you're the Christ, come on! Save yourself and us! You see, he's wanting to use Jesus, but at the same time judge him. He's disregarding the twin reality, as the other criminal pointed out to him. His pride blinds him to the twin reality. Number one. He is there receiving the just desserts of his earthly crime. That's the one thing he doesn't want to face. The other thing he doesn't want to face is the inevitability of his death. So, as it were, facing imminent death, not being able to avoid its conclusion, he nonetheless pursues darkness of denial. He refuses to look at its inevitability, and he looks at Jesus and he judges him. That is the picture of human pride. That picture of human pride which is so glaring is what is at the base of human nature. This moment sets this man at the end of his life on himself, because his entire life has had one trajectory: himself. And at the moment of his death he looks and he simply sees nothing but his own self-righteousness. But to the world that can see it, he can't. Do you see?

But there is a resolution. And that resolution is the other criminal's response. He sees the pride. He says we indeed, we're the ones who receive our just reward, our due reward for our deeds. But this man has done nothing wrong. And he looks at him. And resolving the moment.... And let me say this to you. If you are not a believer and want to know what it means to confess faith in Jesus Christ--- If you are a believer and you wonder what does it mean to really have faith in Jesus Christ--- You see it right here in this simple sentence. It is not an elaborate prayer, but it is a simple sentence that has embedded within it such beautiful complexity when he says: Jesus (calling Jesus by name), remember me. Acknowledging that Jesus is the Christ, who remembers and knows all things. Remember me when you come into your kingdom. He recognized that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. And he says remember me, because there, in all of his shame, receiving the just desserts of his criminal act, he has nothing else. And facing the twin reality of his crime and his imminent death he turns not to himself, he turns to Christ. And he's saying in essence, Lord, have mercy on me. For he knows he cannot hide. He cannot deny. He can only come to the resolution, and that resolution is confession of Christ.

And in this moment we see an amazing thing. To the human eye the first part is not amazing---that is, the justice of why we have criminal laws. When someone breaks a law, there is a penalty to be paid. And that is based on the righteousness, and on the goodness, and the law of God which has been set on every human heart, which can determine what is good and right, evil and goodness. But something else here that this resolution shows which doesn't make sense to the human eye or perhaps to the human ear: It's the injustice of grace. You see, grace is receiving unmerited favor. And here is the moment in this horrible moment where this man stands judged before human laws, receiving the punishment of his crimes, and yet he is one who will receive the grace of God from one who is being judged who is not guilty. The injustice of grace is that the one who was innocent became a criminal, became sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God. That's the injustice of grace.

This is what God is doing. He's showing his compassion. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." But in this confession, and when he receives the compassion when Jesus says to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise," we have the inevitability of death. And here we see that this is what Jesus says: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." And boy, has that sentence been picked apart. What is the word today mean? Did it mean in three days? What did it mean? And the overwhelming evidence shows that what is actually being said here is literally that day, in that moment, at his death.

Let's talk, then, about what transpires here. This man dies. His body goes to the grave. It remained there on the cross. It had to be removed from the cross. Jesus's body remained on the cross. It had to be removed and laid into a grave. The third man up on the cross also had to be removed. And yet Jesus is telling us something here when he says, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." So let's break this out. You'll see there [in your outline] the body, the soul, and existence.

But first I want to say that I stand on the shoulders of giants in that first I want to begin with the Confession of our own church. This has been argued about and thought about and interpreted for centuries. And the Confession of our church, Columbia Presbyterian Church, is the Westminster Confession of Faith, and this is what it says regarding this moment, this death, but also the death of anyone who dies before Christ's coming again. What happens? "The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Beside these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none."

Let me say with the full authority of Scripture: There is no other place aside from heaven and hell that souls depart to. There is no other place. There is no place where there will be a time where there is an opportunity for decision or rethinking it or the gospel will be re-pronounced or preached, where you have an opportunity to respond again. There will be none who will be left behind. For Christ, when he comes again---as we will be looking at in greater detail---that is the day of judgment. And all bodies will be raised from their graves and will be reunited with their souls and will then go to their place for all eternity, either to hell or to heaven.

But here the promise is to this man on the cross who says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," the promise is that, indeed, he will go with him today in Paradise. But what of his body? Paul writes of this quite a bit when he talks about the nature of just this intermediate state, when he writes in his letter to 2 Corinthians 5. He says this. Our heavenly dwelling. "For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home (speaking of the body) is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened---not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit (that is, the Holy Spirit) as a guarantee."

So he's saying in this tent, this body, we groan. They are dying. They are wasting away. And this body of this criminal went to the grave. He would then recognize he's saying that while indeed this takes place, something else takes place---that indeed there is a body, a dwelling place that is being prepared, not by human hands, but by the Lord's hands. And we're being prepared now for that place. Our bodies will go to the grave, but our souls will go immediately to be with the Lord.

Why is that? We know that because he writes one chapter earlier of Christ, "knowing that he who raised Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God." So there he's talking about when Jesus comes again, our bodies---those who believe---will be raised from their graves and united with their souls. And you will receive a perfect, restored, resurrected body and will have an embodied existence with your soul, with the Lord forever.

But as this man's body went to the grave, what of his soul? Paul also writes of this in his same letter and in the same chapter of 2 Corinthians 5 and he says this: "So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith and not

by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether it is good or evil." What Paul is saying there is that in this tent, this body, which is wasting away, to be with the Lord is to be away from this body. So to remain here is to be away from the immediate presence with Christ in heaven. Though we have his Spirit, his presence with us, which is working in us courage and faith---because we do not see by sight, we see by faith, trusting in the Lord's work---that if, indeed, we die before the Lord's return, our bodies go to the grave, but indeed our souls will go to be with the Lord.

Here is the rub, is it not. As Charles Hodge, one of the great theologians of the church, said, the Bible is not a book of anthropology, psychology or physiology or biology, and yet what it speaks of falls into all of those subjects. But what we see here is not a AAA Triptik telling us exactly what's going to happen any moment and every moment. What we know is this. That when Jesus said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise," of what was he speaking? We know it was not his body. We know that it was his soul. And here is where faith and what we can see come into conflict, for we do not understand soul and body separated. How does the soul have the ability to exist outside of being embodied? But nonetheless, these are the words of Jesus. And though we cannot see exactly how it works, Jesus says, "Today you will be with me." So that must mean that the soul's existence with the Lord before his return is a real existence and experience of the Lord's presence and of knowing the Lord and his goodness.

We looked at this a couple of weeks ago. The word 'paradise' comes from the Persian word that means a high, walled garden, a place of great protection and great beauty and manicured glory. And so he is with the Lord from that moment until the Lord's return. In fact, you can read---as you will probably do this ahead of me---you will be going on throughout the Scriptures. Go and look in the book of Revelation. There you will hear of the martyrs who ask of the Lord: Lord, is today the day? Because the blood of the martyrs cries out. And yet the Lord says to them: Wait. Wait till the final judgment. So their souls are with the Lord. The souls of the martyred saints are with the Lord. They converse with the Lord. They appeal to the Lord. But beyond that we don't know much more. But this we know. It is an intermediate state, because of what we will come to later in the month. As you read in Revelation 21 and 22, the Lord will bring a renewed heaven and a renewed earth. But until then, there is an existence with the Lord---by soul---to be experienced.

So what does that entail? (And I realize I'm running low on time.) It is this. It was clear that for Paul, to live is Christ, but to die is gain. Why is that? Because to be at home with the Lord means a number of things. First, it means an immediate purification and holiness. For heaven, the Scriptures tell us---as we will see---is a place where there is no sin. There is no sorrow. There are no tears. There is to be an existence in the presence of God, and to be in the presence of God and to see him face-to-face means that only that which is pure and holy can be in that presence.

Secondly, we also know that not only does that existence mean an immediate purification of our souls, it also means an emancipation from evil---an emancipation from evil, from the corruption of the flesh and from the torments of Satan. In 2 Corinthians 4 we hear these words: "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light and momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." It is to no longer know evil and sin and its corruption.

It is also to know eternal life. Isn't that the words of Jesus? "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." That word, today you will be with me in Paradise, is the Greek verb of an ongoing reality, without end, of a

glorious presence of the Lord. It is the realization of what Jesus was speaking of in the Gospel of John. "I am the vine and you are the branches." It will be the realization of a perfect union---of seeing him face-to-face and him seeing us face-to-face, of our knowing him fully and being fully known. To know the Father's voice and to be in his presence, it is to have an unfailing source of blessedness.

Christian, when Jesus says "Apart from me you can do nothing..." If you are a Christian, I know that some time in your walk of faith there has been a moment where you know---perhaps it was just a conversation, perhaps it was in prayer, perhaps it was in a moment where you were being taught---where you knew, just for the most fleeting of moments, that something was moving in you with such great and profound joy and realization of the beauty, the power, the authority, and the truth of who Christ is---it so set on your minds, and maybe for just the briefest moment, maybe it was an answer to a prayer you didn't think you hardly uttered, yet the Lord heard. Who knows what it might be. But you know of what I speak. And in that moment, you know in that briefest moment, what Jesus said: "For apart from me you can do nothing." And for that moment you tasted it, right? You tasted it.

It happened to me this past week. A young man in our body came up to me and asked me a question after last week's sermon. It wasn't about the sermon, but he was asking me this question. And in that moment my life just came out of me and I just...I didn't plan it that way, I couldn't have ordered it that way. And I don't remember all that I said. I pray he did, but this is what I know. That what came out of my mouth at that moment---I got to the end and I thought to myself, boy, that wasn't me. That was the Lord. In that moment I realized, 'Apart from me, Randy, you can do nothing.' And I praised God for whatever I said. May the Lord use it. And I knew in that moment....oh, I want more of that. Don't you?

For our bodies are wasting away. They hurt. I woke up this morning and I turned to the left and the pain that was in my left turned to my right. My father, groaning after the pains of surgery on his heart. And our brother Jamison being faced with the diagnosis of cancer. Our brother David Scheerer. Our bodies fight back at us. I'm so tired! I'm tired for you, but I must say to you---I know Pastor Tim would say this---I'm tired. My body is tired. My mind is tired. I want to know what it means to be in the vine and to not know any disruption of being in the vine because of my sin, my distraction, my forgetfulness. Amen?

But the promise of heaven that will begin at our death will be that our soul will go to be with the Lord in an unending blessedness of knowledge, of holiness, of perfection---not because of what is there, but because of who is there. That means---the final thing---as I've said, it's not just the immediate purification and holiness for our souls, the emancipation from evil and corruption of this life, knowing eternal life and forever, but it is also to bathe---to bathe---in the full brightness of the glory of Christ.

Let me end where I began---that trip to Japan. Robbie and I in the coming weeks will have an opportunity to share with you more about what that was like. But there is one enduring image that I know he and I will carry for the rest of our lives: the soreness in our shoulders. Because, if we walked our luggage one mile, I think we walked that luggage and backpacks twenty miles in one week. And each night we would get to our hotel and every night we would celebrate it. We would get to that last elevator ride, and we would get into the elevator and we would look at each other...what floor are we supposed to go to? And we would hit that floor and we would hit the bed and aaaaaahhh. Because for us that week our burden was that luggage. We were wishing we didn't bring so many shoes and clothes and books that we never really got around to reading because we were so tired. And the cameras and all the stuff of life. Do you see where I'm going? Our bodies are really big pieces of luggage that don't fit in the overhead compartment. And we keep having to pay extra money for them. And I'm so tired of paying for the baggage. And we just wished we didn't pack so much stuff, because we really didn't need it anyway.

And we get to the end of our day's journey, and we look back on it, and we're just tired. But there was nothing like coming home, and there will be no place like home. In the words of Jewel the unicorn,

arriving in Aslan's country from C.S. Lewis's book *The Last Battle*: "I have come home at last. This is my real country. I belong here. This is the land I've been looking for all my life, though I never knew it til now." Our sisters Ellen and Kathleen Gandy Perry and our brother Ed Goodrich are at home now. And if the Lord tarries and you are a believer and you die in this life before his return, you will go home immediately.

But if you are not a believer, I ask you, aren't you really just like me, a poor traveler tired of his luggage, looking for home. I know to where I am bound, because the Lord has gone before me, and he has gone before you. He died to save. And at his death, he provided an offering of redemption for you that you might know home and a taste of it--oh, but a taste of it now, but to realize it for all eternity. Come to know him, the king who holds judgment and mercy in his hands, who welcomes you home. Let's pray.

Lord, I can't do justice to your Word, for your Word is powerful and it is a double-edged sword, separating bone and marrow. So Lord, I pray that by your Word you would give your people and everyone who can hear my voice a longing for heaven, because that is where Christ is. And because Christ who has died for us has gone before us, purchasing salvation for us, I pray that that might be our trust and our hope. And Lord, that we would long and be able to say to you, Jesus, remember us as you are in your kingdom. And may we, Lord, hear you say, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Lord, may that be the truth of our lives. Give us that hope, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.