

**Monday, March 5 – Read Luke 23:32-33, 39-43** The Bible said little about the two men crucified with Jesus. Luke called them “criminals.” Matthew 27 used a word that could mean “rebels.” Some think they were part of Barabbas’ gang, since it seems he was to have been crucified when Jesus was (Mark 15:7). What we know is that when one man reached out to Jesus in faith, Jesus promised him eternal life. Luke didn’t say if the two criminals had known of Jesus, or how they decided how to act toward him. But one asked, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (which trusted that Jesus would come as king). What is the process by which you have moved (or are moving) to trust Jesus as king of the universe and of your life? The other man said, “Aren’t you the Messiah?” That did not convey faith, as the mocking “Save yourself and us” showed. Most of us have a deep-seated fear of being gullible or naïve. In what ways can this cynicism become spiritually dangerous? Which of Jesus’ promises do you struggle most to trust? Which is most precious to you?

**Tuesday, March 6 – Read Genesis 2:5-15.** Luke quoted Jesus as saying, “You will be with me in Paradise.” “Paradise” was a Persian word meaning “walled garden.” Today, it has taken on many meanings. To some, it’s a gauzy realm where people with harps float on clouds. To others, it might be a tropical island with rum punch for all! But Genesis pictured a primeval garden as God’s first gift to humans. What hopes and dreams come to your mind when you first think of the word “Paradise”? What aspects of this picture from Genesis strike you as Paradise, and what parts of it (if any) feel like things you’d not particularly enjoy? Think of the ways this picture would convey Paradise to people who lived in the parched near-deserts of the Middle East. Scholar William Barclay noted, “When a Persian king wished to do one of his subjects a special honor...he was chosen to walk in the garden with the king.” Does it change the focus of Jesus’ words on the cross to stress “with me” more than “Paradise”? Picture yourself taking a walk with Jesus. What do you say? What does he say to you?

**Wednesday, March 7 – Read Revelation 21:1-5, 21:22 - 22:5.** The Bible’s grand story began in Paradise created, and ends in Paradise restored. Images drawn from the prophet Isaiah (especially chapters 28 and 65) picture a new world with no pain, suffering or death. The seer blended images of a city—God’s city—with those of a garden—God’s garden—to say we will live in God’s presence forever. Psalm 46:4 said, “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.” If you’ve visited Jerusalem or studied a map of the city, there’s no literal physical river there! But Jesus called himself the source of living water (John 4:13-14). What is the message that Revelation’s symbol of “the river of the water of life” conveyed to God’s people? In a world that relied on city walls and strong gates to shut out danger, Revelation said of God’s city, amazingly: “On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there” (Revelation 21:25). What “walls and gates” do we count on? What worries does faith in God’s eternal city calm? How does Christ’s presence today calm your fears?

**Thursday, March 8 – Read 1 Corinthians 15:35-54.** We're blessed that the early Christians in Corinth asked a lot of questions. Because they asked about the resurrection, Paul wrote this whole section about the nature of resurrected, "imperishable" life as opposed to the conditions of mortal life we sometimes consider "natural." Paul was convinced we have a lot to look forward to! Work your way through this passage, and list all of the pairs of words Paul uses to contrast our earthly bodies with our heavenly bodies. He says we will all be changed. What parts of "you" do you look forward to having changed? What parts of "you" are so important to you that you want God to preserve them? Scholar Craig Keener says, "Paul's argument [verse 40] may not fit modern astronomy very well, but it...is meant to persuade ancient readers, whose views of heavenly bodies differed from those of people today." What can you know "for sure" about eternity? What details are you wise to "hold lightly," even with today's knowledge?

**Friday, March 9 – Read John 3:14-21.** The man crucified with Jesus couldn't say, like the apostle Paul, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness" (2 Timothy 4:7-8). But Jesus had pledged eternity to "whoever believes." True to his mission to the end, he accepted the man's faith as all the "credential" he needed. Nicodemus had a seminary degree and a prominent social position. Jesus told him, "You have to be born again." And to the man dying on a cross who showed faith, Jesus said, "You will be with me in Paradise." What does this show you about the reach of Jesus' words "Whoever believes"? Do you trust that "Whoever" includes you? In Jesus' story in Matthew 20:1-16, men worked many or few hours, but got the same pay. Some who worked longer grumbled. Salvation is a gift greater than we could ever earn. So why are we tempted to think "service time" should count? How long have you served God? Do you joyously accept newcomers to God's Kingdom as Jesus did?

**Saturday, March 10. Read 1 John 5:9-13.** Jesus' assurance to the man on the cross—"You will be in Paradise"—was not just for that man. The Methodist movement began when John Wesley, at a meeting in London found (in his own words) that "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." The apostle John wrote that salvation isn't a gift you have to wish, or hope, or try for. You can know you have received God's greatest gift. Pay careful attention to the verb tenses in these verses. John never used the future tense; these verses don't say that whoever has the Son "will have" eternal life, or that you may know that you "will have" eternal life. In what ways are you already living out your eternal life? In what ways do you want to more fully tap into the eternal life that you already have as God's gift through Christ?