

## Jesus' Promise To The Dying Thief

By A. W. Fowler

The words of our Lord to the repentant thief are frequently quoted to show that the thief was promised a reward in heaven on the day of his death and that believers go to heaven when they die. We suggest that this interpretation is an example of wishful thinking and that a study of the words in their immediate and wider context will reveal a very different meaning.

It is a fundamental rule of all literature that any particular passage must be interpreted by reference to both the words used and their context. This principle was clearly stated by Myles Coverdale who produced the first complete translation of the Bible into English in 1535. In his prologue he wrote, "it will greatly help you to understand Scripture if you mark not only what is written but of whom and to whom, with what words, at what time, where, to what extent, with what circumstances, taking note of what precedes and what follows after...therefore when you read Scripture be wise and circumspect."

So let us first consider the words used by our Lord. The words in our English Bibles are, of course, translated from the Greek — the language in which most of the New Testament was probably written. Although we do not possess any of the original writings we do have very early copies dating from the 4<sup>th</sup> Century [with quotations from them even earlier, from the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. KF]. These early Greek Bibles were written with capital letters (uncials) and there were no spaces between the words nor was there any punctuation. The words of Jesus to the thief are shown below as they appear in the famous Codex *Alexandrinus* manuscript. If the scribe had been writing in English with the same format it would have looked like this:

ANDSAIDTOHIMTHEJESUS  
VERILYISAYTOTHEETODAYWITH  
METHOUSHALTBEINPARADISE

From this it is evident that two different constructions of these words are possible, depending on where we choose to insert the punctuation. So Jesus might have said, "Verily, I say unto thee today, thou shall be with me in paradise," or, "Verily I say unto thee, today thou shall be with me in paradise."

Since both of these constructions make sense the decision regarding the true meaning of our Lord's words can only be determined by evidence from other parts of Scripture. One line of enquiry would be to examine how Luke used the word "today" in other parts of his Gospel and in the Acts. The Greek word for "today is *s'emeron*." Luke used it 20 times. In 11 cases it related to the preceding verb and in 7 to the following verb. Thus in Acts 26:29 we read, "And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me *this day*, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds." And in Acts 20:26 Paul says, "Wherefore I take you to record *this day*, that I am pure from the blood of all men." In both these cases the sense indicates that "today" modifies the preceding verb and our English AV has inserted the appropriate punctuation.

On the other hand, in Luke 19:9 we read, "And Jesus said unto him, *this day* is salvation come to this house, for so much as he also is a son of Abraham." And in Acts 13:33, "Thou art my Son, *this day* have I begotten thee." In both these cases "today"

modifies the following verb and the words have been correctly punctuated by the translators.

The words of Jesus to the thief are unusual in that this is the only instance in which Luke uses the word *s'emeron* (today) where the meaning of the text is not obvious. So we shall have to broaden our enquiry and study the context or circumstances in which the words of Jesus were spoken. Four questions need to be answered, namely:

1. What was the thief's request?
2. What did Jesus mean by paradise?
3. Where did Jesus go on the day that he died?
4. Why did he speak of a particular day?

## **1. WHAT WAS THE THIEF'S REQUEST?**

This is very important because it is the basis of our Lord's answer. The thief said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when thou come into thy kingdom." The kingdom that Jesus proclaimed was based on lives transformed by his teaching (see Matthew 13:44–46). Although the kingdom was inaugurated by Jesus at his first coming (see Luke 16:16), Jesus also spoke of his kingdom in the future — culminating in his return to the earth, the judgment and giving of rewards (Matt. 13:41–43). At the Last Supper Jesus said, "I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God shall come." His disciples clearly understood the future aspect of his kingdom when they asked Jesus after his resurrection, "Wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" Paul likewise viewed the kingdom of Christ as a future event when he charged Timothy: "... before God and the Lord Jesus Christ who shall judge the living and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom..." (II Tim. 4:1).

By declaring that Jesus was innocent the thief showed that he knew Jesus. His request to be rewarded when Christ came into his kingdom means that he must have heard Jesus preaching and understood the vitally important future aspect of his kingdom.

It needs little imagination to picture this man standing on the fringe of the crowds listening to Jesus preaching the gospel (good news) of the kingdom of God. Perhaps he had been among the multitudes that Jesus miraculously fed with bread and fish. Perhaps he had been one of those many disciples who took offense at the teaching of Jesus and "went back and walked no more with him" (John 6:66). But whoever he was, his request demonstrated a knowledge of Jesus and his teaching. He did not ask to be taken to heaven because the gospel he had heard Jesus preaching was not about going to heaven but about his coming kingdom upon the earth.

## **2. WHAT DID JESUS MEAN BY PARADISE?**

The promise of Jesus that the thief would be with him in paradise was an appropriate response to his petition because paradise is an appropriate name for the future kingdom of Christ on earth. The word in Greek is "*paradeisos*" which is derived from a Persian word meaning "garden". The same word is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) in Genesis 2:8 where we read that "The Lord planted a garden (paradise) eastward in Eden.

If we consider the changes which will occur at the return of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall see how appropriate was Jesus' description of his kingdom as a paradise or garden. For example, in Revelation we read that at the time when the kingdoms of this world are taken over by the Lord Jesus Christ there will be a judgment and rewards and

God “will destroy them that destroy the earth.” When this happens the earth will be transformed to its former state of being “very good”, and will become a new Eden. Hence the promise of our Lord in Revelation 2:7 “To him that overcomes will I give to eat of the Tree of Life which is in the midst of the paradise of God.” The earth restored to Edenic Paradise is the ultimate fulfillment of many of the visions of the Old Testament prophets (see Isaiah 51:3 and Ezekiel 36:35).

There is an interesting reference to paradise in 2 Corinthians 12:1–4. Here Paul is probably speaking of himself and he equates ‘paradise’ with the “third heaven”. Paul is using the language of 2 Peter 3 where ‘heavens’ represent the three eras of human history. The first heaven was the world before the flood (II Pet. 3:5); the second heaven is the present era (verse 7), awaiting judgment and transformation. This will be replaced by the third heaven or paradise when the earth will be restored, a new era will begin and there will be “new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwells righteousness” (verse 13).

This brief survey of the meaning of paradise indicates that it has nothing to do with heaven. Heaven is God’s throne, where God dwells in light unapproachable (I Tim. 6:16). Heaven is mentioned 740 times in the Bible and not once is it said to be the dwelling of the righteous. David declared in Psalm 115:16 “The heaven, even the heaven of heavens are the Lord’s: but the earth has he given to the children of men.” Peter, in Acts 2:34 says, “...David is not ascended into the heavens”; Jesus said, “And *no man* has ascended up to heaven” (John 3:13).

Matthew refers to the kingdom *of* heaven — not the kingdom *in* heaven. The kingdom of heaven in Matthew is equated with the kingdom of God in Luke (compare Matt. 8:11 and Luke 13:28). Matthew’s kingdom of heaven is a heavenly kingdom on earth. In Matthew 5:5 Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth” and in the same discourse, “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad: for great is your reward in heaven” (verse 12). There is no contradiction here if we follow the rule of comparing Scripture with Scripture, because in Revelation 22:12 Jesus said, “And behold I come quickly and my reward is with me to give every man according as his work shall be.” This makes it clear that our “reward in heaven” will be bestowed by Jesus when he returns to the earth.

This concept of the reward being reserved or laid up in heaven is also found in the writings of Paul and Peter. Paul in 2 Timothy 4:8 writes “Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.”

In 1 Peter 1:4 Peter describes our hope as “an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that fades not away, reserved in heaven for you.” And in verse 13 he indicates that this reward of grace will be given at the revelation (appearing) of Jesus Christ.

### **3. WHERE DID JESUS GO ON THE DAY THAT HE DIED?**

To obtain the Bible answer to this question we must first study Scripture teaching about the nature of man, bearing in mind that Jesus shared our nature (Heb. 2:14–17).

According to the Bible, man is a dying creature (Gen. 3:19). There is no indication that man possesses an immortal soul. The word immortal only occurs once in the Bible and is applied to God (I Tim. 1:17). ‘Immortality’ is used five times. In 1 Timothy 6:16 we are told that God “only has immortality” and the other four passages

clearly teach that immortality is only available to man as a gift from God. Thus in Romans 2:7 we read, “To them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life.” And from 1 Corinthians 15:51–53 it is clear that immortality is to be given by God at the time of the resurrection from the dead, “For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.”

That the soul of man is not immortal is evident from the words of Jesus in Matthew 10:28 and Luke 12:4–5:

“And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”

“And I say unto you my friends, be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will forewarn you whom you shall fear: Fear him, which after he has killed has power to cast into hell; Yes, I say unto you, Fear him.”

From this it is clear that our souls can suffer the same total destruction as our bodies.

But what is meant by destruction in hell? Hell in these verses is the word ‘Gehenna’ which was the rubbish pit outside Jerusalem where bodies of criminals were thrown. This was always smoldering and Jesus used it as a metaphor for destruction. The concept of hell as a place of eternal torment by fire is a grotesque example of the folly of giving a literal meaning to a metaphor. Eternal fire is a particularly appropriate metaphor for total destruction because the outstanding property of fire is that it destroys almost everything that goes into it.

“Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:12).

This view of the nature of man is reinforced by many passages which teach that death is the cessation of the life of the whole man — body and mind. For example, in Psalm 146:3–4 we read:

“Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is not help. His breath goes forth, he returns to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish.”

So we are led to the conclusion that without Divine intervention man perishes in the same way as the animals. As the Psalmist declared, “Nevertheless man being in honor abides not: he is like the beasts that perish” (Psa. 49:12).

With these facts in mind let us look at the question of where Jesus went on the day of his death. There should be no difficulty in answering this question because Jesus himself gave a clear answer in Matthew 12:40. “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three night *in the heart of the earth*.” If Jesus was in the tomb on the day of his death, how could the thief be in paradise with Jesus on that day?

Some may say that Jesus was only referring to his body and that his soul, or his essential being, ascended to heaven. But Jesus did not say that his *body* would be three days and nights in the earth. He said that the *Son of man* would be there. ‘Son of man’ was used by Jesus to describe himself (see Matt. 9:6 and 16:27). This agrees with what

Peter said in Acts 2:27 applying the words of Psalm 16 to the Lord Jesus. "...because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thy Holy One to see corruption."

In this verse "hell" is the Greek word '*hades*' which means a 'hidden place' — a word signifying the grave where bodies are *hidden*. The body of Jesus was hidden in the rock tomb of Joseph of Arimathea which was sealed with a large stone. But it was not left there; after three days the stone was rolled away and the women who visited the tomb were told, "He is not here, but is risen" (Luke 24:6).<sup>1</sup>

In the Old Testament there is a similar Hebrew word for the grave — '*sheol*' which means 'unseen'. So it is most appropriate that Jonah, whose incarceration in the belly of the whale was symbolic of Christ's burial, should say, "I cried by reason of my affliction unto the Lord, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell (*sheol*) cried I, and thou heard my voice" (Jonah 2:2).

There are therefore good Scriptural reasons for believing that Jesus meant exactly what he said when he declared that the sign of this authentic messiah-ship was the sign of the prophet Jonah, and that as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale so he would be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

On the basis of a passage in the first Epistle of Peter it is widely believed that at his death Jesus descended into hell (*hades*) where he preached to imprisoned souls from the days of Noah — the so-called "Descensus ad inferos".

"For Christ also has once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us unto God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the spirit: by which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water" (I Pet. 3:18–20).

How are we to understand this obscure passage? As with all difficult passages we must seek the meaning of the words and how they are used in other parts of Scripture.

What is meant by *Spirit and spirits in prison*? Spirit is the Greek word 'pneuma' which means 'wind' but it has many extended meanings in Scripture, for example "breath" (Rev. 11:11), mind (Mark 8:12), character (Matt. 5:3), mental illness (Matt. 8:16), life (Luke 8:55), angels (Heb. 1:7) and power (II Thess. 2:8).

It is significant that apart from Luke 24:37 (where it refers to a non-existent ghost) 'pneuma' never refers to disembodied human beings. When applied to humans it relates to the mind and usually refers to spiritual character as distinct from worldly or fleshly character:

"But if the spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his spirit that dwells in you. Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. For if you live after the flesh, you shall die: but if you through the spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, you shall live" (Rom. 8:11–13).

So when John tells his readers to "try the spirits whether they are of God" (I John 4:1) he is advising them to test the *character* of living people.

Who are “the spirits in prison” to whom Peter refers? They are men and women who are in bondage to sin. They are the spiritually imprisoned who are being offered salvation as expressed by Isaiah the prophet:

“I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold your hand, and will keep you, and give you for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house”(Isa. 42:6–7).

So how did Christ preach to the spiritually destitute people living before the flood? A clue will be found in the first chapter of Peter’s letter where he writes:

“Of which salvation the prophets have enquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: searching what, or what manner of time the spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow” (I Pet. 1:10–11).

Thus Christ preached through the antediluvian prophets in the sense that these prophets offered a hope of salvation from the waters of the flood which was similar to Christ’s offer of salvation through the waters of baptism.

Who then were the prophets before the flood who preached in the spirit of Christ? Noah was clearly one of these and he is described by Peter in his second epistle as a “preacher of righteousness” (II Pet. 2:5). But it is significant that in a parallel chapter in Jude we are told that Enoch (the grandfather of Noah) was also a preacher who issued warnings of impending judgment on ungodly sinners who lived before the flood:

“And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these saying, Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his saints, to execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him” (Jude 14–15).

That Enoch might have been the prophet to whom Peter was referring in 1 Peter 3:19 is supported by an interesting theory of Dr. Rendal Harris who suggested that Peter originally wrote, “In which also Enoch went and preached to the spirits in prison...”

“In which also” in the original Uncial Greek was written ENWKAI. This is similar to the name Enoch which was ENWX. So “in which also Enoch” would originally have been written thus, ENWKAIENWX...

It is easy to imagine that in copying this sentence a scribe might have failed to write the name ‘Enoch’ thinking he had already written it. This error of omitting repeated similar words or phrases is well recognized and is common enough to have been given a technical name ‘homoeoteleuton’. It is interesting to note that a homoeoteleuton error appears in the first printing of the 1988 New Welsh Bible where, in Ezekiel 5:2, one of the three repeated phrases was omitted.

Whether Peter was referring to Noah or Enoch does not really matter. What we should understand is that this passage need not be interpreted as teaching that Jesus at his death went to preach to disembodied spirits.

#### 4. WHY DID JESUS SPEAK OF A PARTICULAR DAY?

We have seen that a study of the wider Scriptural context of the words of Jesus to the thief leads us to the conclusion that what Jesus said was, “Truly I say to you today, you will be with me in paradise” The Greek word *s’emeron* means *this day* — it is emphatic. So why should Jesus put an emphasis on the day when he spoke to the thief? To understand this we need to picture the crucifixion scene. There was Jesus, dying like a criminal, on a charge of treason and on either side two violent robbers who, like Barabbas, had probably committed murder. Onlookers were mocking Jesus, “You say you are the Son of God, so why don’t you prove it by coming down from the cross? If you do this we will believe you.” The two robbers dying with Jesus cast the same in his teeth, though in their case they were desperately seeking their own rescue.

But then one of the robbers changed his mind. He turned to Jesus and asked to be remembered when Jesus established his kingdom. For one dying man to ask another dying man to remember him in the future shows an amazing degree of faith. This remarkable declaration of faith is rewarded by a very emphatic promise. Jesus could have said “Yes, I will remember you when I come into my kingdom.” Instead he gave him a much more emphatic assurance, “On this very day — here and now — I give you my word that you will be with me in the paradise of the restored earth.”

This emphatic use of ‘today’ (this day) is a common idiom in both Hebrew and Aramaic which are the two Semitic languages in which the Old Testament was written. The idiom is used to introduce a solemn statement. “I...to you today” when the verb is one of declaration, testification, command or oath. Some seventy occurrences of this formula are found in the Bible and forty-two are found in the Book of Deuteronomy. For example, Deuteronomy 4:28:

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that you will soon utterly perish from the land which you are going over the Jordan to possess; you will not live long upon it, but you will be utterly destroyed.”

We know that Jesus spoke in Aramaic from the cross. “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*” is the Aramaic form of the words of Psalm 22:1. we also know that Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy in his answers to the temptations in the wilderness. So it is a reasonable inference that in his reply to the thief on the cross Jesus spoke in the idiom that was common to both his own Aramaic language and the Hebrew language of the Old Testament.

The earliest translation of the Greek New Testament was into the language of Palestine’s nearest neighbor, Syria. Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic. It is therefore not surprising that in one of the oldest Syriac manuscripts of the Gospels (5<sup>th</sup> century Curetonianus) the translator recognized the idiom and translated the passage, “*Amen say I to you today that with me you will be in the garden of Eden.*” By introducing the word ‘that’ the translator removed the need for any punctuation to determine the sense. ***We therefore have a very ancient precedent for our interpretation which ante-dates all the English versions by hundreds of years.***

But the question remains, Why do nearly all later translators interpret the words of Jesus in a way that is contrary to all the evidence of Scripture? The answer, as suggested in the introduction, is because they have a deep-seated prejudice born of wishful thinking. It may be comforting to imagine that we go to heaven when we die but this is ‘pie in the

sky' and is no more true than other myths of the after-life found in most religions. True Bible teaching is unique — It offers us a wonderful hope of the Kingdom of God; a transformed earth — the paradise of Eden restored.

### CONCLUSION

In suggesting that the words of our Lord to the thief can only be understood by re-arranging the punctuation we are often accused of tampering with the text. This is a false accusation because any punctuation is an addition to the text.<sup>2</sup> The correct punctuation can only be determined by comparing Scripture with Scripture.

When considered in the wider context of the New Testament and of Scripture in general the words of our Lord to the thief open up wonderful truths concerning the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. We have brought together several related and difficult passages and found that they are in perfect harmony. In this we have followed the advice of Humbaier who was burnt at the stake in 1528 for preaching adult baptism, "If we put beside obscure or brief passages other passages on the same subject and bind them together like wax candles, and light them all at once, then the clear and pure splendor of the Scripture must shine forth."

Please look further into the wonderful truths concerning the Gospel of the Kingdom of God one earth. The thief waited until the last few hours of his life before confessing his faith in Jesus Christ. Why wait until it may be too late? Too often we put off a commitment to Christ until we are desperate or until we see our lives ebbing away. Is this the way to treat God's offer of salvation? As the poet expressed it,

"We will not come to thee till thou has nailed us to some bitter cross, and made us look on thine."<sup>3</sup>

### NOTES:

(1) In the Authorized Version N.T. the words 'hades' and 'Gehenna' are both translated 'hell' although they have quite different meanings. "Hades" signifies the grave were all go at death. "Gehenna" signifies the destruction which is reserved for those who are rejected at the judgment (Matt. 25:41). In Luke 16:23 Jesus appears to teach that there is torment in hades but this is an allegorical and ironic parable based on a Jewish myth. We have no reason to think that Jesus believed in a place called Abraham's bosom. Similarly when, in Mark 3:22-28, Jesus refers to another Jewish myth about Beelzebub it does not mean that Jesus believed in the existence of the 'prince of the demons'.

(2) Our system of punctuation was introduced by Aldus Manutius, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Venetian scholar and printer.

(3) *Ezekiel and other poems*. B. M. Nelson, 1907.

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## Pertinent Words on Paradise

The following is a small section of an article written by Jim Shaull that also appeared in Resurrection magazine, VOL. 95, No. 2, Spring 1992. It falls right in line with the above article you have just read, concerning "Paradise". [Ken Fortier]

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### PARADISE

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul seems to be telling us that "the third heaven" and "paradise" are the same thing, read verses 2–4.

Where, or what, is "paradise"? The word "paradise" is found in scripture only 3 times (II Cor. 12:4; Luke 23:43 and Rev. 2:7). The thief on the cross asked Jesus to "**remember me when you come into your kingdom.**" Jesus told the man that he would "**be with me in paradise.**" Here, Jesus has made another connection. Not only is paradise and the third heaven the same thing, but also "paradise" and "the kingdom" are the same thing!

Since all these refer to the same thing, if we can figure where one is, or will be, we can figure the others too. In Rev. 2:7, Jesus says, "To him that overcomes will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God." Where, in scripture, do we find "the tree of life"? First, it was on the earth in the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9) and next, it shall be, according to Rev. 21 & 22, after judgment day, on either side of the river "of water of life" in the Kingdom on a new earth under new heavens. Daniel also tells us (&:22–27) that the "everlasting kingdom" (i.e., "the third heaven") will be after the "judgment", "under the whole heaven" ("under" not "in").

"**Paradise**", "**the third heaven**", and "**the kingdom**" are one and the same, and this is what Paul saw. What Paul actually saw was/is the future!

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NOTE: Emphasis in bold print added by Ken Fortier, Editor.