

PARADISE

By

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To be able to give a “reason concerning the hope that is in you” should be a top priority with each Christian (I Peter 3:15). But the hope itself has become badly out of focus, if not completely negated, by contrary and confusing concepts of life after death.

It is repeatedly expressed in scripture that the hope of seeing Jesus and receiving the glory of eternal life is not to be realized until the time of His return and the resurrection of the dead. In view of this fact, many ask about Christ’s statement to the thief on the cross: “I say unto you this day you shall be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23–43).

These words, taken as they usually appear in English translations, contradict everything the Bible has to say elsewhere on the subject. To resolve this problem we will consider the location of Paradise and then examine the meaning of Christ’s words.

One common view holds that Paradise is a part of Hades, so that at death the spirits of the redeemed enter that blissful portion of Hades, while the unredeemed enter a separate compartment under a condition of misery and terror. Indeed, the Bible teaches that at death all people enter Hades, the state of death, and Jesus was in Hades for three days. In Acts 2:27–33 Peter reminds his audience that Jesus was not “left in Hades” but was resurrected. By making Paradise a part of Hades, it can be understood how Jesus went to both Paradise and Hades at His death. But this idea has no Biblical support, and it contradicts the other scriptures where Paradise is mentioned.

In the days of Jesus, the Jews held many widely diverse views regarding “Paradise,” but none of them were based upon Divine revelation, so no weight should be attached to such opinions. We will stick to what is revealed in the Bible.

Paradise is a Greek word, borrowed from the Persians, and means an orchard or fruit garden. The Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) renders Genesis 2:8 thusly: “god planted a paradise in Eden.” There are only three places in the New Testament where Paradise is found: Luke 23–43, II Cor. 12:4; and Rev. 2:7. In each case the word suggests the restoration of the original Paradise (orchard) of Eden.

Paul speaks of “visions and revelations” (II Cor. 12:1–4) and mentions one “who was caught up even to the third heaven...how he was caught up into Paradise...” While Bible commentators are not agreed as to what constitutes the “third heaven,” Peter explains that the first heaven and earth were destroyed at the time of the flood, and the present heavens and earth are also to be destroyed (II Peter 3:5–7). But there is yet to be a “new heavens and a new earth” (II Peter 3:13). To understand that Paul’s “visions and revelations” were of the new heaven and new earth is much more fitting than to apply them to some connection to Hades.

The blessed promise made to the thief is made again in Rev. 2:7 for all the faithful saints. “To him that overcomes to him will I give to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.” This “tree of life” which was found in the original Garden of Eden is not to be found again until the creation of the new heavens and earth, as

described in Revelation 21 and 22. “And on this side of the river and on the other was the tree of life...” (Rev. 22:2).

After Adam’s sin he was driven from the garden, the original Paradise, “lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” (Gen. 3:22). The Creator would not have man living forever in a state of sin. But the new creation will be inhabited only by those who have been cleansed from sin by the death of Christ so they can live forever in His presence. Whatever this “tree of life” is, it conveys the truth that it is not now available to man and will be restored only after judgment and the creation of the new earth.

Did the thief go to heaven with Christ on the day He died? Apparently not, for even on the first day of the week after His resurrection, Jesus had not yet ascended to the Father (John 20:17) and, in fact, did not ascend to heaven until some forty-three days after the crucifixion. Surely we are not to understand that Christ was offering the thief a place in heaven before He Himself ascended, and in advance of all the faithful, including David, who according to Acts 2:31 had “not yet ascended into heaven.”

Then, if Paradise is yet future, how do we understand Christ’s promise to the thief?

The problem is resolve when we look at the statement in the original language and compare other scriptures, which is always proper in understanding the Bible.

Punctuation, as we have it today, was entirely absent from the New Testament Greek manuscripts. In the earliest manuscripts the text continues without any divisions between letters or words except an occasional dot, or point, on a level with the top of the letters, and sometimes a space. The punctuations of all modern editions of the Greek texts **rests entirely on human authority.**

George R. Berry, editor of the Interlinear Literal Translation, wrote: “There is no authority anywhere in the Greek text for punctuation.” The Greek adverb here rendered “today” appears in the Septuagint and the New Testament 221 times. In 170 of these places the adverb follows the verb it modifies. For example: “I declare to you **this day**, that you shall surely perish” (Deut. 30:18). Therefore, it would be natural to punctuate Luke 23:43 as follows: “Truly I say to you today, you will be with me in Paradise.” Paul uses a similar turn of phrase in Acts 20:26 — “I testify to you **this day**, that I am innocent of the blood of all men.”

In his translation of the New Testament, Joseph Rotherham renders the text: “Verily, to thee I say, this day, with me shall thou be in the paradise.” He notes that concerning *semeron*, rendered “this day,” that it is a demonstrative word and therefore “it will bear any reasonable stress which may be laid upon it, whether it be placed before or after the words which it qualifies.” He then paraphrases Jesus’ answer: “Thou dost ask to be remembered then: verily thou art assured now. As on this the day of my weakness and shame; thou hast faith to ask, I this day have authority to answer. Thou dost ask to be remembered when I come in my kingdom; thou shall be remembered then and with distinguished favor: thou shall be in my kingdom; shall be with me in the very paradise of my kingdom, in the garden of the Lord.”

It may be asked why translators of most modern versions do not place the comma after the “today” so that the verse will harmonize with other scriptural teaching on death and resurrection. We might as well ask why they do not translate the Greek *baptizo* as immerse or *diakonos* as servant instead of merely spelling them with English letters. To

do so would put the translation at odds with most denominational doctrine and almost insure its failure to be accepted. When the translators put Luke 23:43 into English, they punctuated it arbitrarily according to preconceived notions. An honest translator, when faced with more than one choice of translation, will choose the one that is in harmony with the rest of God's word.

The promise to the thief is consistent with Christ's promise to all His people. "This is the will of Him who sent me, that everyone who sees the son and believes on him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:40). The purpose of God—to have a race that is eternal, in His image, in a perfect Paradise—is not to be realized until after Christ's return, the resurrection, the day of judgment and the destruction of all that is ungodly. The new creation will be one "wherein dwells righteousness" (II Peter 3:13). "And there shall be no curse anymore; and the throne of God and the Lamb shall be therein; and his servants shall serve him" (Rev. 22:3).

"Blessed are they that wash their robes, that they may have the right to come to the tree of life, and ay enter in by the gates into the city" (Re. 22:14).

So shall we be with Jesus, in His paradise.

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