

THE UPWARD CALL

*Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet;
but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,
**I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God
IN CHRIST JESUS.**
(Philippians 3:13-14 NASB)*

#05-1109

Is the Thief in Paradise Today?

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(39) And one of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" (40) But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? (41) And we indeed justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." (42) And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" (43) And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise." (Luke 23:39-43 NASB)

The story of the criminals being crucified along with Jesus is used by many to teach that this is proof positive that when a believer dies, he goes straight to heaven to be in the presence of God.

I once heard a very well-known preacher declare that this story "absolutely proves without any doubt" that the death of a believer leads to instant ascent to heaven. To be sure, this brother in Christ means well in his preaching, but this particular story declares *nothing of the sort*. Let me be more emphatic: this story has nothing whatsoever to do with where a believer goes *in* death.

As stressed in other issues, we need to be reminded of Jesus' words: "**No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man**" (John 3:13 NASB), who Paul declared "alone possesses immortality" (1 Timothy 6:16). Could Jesus or Paul, for that matter, have made it any clearer than this?

Given this, what did Jesus mean when He told the thief he would be with Him in Paradise?

First, the criminal asked Jesus to remember him when He comes in His kingdom. To what kingdom was the criminal referring? In that day, there was only one kingdom that was expected by the Jews. It was the kingdom promised to David; the same one declared to Mary when Gabriel appeared to her pronouncing her favorable before God.

"He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end." (Luke 1:32-33 NASB; see Isaiah 9:6-7; Daniel 7:13-14)

Even if he did not know all the facts surrounding Christ's future kingdom, the criminal surely understood the insults being hurled at Jesus as He hung on the cross.

And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One." And the soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!" Now there was also an inscription above Him, "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS." (Luke 23:35-38 NASB)

So, it was in this context that the criminal asked Jesus to remember him when He comes in His kingdom.

Did the kingdom of Christ come to rule over the nations in that day or any of the days that followed? If it did come, then according to the prophets, the world should be experiencing righteous and just rule. Can anyone find such a thing throughout the nations today? Is our modern world ruled according to righteousness and justice? Are there kings and lords of Christ ruling over the nations today? Of course, the answer to all these questions is *no*. Consequently, there is only one conclusion to draw: Jesus was not promising the criminal a place in the kingdom upon his death. Jesus' answer to the criminal had to

be in reference to a day that would not commence for at least 2,000 years from Calvary, considering we are still waiting for our Savior to come from heaven.

Second, some might argue that Jesus promised the criminal a place in paradise, not in His kingdom. There are only two other places in the New Testament that refer directly to paradise, and each points to the future kingdom. Paul was snatched away into paradise (2 Corinthians 12:4), which is taken up in the next issue. Then, it is promised to those believers who overcome (the conquerors) that they may eat of the tree of life in the paradise of God (Revelation 2:7). It must be added that all of the promises to those who conquer, as recorded in the seven epistles to the ecclesia (Revelation 2-3), refer to entering paradise in some fashion. Of course, John, along with Paul, actually saw paradise.

Third, many preachers place their emphasis on the word *today* as proof that the criminal and Jesus both went to paradise in that day. However, when Jesus died, He went into the tomb (grave) as a dead man, until God raised Him from the dead on the third day. Jesus then ascended to His Father (John 20:17), returned to the earth, and appeared to His disciples over a forty-day period, before finally ascending into a cloud as the disciples watched (Acts 1:9-11; 2:14-36). Today, He is *not* in paradise but seated upon His Father's throne in heaven.

The Hebrew believers were encouraged that Christ entered **into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us** (Hebrews 9:24). Please note that these believers had no expectant hope that they were to go to heaven *in* death. In fact, a few verses later, they were encouraged *to wait* for Christ to come *a second time* for salvation apart from sin (Hebrews 9:28).

Further, the Thessalonian believers were commended because they were waiting for God's Son to come from heaven (1 Thessalonians 1:10). When they were concerned over their loved ones who had fallen asleep in Jesus, Paul did *not* encourage them that there was no need to be concerned, for they were in heaven already. Rather, he encouraged them that they were asleep in Jesus and would be resurrected (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). They were to comfort one another with these words about the resurrection and snatching away to meet the Lord in the air.

Thus, God's word consistently places the emphasis on waiting for the resurrection, and *not* on death and immediately going to heaven.

Fourth, many cite the use of the word *today* as proof that the thief went to paradise that day when he died. However, we need to understand that the Greek language from which the English versions were translated had no punctuation as do our modern-day versions of the Bible. In other words, punctuation had to be placed in the text by the translators and editors. As such, this alone opens up the door for interpretative bias.

Without punctuation, Luke 23:43 reads: **"Truly I say to you today you shall be with Me in Paradise."** But notice that the meaning of Jesus' words changes, depending on where a comma is placed in relation to the word *today*. If it is placed after *today*, it simply means that Jesus was making a statement of a future promise on that day. He was not promising that the thief would be in paradise with Him on that particular or specific day. Recognizing this as the more likely interpretation, some translations have placed the comma after the word *today*.

"Verily, to you am I saying *today*, with Me shall you be in paradise." (Luke 23:43 CV)

Verily I say unto thee *this day*: with me shalt thou be in Paradise. (Luke 23:43 REB)

Given this rendering, Jesus was merely stating that on *that* particular day (*today*) He made a promise to the criminal that referred to a day many years into the future when He would *be coming* (future) in His kingdom. For the thief, this day was either 2,000 years (first resurrection) or 3,000 years (second resurrection) into the future. We are not given an indication of which one was promised. I suspect the latter, for this is when paradise, New Jerusalem, truly comes into view for all to see and enter into it.

Especially in light of scripture on immortality and ascension into heaven, this appears to be the most plausible understanding of this passage.