

The Thief on the Cross

What did Jesus mean when He told the thief on the cross who believed in Him that he would be with Him in paradise? Did He mean he would be with him that very day? Is paradise the same thing as heaven? What is this all about?

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When Jesus Christ was crucified, one of the thieves crucified alongside Him railed at him, in blasphemy, saying, “If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.” But the other one rebuked him, saying, “Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong” He then said to Christ, “Lord, remember me when You come into your kingdom.” (Luke 23:39-42).

Yeshua replied, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise” (v.43). This verse has perplexed millions. The thief was going to die that very day. How could he be with Christ in “paradise” that same day? What is this account all about?

In the New Testament, “paradise” is simply another word for the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God. When Jesus died on the cross that day, He did not immediately go to heaven, where God’s throne is located. He went to the grave, where He abode for three days and nights (Matt.12:40).

Why did Jesus promise this criminal, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43)? The problem in this verse, in the English translation, is in the punctuation. The Companion Bible in a footnote to this verse says, “ ‘I say unto thee today’. **Today.** Connect this with ‘I say’, to emphasize the solemnity of the occasion; not with ‘shalt thou be.’”

Punctuation the Key

Says Bullinger’s Companion Bible, in appendix 173, “The interpretation of this verse depends entirely on punctuation, which rests wholly on *human* authority, the Greek manuscripts having no punctuation of any kind till the ninth century, and then it is only a dot in the middle of the line separating each word.” Here, as in the common Hebrew idiom, “I say unto you today” the word “today” refers to Christ’s time of saying this statement, not to when the thief would join Him in paradise.

We do not enter God’s Kingdom until the return of Christ, at the resurrection. Therefore the thief, although promised he will join Christ in paradise, when the time

comes, as of this day he is still in his grave, where all the dead go until the day of the resurrection. *He could not go to paradise that very day, because Christ was in the grave from the time He died until three days later when He was resurrected!*

As the apostle Paul said, “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He *rose again the third day according to the Scriptures*” (I Cor.15:3-4).

So when will the thief on the cross join Christ in paradise? What is “paradise”?

Paradise = the Kingdom of God

As the apostle Paul said, “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord” (I Thess.4:16-17).

Paul also declared, Behold, I tell you a mystery: we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the DEAD will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruption must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality” (I Cor.15:51-52).

The prophet Daniel explained when Christ would come into His Kingdom. He explained king Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the tall statue with a head of gold, chest silver, belly of bronze, and thighs and legs of iron as being an insight into the future world governing kingdoms of the world – kingdoms of men – which would culminate in a world union of ten separate parts, symbolized by ten toes – which would all be replaced by Christ. Daniel said, “And as the toes of the feet were partly of iron and partly of clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly fragile. . . And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever” (Dan.2:42-44).

How will this occur? Daniel told the king, “You watched while a stone was cut out without hands, which struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were crushed together, and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; the wind carried them away so that no trace of them was found. And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth” (Dan.2:34-35). The stone symbolizes Christ, He is the “stone which the builders rejected” which “has become the chief cornerstone” (Psalm 118:22). He is the One of whom God the Father said, “Behold, I lay in Zion a stone for a foundation, a tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation. Whoever believes will not act hastily” (Isaiah 28:16). That cornerstone is “that spiritual

Rock that followed them [Israel in the wilderness, coming out of Egypt], and that Rock was Christ” (I Cor.10:4).

When Christ Receives His Kingdom

When will this occur?

Daniel had a vision himself of the future of the nations. After watching future world human governments rising up, he says, “I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed” (Dan.7:13-14).

Daniel concludes, “Then the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey Him” (Dan.7:27). That is when the thief on the cross, who is one of the saints, will receive his reward and enter the Kingdom of God – paradise!

Revelation Reveals It

John wrote in the book of Revelation, speaking of the future period when Christ will return to earth to take charge of His Kingdom, “Then the seventh angel sounded: And there was a voice in heaven saying, ‘The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!’ And the twenty four elders who sat before God on their thrones fell on their faces and worshipped God, saying, ‘We give You thanks, O Lord God Almighty, The One who is and who was and who is to come, because You have taken Your great power and reigned. The nations were angry, and Your wrath has come, *and the time of the dead, that they should be judged*, and that You should reward Your servants the prophets and the saints, and those who fear Your name, small and great, and should destroy those who destroy the earth” (Rev.11:15-18).

At the Mount Olivet prophecy, Christ Himself explained that after the great tribulation which the nations would experience, in the end times, “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Matt.24:29-31).

Until that time, all those who are dead in Christ, who believe in Him and accept Him as Saviour, Lord and Master – as the thief on the cross did – will be asleep in the grave, unconscious of any thing – dead as a doornail.

As Solomon said, “For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all return to dust” (Eccl.3:19-20).

Solomon also wrote, “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going” (Eccl.9:10).

The Real Meaning of “Today”

Therefore, the real statement of Yeshua to the thief, “I say unto you this day,” means that even as He was hanging on the cross, He had the authority to tell the thief that his sins were forgiven and that he would be in God’s Kingdom – Paradise – in the future, when Christ establishes His Kingdom – at His Second Coming. He could and did say such a thing, make such a solemn pronouncement, even when nailed to the stake, paying the penalty for all our sins! He made such a powerful promise, even at that very day, that very moment.

The “Today” referred to the timing of the utterance – even then, while nailed to the stake, Christ could make such a promise.

This thief (unlike his fellow robber) knew he needed to have his sins forgiven, and he believed only Christ could forgive and save him. So he cried out, “Jesus, remember me *when You come into Your kingdom*” (Luke 23:42). His request had to do with the time Christ returns to take up the reins of His Kingdom, at His Second Coming.

This passage has nothing to do with what was to occur that very day, for both Christ and the thief would be in their graves for the remainder of that day, and the following days. Christ was resurrected three days later; the robber will not join Him in the Kingdom of God, or Paradise, until he also is resurrected, at the time when Christ returns for His saints, to judge the world. The thief’s request referred to the “*time when You come into Your kingdom*” – ***THE SECOND COMING!***

The Backstory of the Thief

The thief himself, it seems clear, had heard about Christ, and knew that He was an innocent man who had become notorious in the land of Judea, doing miracles, and thundering against hypocrisy and sin. He had undoubtedly heard about Him, and probably had heard Him speak at one time or another. The miracles and teaching of Christ were widely known throughout Judea. His miracles captivated the attention of the nation. Everybody wondered about Him.

If we read between the lines, the thief seems to have known exactly who Yeshua was. Although it is not provable, it is possible that the repentant thief may have been originally a follower of John the Baptist, and heard and believed his preaching and warnings about sin. But, society and other people led him into a path of sin and lawlessness, causing him to succumb to temptation. He was enticed to join in with others and went down the wrong path and made some poor choices in his life.

As Solomon had warned, My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent . . . My son, do not walk in the way with them, keep your foot from their path” (Prov.1:10-15). Solomon also declared, “He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed” (Prov.13:20).

The thief could well have been one of those who had been baptized by John, but then got caught up in a life of thievery and temptation, and went astray from the truth. But his conscience smote him, especially as he saw Christ, the Man of God, being crucified along with him because of the jealousy and wickedness of the spiritual leaders of the nation.

Therefore he rebuked the other thief, and in essence showed his chagrin and repentance for his sins, when He asked Christ to remember him favorably when He inherited His kingdom. The thief obviously recognized Christ as the Messiah and coming King, and his request acknowledges that fact. He seems to have been a believer who had stumbled and fallen from grace, but was now repentant.

The thief probably had heard the preaching of John the Baptist. John’s preaching was very well known throughout the land.

“Then Jerusalem, ALL JUDEA, and ALL THE REGION around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins” (Matthew 3:5-6).

“Then ALL THE LAND OF JUDEA, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were ALL baptized by him in the Jordan river confessing their sins” (Mark 1:5).

This large group of people may have at one time included the thief himself, since he was very knowledgeable of Christ and the coming kingdom of God.

This thief “came to himself” and repented of his sins, when he saw his abysmal situation. It would seem like he knew a lot about the Scriptures and the coming Messiah, and was at this point truly broken-hearted at his “lifestyle”, and poor choices, which had let down himself, his family and his God, and led him to his ultimate fate on the cross.

This story also shows just how great is the mercy of God and His Son Yeshua, into whose hands all judgment is committed.