

The Thief on the Cross

Many people think Jesus assured the thief on the cross that he would go to heaven with Him that very day. But is this really what Jesus Christ meant?

As Jesus Christ hung dying, He told a convicted criminal being crucified with Him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Many people think Jesus assured the man he would go to heaven with Him that very day. But is this really what He meant?

The placement of the comma after "you" and before "today" would certainly seem to indicate this. However, notice how an entirely different meaning is conveyed if the comma is placed *after* "today" rather than before: "Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise."

No punctuation in the original Bible texts

We need to first understand that original texts of the Bible (Greek for the New Testament and Hebrew and some Aramaic for the Old Testament) used no punctuation.

As Dr. E.W. Bullinger explains in *The Companion Bible*: "None of our modern marks of punctuation are found [in Bible texts] until the ninth century...The punctuation of all modern editions of the Greek text, and of all versions made from it, rests entirely *on human authority*, and has no weight whatever in determining or even influencing the interpretation of a single passage" (1990, Appendix 94, p. 136, emphasis in original).

In most cases translators and publishers of the Bible have done an admirable job using punctuation to clarify the meaning of the Scriptures. But this is one case where their doctrinal bias has regrettably obscured the meaning of Christ's words. By placing a comma *before* "today" in Christ's statement to the dying man rather than *after* it, they have Jesus saying something He never intended.

We know this because the Bible clearly says Jesus Himself did not go to paradise or heaven on the day He died! Instead *He died and was buried in the grave*. Notice the apostle Paul's clear statement in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4: "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."

Notice what Christ told Mary soon after He had been resurrected: "Do not cling to Me, for *I have not yet ascended to My Father*" (John 20:17). A full three days after His death, Jesus Himself clearly said that He had not yet ascended to heaven.

Jesus had earlier plainly said that He would lie in the grave for three days and three nights (Matthew 12:40). The Scriptures nowhere say that His body was buried while His soul went elsewhere. Jesus died and was buried. He went only to the grave. Therefore the dying criminal *could not* have been with Jesus in heaven that day, because *Jesus Himself did not go there then*.

If Jesus was not telling the man he would be in heaven or paradise on that day, what was He telling him?

Future Kingdom and paradise on earth

A fundamental principle for sound Bible study is to carefully check the context. Notice the specific wording of the man's request: "Lord, remember me *when You come into Your kingdom*" (Luke 23:42). Notice that the thief expressed no expectation of immediately going to heaven with Jesus at the moment they died.

He may have already known something about the nature of the Kingdom of God—that it would be a literal kingdom to be established on earth by the Messiah, which many Jews of that day understood. Jesus Himself had previously given an entire parable "because they thought that the kingdom of God would immediately appear" (Luke:19:11). Jesus also taught His disciples to pray, "Your kingdom come" (Luke 11:2). This Kingdom, as explained in our free booklet [The Gospel of the Kingdom](#), is the Kingdom that Jesus will establish *on earth at His return*, not a location in heaven to which we go when we die.

Notice also Jesus' response to the man, telling him, "...you will be with Me *in Paradise*." Understanding the nature of the biblical use of the term *paradise* is crucial to understanding this passage.

The Greek word here translated "paradise," *paradeisos*, means an enclosed garden or park. In the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament in common use at the time of Christ, this same word was used in references to the Garden of Eden. Besides its occurrence in Luke 23, the word is used only two other times in the New Testament. In both cases it refers to the place of God's presence.

In 2 Corinthians:12:2-4 Paul describes a *vision* in which he "was caught up into Paradise." Paul says this paradise was in "the third heaven"—the dwelling place of God.

Jesus tells us that "the tree of life" is located "in the midst of the Paradise of God" (Revelation 2:7). Revelation 22:2 explains that the tree of life is to be in the New Jerusalem. God will come *from heaven* with this New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2-3) after the resurrections of the dead mentioned in Revelation 20. Only at that time will men dwell with God in this paradise.

Furthermore, the restoration of the land of Israel that will take place under the coming reign of Christ is compared in Isaiah 51:3 to the Garden of Eden—again, *paradeisos* in the Septuagint.

Putting together all these scriptures, we can see that the paradise Christ mentioned, in which men will dwell with God in His Kingdom, is to be *at a future time*.

How do we know this was Christ's meaning? Again, as noted above, Jesus plainly said He was going to be dead and buried for the following three days and nights, after which He clearly told Mary that He had not yet ascended to heaven.

Some theologians and religious denominations try to redefine Christ's use of *paradise* to say that this referred to where the righteous dead went before Jesus came—a sort of temporary "holding place" next to hell because heaven wasn't available to them until Christ ascended to heaven after His death and opened the way for them to follow.

This concept, however, is straight out of pagan Greek mythology about life after death (the Elysian Fields as the section of the Greek underworld for good people) and not something taught in the Bible. The idea that the righteous dead of Old Testament times went to a place called "paradise" and later ascended to heaven after Jesus was resurrected is disproved by the apostle Peter's plain statements in Acts 2:29 and 34—almost two months after Christ's death and resurrection—that King David "is both dead and buried" and "David *did not* ascend into the heavens."

Putting together the relevant scriptures, we can see here the truth of the matter. The robber, facing imminent death while being crucified alongside Jesus (Luke 23:39-41), sought comfort and assurance. Jesus provided it, telling the man, "Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise." The "Paradise" of which Jesus spoke wasn't heaven, but the Eden-like world to which the man would be resurrected according to God's plan—as touched on later in this booklet.

Hebrew idiom lost in translation

Part of His reply, "Assuredly I say to you today" was a "common Hebrew idiom...which is constantly used for very solemn emphasis" (*The Companion Bible*, Appendix 173, p. 192). Examples of this Hebrew phrase, worded very similarly to Christ's statement, can be found in Deuteronomy 30:18 ("I announce to you today that you shall surely perish") and Acts 20:26 ("Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men"—New International Version).

Many centuries later, when the punctuation marks we see in our English versions were inserted, Jesus' meaning was distorted by the wrong placement of the comma, and this Hebrew figure of speech was obscured. (Several other Bible translations and reference works, among them the Rotherham Translation, *The Emphatic Diaglott*, The Concordant Literal New Testament and *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament*, recognize the Hebrew idiom and correctly place the comma after "today" for proper punctuation.)

In conclusion, Jesus never said nor implied that the dying man would be in paradise or heaven on that very day. Christ was encouraging him by solemnly assuring him that a time would come, in God's future Kingdom on earth, when the man would be resurrected and would see Jesus again.

This dramatic event can be properly understood only when we comprehend the time frame of God's plan of salvation and the promised resurrections described in the Bible.