

## “Christ and the Thief on the Cross”

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THERE are several important points in connection with the passage concerning the thief on the cross, Luke 23:39-43, that are not usually taken into account. It is too often explained to harmonize with certain fixed notions of the teacher, and not with the general tenor of the Scriptures. A few of those points will be noticed, in hope that some may be led to a right understanding of this text.

We notice first the request of the thief. After rebuking his companion for his railing, he turned to Christ, and said: “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom” (vs. 42). An extract from the “Speaker’s Commentary” will be in place right here. “The faith of the penitent thief looked forward not merely to a kingdom of the Christ, but to a kingdom beyond the grave, since he could see the Sovereign of that kingdom in one who was at the point of death. He believed in the coming of the Christ, not into his kingdom, as the Authorized Version would lead us to understand, but to earth, invested with the kingly dignity. (Compare Matt. 25:31, where the Son of man, called below “the king,” is said to “come in His glory.”)” This criticism is a just one. The language of the thief shows that he looked forward to a future event, at which time he wished to be remembered. Griesbach’s text reads thus: “Lord, remember me in the day of thy coming.” This is equivalent to the ordinary version, for when Christ comes He comes in His kingdom. (See Matt. 25:31; 2 Tim. 4:1). This is also shown by the parable of the nobleman who “went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return” (Luke 19:12). It is expressly stated, Luke 19:11, that this parable was given to correct the impression which some had obtained, that the kingdom should immediately appear. Christ teaches that the kingdom is yet future; that He is now gone to the far country—Heaven—to receive it, and that when He has received it He will return and reward the righteous and punish the disobedient. In harmony with this teaching He commands His followers to ever pray, “Your kingdom come” (Matt. 6:10). The thief looked forward by faith to the time to which Christ directed all his followers to look, —the time when He should return and receive them unto Himself. (John 14:3). His request was not that Christ should take him to some place of happiness, but that Christ should remember him when He should return.

But it may be objected that the thief could not have understood that Christ’s kingdom was far in the future, since he had had no instruction on the subject. To this we reply that Christ’s teaching on this subject was quite generally known,

although it was not comprehended to any great extent. Moreover, it appears from the narrative that the thief had some previous knowledge of Christ, for he said to his companion, "but this Man has done nothing wrong" (vs. 41). He could not have made this statement had he not had some previous acquaintance with Christ and His doctrine.

Having settled the fact that the thief's request had reference to an event that was still future, **we ask, "Did Christ go to Paradise that day?"** We will let the Bible answer. From Rev. 22:1, 2 we learn that the tree of life is on either side of the river of life, and that the river of life proceeds "out of the throne of God." In Rev. 2:7, we read: "To him who overcomes will I give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God." These texts show conclusively that Paradise is where God resides—where He has His throne. Then if Christ went to Paradise, He must have gone into the presence of God. But He did not go into God's presence, for on the morning of his resurrection, He said to Mary "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to my brethren, and say to them, I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God" (John 20:17). Christ, therefore, did not go to Paradise that day. Now, since it is impossible that Christ should lie, it necessarily follows that He did not tell the thief that he would go to Paradise that day.

**We next inquire:** "Where did Christ go in the interval between His death and resurrection?" This is answered by Peter in his sermon on the day of Pentecost. He quotes Ps. 16:10, "For You will not leave my soul in Sheol [hades], nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption," and explains that David, being a prophet, spoke this of Christ. Thus: "Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption." (Acts 2:30, 31). This point is admitted by the creeds of all churches, which say of Christ "He descended into hell" [hades]. An additional proof is here given that Christ did not at death enter into His kingdom, for the promise of which Peter speaks was that God would "raise up" Christ to sit on His throne.

**The nature of hades:** Solomon says: "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 [hades] where you are going" (Eccl. 9:10). David says: "For in death there is no remembrance of You; in the grave [hades] who will give You thanks?" (Ps. 6:5). Again: "The dead do not praise the Lord, nor any who go down into silence [hades]" (Ps. 115:17). And Hezekiah says: "For Sheol [hades] cannot thank You, death cannot praise You; those who go down to the pit [hades] cannot hope for

Your truth" (Isa. 38:18). Testimonies might be continued indefinitely, to show that the grave [hades] where Christ went is a place of darkness, silence, gloom, and unconsciousness. It is unnecessary to multiply texts to prove that the thief went there also, since the Bible declares that all men alike go there. (See Ps. 89:48). Both Christ and the thief went to the same place, but that place was not Paradise; it was, as David describes it, "a land of forgetfulness."

**Let us recapitulate what we have found: 1)** The thief did not ask nor expect to be remembered that day. He looked forward to the time of reward—the second coming of Christ. **2)** Christ positively did not go to Paradise that day. **3)** He positively did go to hades. **4)** Since Christ did not go to Paradise that day, we are forced to the conclusion that He did not say that He would meet the thief there that day. **5)** The preceding points having been proved, we must naturally suppose that Christ's promise had reference to the same time to which the thief's request referred—His second coming—for this is in agreement with all His teaching. (See Matt. 25:31-34; John 14:1-3).

"But," an objector says, "the text plainly says, 'Assuredly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.'" Let us see if this is what Christ said. And in our consideration of the text itself, we must bear in mind what has been learned in regard to the condition of men in death, and the time when the just are rewarded; and we must remember that this text must harmonize with the other Scriptures, else the Bible ceases to be a divine revelation. Now let us consider the passage as it came from the pen of Luke. It had no punctuation marks, for punctuation was not invented until several hundred years after his time. The punctuation of the Bible is not a part of inspiration, but is the work of men. Then we are doing no violence to the text if we remove the comma from before "today," and place one after it, or we might remove it entirely. Then it would read, "Assuredly I say to you today," etc., the word "today" being used to make the declaration emphatic, and not to mark the time when the promise should be fulfilled. But it is still further objected that if the comma were placed after "today," the sentence would not be declarative, but interrogative; thus, "shalt thou be with me?" etc. To this, we reply that in the original there is only one word to express the three English words, "shalt thou be." The subject of the sentence, and the auxiliary of the verb, are not expressed, but are indicated by the form of the verb. The Greek word is *esee*, the future indicative second person singular of the verb *eimi*, to be, a literal translation of which is, "thou wilt be;" and this order is the most natural. We may read the whole text, then, as follows: "Assuredly I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise." And this must have satisfied the penitent thief, since it was all he asked. The time when he would be there would be understood to be future, since Christ's coming was the generally recognized time of reward.

In regard to the reading of the Authorized Version, this may be said: The Bible was translated by men who were just emerging from the bondage of papal error. It was a wonderful thing at that time to have any version at all in the language of the common people. On most points, the reformers believed just as the Catholics did; they differed only in believing that men were justified by faith, and not by indulgences and doing penance, and that men could go to Christ direct, without the intervention of a pope.

Those who translated the Bible believed just as the Catholic Church did in regard to the state of the dead, and would very naturally construe this text to harmonize with their previously conceived ideas. With the light, which we now have on the word of God, in reference to the subject of death and the final reward, this text harmonizes completely.

In order to fully realize the wondrous nature of this whole occurrence, we must bear in mind Christ's circumstances. He had been betrayed by one of His own disciples, into the hands of a brutal mob. All His other disciples had forsaken Him and fled. He had been hurried from one place to another during the night previous, and was worn out from lack of sleep and fasting. He had been scourged almost to the point of death. His temples had been pierced with sharp thorns; He had been spit upon, and struck in the face with the reed and with the fist, until "His visage was so marred more than any man." He had borne the cross, which of itself was a disgrace, until He had fainted beneath the burden; and of all the throng who a few days before had shouted, "Blessed is the King of Israel that comes in the name of the Lord," there was none to speak a word in His favor. All united in reviling Him, or else preserved the silence of despair. When His disciples saw Him submit to all these indignities, and finally to the cruel and shameful punishment of crucifixion, their hopes fled entirely. They thought that He had been deceived in regard to Himself, when He had received their homage as King of Israel, and had told them of His future glory. But now the thief showed a faith that was almost miraculous. That which was darkness to the minds of the disciples, was clear to him. He recognized the divinity of Christ notwithstanding His humiliation, and by faith he looked beyond the grave and saw Christ coming in power and glory. On the strength of this faith he cried out, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

How refreshing this acknowledgment and trustful prayer must have been to the bruised spirit of Jesus. And He who never turns from the prayer of any humble suppliant, said, "Assuredly I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise." What force there is in this emphasis on the adverb "today." Today, although suffering all the insults and tortures that cruelty can suggest; although forsaken by my followers, and shut out from the presence of God; although apparently the

weakest and most helpless of mortals, —notwithstanding all this, even today I can promise you a place in My kingdom. Here also is a sublime exhibition of faith. He could not feel His Father's presence as He had always felt it, and He was left alone, yet His faith was strong in His mission, and He knew that at the appointed time He could return to earth, a glorious conqueror.

And the faith of the penitent thief is a standing rebuke to any who may doubt the promises of God, or the willingness or ability of Christ to save all who come unto God by Him. He had nothing but Christ's word in the face of events that seemed to preclude the possibility of its fulfillment. Still he believed. We can look back and can see Christ coming forth from the tomb, victorious over death, and can hear Him say, "All power is given to Me in Heaven and in earth." How then can we doubt?

"Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast *our* confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all *points* tempted as *we are*, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:14-16)