

Did Jesus and the Dying Thief Go to Paradise That Day?

**A Study of Luke 23: 43
by Stephen Jones**

Which did Jesus say?

**“Verily I say unto thee, today shalt
thou be with Me in paradise”**

or

**“Verily I say unto thee today: With
Me thou shalt be in paradise”**

“And he said unto Jesus, ‘Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.’ And Jesus said unto him, ‘Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with Me in paradise.’” (Luke 23: 42-43).

As it is generally translated in modern versions, as well as in the King James Version above, this passage has Jesus telling the dying thief on the cross that he would be with Jesus in paradise that very day. Presumably, this would mean that the consciousness (soul) of each were to survive the death of the body, and that they were to go consciously to a place called “paradise.”

However, this interpretation is entirely dependent upon the punctuation of the passage, which was added to the original text many centuries after the Apostle penned these words. When the writers of the New Testament lived, punctuation was unknown. All the words and sentences were run together, making it quite difficult to read. It was not until the ninth century that any Greek manuscripts contained even the barest rudiments of punctuation. The earliest punctuated manuscript (Codex Augiensis) has only dots separating each word.

It is obvious then, that any and all punctuation found in the Scriptures rests entirely on human authority and cannot be used to prove how any passage must be read. It is the purpose of this pamphlet to prove that the weight of internal evidence is in favor of rendering Luke 23: 43 in this way:

“And Jesus unto him, ‘Verily I say unto thee today: With me thou shalt be in paradise.’”

As the reader will note, this manner of punctuation has Jesus saying to the thief: “With me thou shalt be in paradise.” Jesus said those words “today.” Jesus did not say that they would be together in paradise “today.”

Keep in mind that since punctuation rests only on human authority, neither rendering can take precedence over the other, except as may

be dictated by OTHER EVIDENCE. We shall now present evidence in the case which will show clearly, we believe, that Jesus and the thief did indeed die, and that neither of them went to paradise that day.

It is commonly thought today that paradise is a place that was at one time a “compartment of hell” (Hebrew ***SHEOL***; Greek ***HADES***), where all the saints of the Old Testament lived consciously after they “died” until Christ “took them to heaven with Him” after the resurrection. And since Revelation 2: 7 states that one of the rewards of the overcomers was that they would be given access to “the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God,” it is necessary to assume also that Jesus not only took the saints to heaven with Him, but that He also took paradise itself with Him, including the Tree of Life.

This explanation, though believed by many (who must find some way to make paradise consistent with their belief in man’s inherent immortality) is not supported by the definition of paradise prevalent in the New Testament era. This is made evident by the Septuagint’s version of Isaiah 51: 3, where it puts “paradise” in place of “Eden” and “the garden of the Lord.” (The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament made about 280 B.C. It was in common use during Christ’s day.)

Let us compare the Hebrew version with the Greek. Isaiah 51: 3 reads in the King James Version (from Hebrew manuscripts):

“For the Lord shall comfort Zion: He will comfort all her waste places; and He will make her wilderness like EDEN, and her desert like THE GAPDEN OF THE LORD; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody.”

The Septuagint reads:

“And I will be comforting you, O Zion, and I will place her deserts as PARADISE and her wilderness as THE LORD’S

PARADISE. They shall find gladness and exultation in her, confession and the voice of praise.”

The Septuagint version is very important here, because it shows us how the Judeans defined “paradise” during the New Testament era. The word was used to describe the perfection of the world order before sin entered into the world (i.e., in Eden); and thus it was also connected with the future, perfected kingdom of God, when the earth would again become a paradise.

It is certain that the thief was asking Jesus for resurrection into His future kingdom. However, Jesus was not about to enter into His kingdom that day, nor was that the purpose of His first advent. Jesus came first as the Lamb of God who was to take away the sins of the world – not as the Lion of the tribe of Judah, coming to rule all nations. Only in His second advent will He come into His kingdom. This is made evident in 2 Timothy 4: 1, where Paul says,

“I charge thee therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom.”

Thus, for Jesus to supposedly answer that they would be together in a compartment of hell called paradise that day would be ignoring his request, or at best it would be a CORRECTION of the dying thief’s faith. The thief spoke of the future kingdom, but Jesus supposedly said, “No, we’re not going to be entering into My kingdom; we’re going to a compartment of hell called paradise, and furthermore, we’re going to go there today.”

Inasmuch as the thief expressed confidence in Jesus for entrance into a future kingdom following the resurrection, and since Jesus obviously EQUATED the kingdom with paradise, as did the Septuagint Version in His day, it is much more reasonable to believe that Jesus answered the man’s request by promising that he would indeed be with Christ in the future kingdom (i.e., “paradise”). The historical context of Luke 23: 42-43 proves this.

Sometimes 2 Corinthians 12: 1-4 is used as evidence to show that paradise was located in heaven (presumably only after the resurrection and ascension of Christ). In this passage the Apostle Paul says he knew a man about 14 years previously who had had “visions and revelations” (see verse 1) and had been “caught up” (literally CAUGHT AWAY) into paradise. This is often used to show that paradise is a literal place in existence today, and that it is now located in heaven.

The passage merely tells us, however, that an acquaintance of Paul’s (or Paul himself) had a vision of the future paradise. Thus, the man was caught away into paradise in the spirit only, as John was in Revelation 1: 10. He saw the paradise, the kingdom of God, in its restored condition, which the elect will inherit at the resurrection. This is the only interpretation that is consistent with the definition of paradise current in the New Testament era.

Getting back to Luke 23: 43, we come now to the actual grammatical evidence. If we translate the original wording literally, leaving out all man-made punctuation, we read this:

“To you I am saying today with me you will be in the paradise.”
(LEGO SEMERON MET EMOU ESE EN TO PARABEISO.)

It is most important that Luke did not include the Greek word *HOTI* (“that”) between “saying” and “today.” When the Greek uses *HOTI* after the verb “to say,” it means (in effect) that we can put quotation marks around the following sentence that is being stated. If Luke had used that word after *LEGO* (“to you I am saying”) there would be no doubt but that he was quoting Jesus’ words: **“Today with me you will be in paradise.”** However, Luke did not use *HOTI*. There are other passages in which Luke DID use *HOTI*:

1. Luke 5: 26. **“And they were all amazed, and they glorified God, and were filled with fear, saying (that – *HOTI*) ‘We have seen strange things today.’”**

2. Luke 19: 9. **“And Jesus said unto him (that – *HOTI*) ‘This day is salvation come to this house, forasmuch as he also is a son of Abraham.’”**

Perhaps the most significant example is found in Mark 64: 30. This example is important, because it uses the same sentence structure as that found in Luke 23: 43, except that here it uses the word *HOTI*.

3. Mark 14:30. **“And Jesus saith unto him, ‘Verily I say unto thee (that - *HOTI*) this day, even in this night, before the cock crow twice, thou shalt deny Me thrice.’”**

Thus, if Luke had wanted to make it clear that Jesus was saying, **“Today thou shalt be with me in paradise,”** he should have used the Greek word *HOTI* before the word “today.”

As English-speaking people, we would seldom, if ever, say, “I say to you TODAY.” To our English ears the word “today” would be redundant. Since this simple fact may serve to prejudice the reader against the evidence presented, we should remind him that this was a very common idiom in the languages of the Bible. All three verses quoted above in connection with *HOTI* used the word “today” (Greek *SEMERON*). This idiom was used in ancient times for emphasis, showing the gravity of the event that was occurring on that day.

The day Jesus died on the Cross was a day beyond comparison. Jesus knew that, and thus He said, “I’m telling you TODAY of all days, though all seems lost, though we will soon die, with me you will be in paradise.”

The final grammatical point to make is the simple fact that in the original Greek, the word “today” stands next to the verb *LEGO* (“saying”). However, the phrase “with me” (*MET EMOU*) separates “today” from “you will be” (*ESE*). Since the word “today” is an adverb and modifies a verb, we must recognize that “today” obviously modifies “saying,” rather than “will be.”

In other words, we should understand it to mean **SAYING TODAY**, rather than **TODAY WITH ME YOU WILL BE**. The alternative merely strains the interpretation of the passage.

Thus, we find prominent and respected translators recognizing this very fact. Rotherham's *The Emphasized Bible*, reads, **"Verily I say unto thee this day: With me shalt thou be in paradise."**

The Concordant Literal New Testament reads: **"Verily, to you am I saying today, with me shall you be in paradise."**

Bullinger's *The Companion Bible*, in its notation on Luke 23: 43, says: **"TODAY. Connect this with 'I say,' to emphasize the solemnity of the occasion; not with 'shalt thou be.'"**

We conclude, then, that Luke 23: 43 cannot be used to prove either the "compartment" theory of paradise in hell or the immortality of the soul. We can read passages like 1 Timothy 6: 16 with confidence, when Paul tells us that only Christ has immortality. We need not wonder if this contradicts Luke 23: 43. We can place our emphasis, not on going to heaven when we die, but on the resurrection of the dead, which is our great hope of salvation (Romans 8: 23-25).

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Reprinted by:

Christian Identity Ministries
PO BOX 146
CARDWELL QLD 4816