

Did the Dying Thief Accompany Jesus to Paradise?

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Luke 23:43 NKJV

43 And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

Luke 23:43 LGV

43 And Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you today, You will be with Me in the Garden."

This verse is one of the primary proof-texts for the doctrine of the "*immortality of the soul*." This passage allegedly proves that both Jesus and the thief traveled as disembodied ghosts to "Paradise" on the day of their deaths, while their bodies remained behind to be buried. This allegedly proves that a man merely sheds his flesh at death, yet remains a conscious person capable of sensing, thinking, and even travelling as a ghost.

Those who hold the opposite opinion, "*conditional immortality*," point out that the placement of the comma (before "today") in most English versions is arbitrary, and is not required by any known rule of Greek grammar. In most cases in the New Testament, the temporal adverb "today" modifies a verb that comes before it, rather than after it. Thus, "today" was most likely part of Jesus' introductory clause, "*Truly I say to you today, ...*," with the adverb "today" modifying "I say."

The *immortality of the soul* proponents admit that there is no grammatical reason why this construction is not valid. However, they claim that such a construction is not consistent with Jesus' frequent use of His "*Truly I say to you...*" introductory clause. In no other case did Jesus ever include the temporal adverb "today" in His introductory clause, "*Truly I say to you.*" On this ground they rest their entire case. But is their reasoning valid or decisive?

While it is true that there is no other example in the Gospels where Jesus' introductory clause includes the temporal adverb "today," there might be a very good reason for Him to do so only in this particular case. If there was some unique circumstance which demanded that Jesus emphasize that His declaration was being made on that very day (today), then including the temporal adverb (today) with His "*Truly I say unto you*" introductory clause would be the proper way to do it.

As part of our analysis, we ought to consider the implications of each interpretation, and attempt to discern the reason why Jesus used this adverb at all, either with the preceding clause or with the following clause. One thing is for sure, nothing Jesus said was frivolous, redundant, or without cause. There is a reason for every word. So what are the implications if “today” modifies the clause “*Truly I say to you,*” versus if “today” modifies the clause, “*you will be with Me in Paradise?*”

If “today” modifies “*you will be with Me in Paradise,*” then we ought to ask just what does the adverb “today” add to such a statement that is not already understood without it? If “today” modifies the following clause, then Jesus was speaking of the travels of both of their ghosts, and that they would reach their destination on that same day. Yet, surely the thief understood that he would die on that very day. So, including the adverb “today” would not add anything to Jesus’ statement if it merely pointed out when his ghost would allegedly separate from his body. Perhaps we should suppose that the thief thought the trip of his ghost to its destination might take more than one day, perhaps two or three days! So, in this case, Jesus’ supplying the word “today” would assure him that it was only a one-day trip to their destination! Obviously, neither of these ideas are reasonable, because they do not address the real concerns that the thief had which are very evident in the context. Therefore, associating “today” with the following clause seems to have no real purpose, and adds nothing of value to Jesus’ statement.

On the other hand, if “today” modifies “*Truly I say to you,*” then we ought to expect the context to supply a pressing reason why this declaration by Jesus needed to be made on that particular day. When we explore the historical setting with this supposition in mind, all becomes clear. There was a great urgency from the thief’s perspective to hear Jesus’ declaration on that very day. Tomorrow would be too late.

What was that urgency? It was that the fate of this dying thief was hanging in the balance as his life was quickly slipping away! Both the thief and Jesus knew that his eternal destiny would be sealed forever on that very day. The Father had committed all judgment to the Son¹ so that He could give eternal life to whomever He chose.² This was public knowledge throughout Jesus’ ministry by His repeatedly saying to those whom He healed, “*Your sins are forgiven.*”³ It was within Jesus’ power to forgive and grant eternal life to this thief, or to condemn him to the flames of Gehenna. And the thief

¹ John 5:22

² John 5:26-27; John 6:27; John 10:28; John 17:2

³ Matt. 9:2,5

knew his time was just about up. Therefore, for the thief, there was a very great urgency – a desperate plea – to hear from the Judge His verdict ON THAT VERY DAY – the day of his death – that he was forgiven and would have a place in the resurrection to eternal life. He had only moments left to have his mind put at ease. And he was not disappointed. The Just Judge, Jesus the Messiah, made His verdict known to him on THAT DAY (today) rather than allowing this poor thief to die in dread of judgment, to await the verdict in the general resurrection.

Thus, there was indeed a very unique and urgent situation which demanded a definitive answer for the thief ON THAT DAY. And this is a situation that is nowhere else to be found in any of Jesus' other "Truly I say to you" statements. Therefore the uniqueness of this statement is indeed expected, because the circumstances were unique.

How then are we to decide where to place the comma in our translation? The placement of the comma is extremely important because, wherever we place it, we are implicitly affirming one or the other doctrine – either *the immortality of the soul* or *conditional immortality*.

There is indeed a decisive way to solve the problem. And that is to see what the rest of Scripture says about "Paradise." The term "Paradise" is a transliteration of the Greek word "ΠΑΡΑΔΕΙCOC" (paradeisos). It was the common word in Greek for a lush and well-manicured garden or park. It is used in Genesis (LXX) many times for the "Garden of Eden," in which was the Tree of Life. Isaiah prophesied of the restoration of the Land in Christ's Kingdom, that it will again be like "*the Garden of the Lord*."

Isaiah 51:3 LXX

*3 And now I will comfort you, O Zion. And I have comforted all her desert places; and I will make her desert places as **the Garden** [paradeisos], and her western places as **the Garden** [paradeisos] **of the Lord**; they will find in her gladness and exultation, thanksgiving and the voice of praise.*

In Genesis, Eden was the Paradise of the Lord, to be distinguish from any other garden, because the Lord planted the Paradise of Eden.⁴ Isaiah here used the same term to describe the Land in Messiah's Kingdom.

The common Jews were typically taught from the Septuagint in the synagogues. Therefore, this thief would have been familiar with the use of "paradeisos" from the

⁴ Gen. 2:8 LXX

synagogue, that it was the Garden of God where the Tree of Life was, and that it will be restored in Messiah's Kingdom as the abode of the righteous. "Paradise" would be restored when the desert blossoms as a rose.⁵ The New Testament is consistent with the Septuagint, and also places the Tree of Life in the Paradise of God, in the Kingdom.

Rev. 2:7 NKJV

7 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise (Garden) of God."

Rev. 22:1-3, 14 NKJV

1 And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. 2 In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. ...

14 Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city.

Thus, "Paradise" (the Garden of the Lord) in prophecy is synonymous with the Messiah's Kingdom, and is the abode of the righteous after the resurrection. "Paradise" is always a real physical place on earth with real trees and vegetation. It is never a "ghost lounge" in an alleged underworld,⁶ as in pagan mythology.⁷ Unfortunately, a great deal of theological cover has been given to the false doctrine of *the immortality of the soul* by translators who refuse to translate "paradeisos" properly as "Garden" and instead insist on transliterating it, which conveys only the phonetic sound of the Greek word and not its real meaning.

Furthermore, the statement of the thief, to which Jesus responded, concerned Messiah's Kingdom. It had nothing to do with an alleged ghost lounge in the underworld, as the

⁵ Isaiah 35:1

⁶ Some might suppose that "Paradise" is in heaven, because Paul claimed to have been taken there in 2 Cor. 12. However, it should be observed that Jesus did not go to heaven on the day of His death, since three days later He said to Mary, "Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father." Thus, neither Jesus nor the thief could have gone there on that very day. Also, a close examination of 2 Cor. 12:1-4 reveals that Paul did not equate "Paradise" to "the third heaven" in that passage. He spoke of two separate incidents, as is made very plain by his otherwise redundant statement in verse 3. In the first incident (verse 2) Paul was transported into the third heaven. In the second incident (verse 3) he was transported to Paradise. His experience was very similar to John's in Revelation. John was transported in vision to heaven (Rev. 4-5), and later he was transported to view the future Kingdom of the Messiah (Rev. 21-22).

⁷ The Elysian Fields of Greek mythology had the righteous dwelling in a lush garden for souls. "In no fix'd place the happy souls reside. In groves we live, and lie on mossy beds, by crystal streams, that murmur thro' the meads" — Virgil, Aeneid (6.641). See also Homer's Odyssey, 4:560-565).

proponents of the *immortality of the soul* postulate. The dying thief called out in agony and fear, “*Lord, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom.*” His desperate plea reflected the belief that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. But it also implicitly conveyed the typical Jewish hope of resurrection to eternal life in Messiah’s Kingdom for those deemed righteous.⁸ Jesus’ response to him was relevant, direct, and reassuring.

Dying Thief: “*Lord (Messiah), remember me when you come into your Kingdom.*”

Jesus: “*I am declaring to you on this very day (the day of your death), You will be with Me in Paradise (the Kingdom).*”

Jesus’ answer was very compassionate. The thief could die in peace knowing that the Just Judge, the One who gives life and who condemns to Gehenna’s flames, had personally granted him “life” and resurrection on the very day of his death.

The insistence that this passages teaches the *immortality of the soul* has Jesus ignoring the essence of the thief’s request, and promising Him something entirely different from what he asked – a hope that was common to the Greeks, not to the Jews. It also makes the true hope of the righteous – the resurrection to eternal life – completely redundant and unnecessary since it is possible to enjoy “Paradise” immediately at death without a body. If “Paradise” is open to the ghosts of the dead immediately at death, what then is the point of the resurrection? William Tyndale made this point succinctly when arguing against the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory.

“And ye, in putting them [the departed souls] in heaven, hell, and purgatory, destroy the arguments wherewith Christ and Paul prove the resurrection. ... And again, if the souls be in heaven, tell me why they be not in as good case as the angels be? And then what cause is there of the resurrection?”⁹

“The true faith putteth [setteth forth] the resurrection, which we be warned to look for every hour. The heathen philosophers, denying that, did put [set forth] that the souls did ever live. And the pope joineth the spiritual doctrine of Christ and the fleshly doctrine of philosophers together; things so contrary that they cannot agree, no more than the Spirit and the flesh do in a Christian man. And because the fleshly-minded pope consenteth unto heathen doctrine, therefore he corrupteth the Scripture to stablish it.”¹⁰

⁸ Matt. 19:28-30

⁹ Tyndale, William, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue* (Parker's 1850 reprint), pp. 180, 181.

¹⁰ Tyndale, *ibid*, p. 180

“And in like manner, Paul’s argument unto the Corinthians is naught worth: for when he saith, ‘if there be no resurrection, we be of all wretches the miserablest; here we have no pleasure, but sorrow, care, and oppression; and therefore, if we rise not again, all our suffering is vain.’ ‘Nay, Paul, thou art unlearned; go to Master Moore, and learn a new way. We be not most miserable, though we rise not again; for our souls go to heaven as soon as we be dead, and are there in as great joy as Christ that is risen again.’ And I marvel that Paul had not comforted the Thessalonians with that doctrine, if he had wist it, that souls of their dead had been in joy; as he did with the resurrection, that their dead should rise again. If the souls be in heaven, in as great glory as the angels, after your doctrine, shew me what cause should be of the resurrection?”¹¹

¹¹ Tyndale, *ibid*, p. 118