

SEED & BREAD

FOR THE SOWER ISA. 55:10 FOR THE EATER
BRIEF BIBLICAL MESSAGES FROM

THE WORD OF TRUTH MINISTRY

Otis Q. Sellers, Bible Teacher

THE DYING MALEFACTOR

The Interpretation of Luke 23:43

In order to conform to the accuracy of Scripture, this study has been given the title of "The Dying Malefactor," and not "The Dying Thief" as he is commonly designated in song and sermon. There are very good Biblical reasons for believing that five men died at Calvary on the day our Lord was crucified: two thieves, two malefactors, and the man Christ Jesus. Medieval painters did not want to crowd their pictures, so two were eliminated from the crucifixion scene, and this more than anything else has led to the view that only two others were crucified with our Lord. However, if any should disagree and think that only two others died that day, I will not press my view. I will simply warn them that there are numerous discrepancies and difficulties to be faced if they hold to the traditional theory. *The Companion Bible* (Bullinger) deals with this matter in a masterful way in Appendix No. 164. I refer all objectors to this excellent treatise.

Since the number who died at Calvary is not the subject of this study we can pass over this question for now:. The deaths of the others, whether two or four, have no direct relationship to us, but the death of One did. We know and believe "**that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures**" (1 Cor. 15:3). But we must not ignore the fact that a certain important dialogue took place on that day when one of the malefactors turned to the Lord Jesus and said: "**Lord remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom,**" and to this request he received the assuring answer: "**Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise**" (Luke 23:43).
KJV

The reader is asked to note that the passage above has been quoted and punctuated exactly as it appears in the *King James Version*. Throughout the history of Christendom millions have come upon this passage, done some rough and ready reckoning in regard to this statement, then come to the crude conclusion that the Lord told this dying malefactor that on that very day he would be with Him in heaven. Following this line of thought these conclusions are projected and enlarged to make

them say that when a forgiven one dies he is instantly ushered into the presence of God in the place called heaven. However, this deduction is reached without any consideration at all being given to plain and forceful statements made in Scripture which would flatly contradict and set aside such a conclusion.

For example, the Lord Jesus emphatically declared: "**For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.**" (Matt. 12:40). Since it is my firm belief, and I judge that most believers will agree, that this prophecy was fulfilled to the letter in the time between the Lord's death and His resurrection from the state of death, then for three days and three nights He was "in the heart of the earth" and not in paradise or in heaven. Therefore, if one believes the fact declared in Matt. 12:40, he cannot believe that our Lord at the moment of His death "took the malefactor by the hand and led him into the presence of God in heaven," as some are inclined to describe it.

The plain declaration of Scripture forces me to believe that our Lord was in "the heart of the earth" from the moment of His death until the moment when God raised Him from the dead. However, we must not think of "the heart of the earth" as being a place somewhere inside of this planet. "In the heart of" is in Scripture a figure of speech, an idiom, which means to be one with a thing, a part of it, the same as it, or identified with it. In fact this is what happens to anyone that dies. It is even as the Lord said to Adam: "**For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return**" (Gen. 3:19). Therefore, when we read in Scripture that Christ died, that He was buried, and that He rose again on the third day, let us stand ready to believe this without hesitation (1Cor. 15:3).

It should also be noted that after His resurrection the Lord Jesus declared to Mary Magdalene that He had not yet ascended to His Father (John 20:17). Then she was told to go to His brethren and say to them: "**I ascend unto My Father, and to your Father; and to My God, and your God.**" And yet if we accept the reading as it stands in the KJV, He would be with His Father that day "in the paradise." The definite article is in the Greek.

Facts such as these which are pertinent and plain demand that the careful student who has a love for the truth should explore every possible facet and seek diligently for the true meaning of the promise made by Our Lord to the dying malefactor. And if the search is honest, we must admit the possibility that the Lord did not say and did not mean that the malefactor would be in "the paradise" with Him on that very day.

In response to the above statement, some are sure to cry out: "But, how can these words have any other meaning?" Those who ask this question fail to realize that in the Greek language in which the New Testament was written there were no punctuation marks – no periods, no commas, no question marks, or any other such sign that are so

familiar and important in all that we write today. Therefore all punctuation marks in the Bible must be inserted by the translator and thus they are a matter of interpretation and not of translation. In the passage we are considering the meaning of our Lord's promise depends entirely on the placement of the comma. If it is placed before the words "today" it can only mean that the Lord and the malefactor would be present together in "the paradise" on that day. But if we place it after the words "today" it means that the words were spoken on that day, but no definite time is set as to when they would be together.

Of course there are those who declare that our Lord would not have said, "I say unto you today;" for if the Lord said anything at all it was evident to all who heard that He was saying it then and there, on that day, and they did not need to be told this. My personal friend Harry A. Ironside belabored this point to the extreme and found much pleasure in laying it upon any who suggested that the comma belonged after the words today. I do not believe he ever considered how the words "this day" or "today" were used throughout the Old Testament. These words were a Hebraisms which were used regularly on occasions when the matter declared was exceedingly solemn and important. Here We have one Hebrew, the Lord Jesus, speaking to another Hebrew, using an idiom that was common to both. We will consider some pertinent examples.

"Know therefore this day, and consider it in thine heart" Deu. 4:39.

"Thou shalt keep therefore His statutes, and His commandments which I command thee this day." Deu. 4:40.

"Thou shalt therefore keep the commandments, and the statutes, which I command thee this day, to do them." Deu., 7: 11.

"All the commandments which I command thee this day shall ye observe and do" Deu. 8:1.

"I testify against you this day that ye shall surely perish" Deu. 8: 19.

"Which I command thee this day." Deu. 10:13.

"Behold I set before you this day a blessing and a curse." Deu. 11:26.

"Therefore I command thee this thing today" Deu. 15:15.

"Wherefore I take you to record this day" Acts 20:26.

"I shall answer for myself this day." Acts 26:2.

It is vain therefore for men to argue that our Lord would not have said, "Verily I say unto you today," and have been speaking of the day on which the words were spoken. The same idiom is found too many times in the inspired Old Testament for anyone to say that our Lord would have been using "a vain and foolish platitude" as a recent writer has declared. This idiom has its parallel in almost every language. I recently heard one man say to another: "I am telling you right now that you will regret it if you take this step."

It has not been my purpose in this study to deal with the meaning of paradise. The word means a garden in the sense of a formal garden, a park. When the Lord caused the dry land to appear as recorded in Gen. 1 :9-12 it seems that the land mass was designated as Eden in contrast with the planet which was called Earth. In Genesis 2:8 we are told that the Lord God planted a garden (a paradise) eastward in Eden and there He put the man whom He had formed. In Gen. 2: 15 we are further told that **"The Lord God took the man, and put him in the garden (paradise) of Eden to dress it and keep it"**. Many centuries later we are told: **"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 garden (paradise) of the Lord; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody"** (Isa. 51:3).

The word paradise has numerous applications. It is applied to the new earth which follows the Kingdom of God and the thousand years of Christ's personal presence. This is the paradise to which Paul was caught away and which he equated with the third heaven, which are (1) the heavens of old, (2) the heavens which are now, and (3) the new heavens (2 Peter 3:5-13). However, the context of Luke 23:43 relates the paradise promised there to the kingdom of Christ. The request of the malefactor was: **"Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom."** And in answer the Lord promised him a place with Him in the paradise of His kingdom, the one spoken of in Isa. 51:3, even the land of Israel, in that day when the joy of the whole earth will be mount Zion.

Let us ever remember that on the blackest day the universe has ever known, on the day when even His beloved disciples had forsaken Him, when one had betrayed Him and another had denied Him three times with an oath, yet on that day one man had faith enough in Him to make a request in regard to the future. Yes, on that black day, the darkest the world had ever known, our Lord said to the malefactor: **Verily, I say unto you TODAY, thou shalt be with Me in paradise."**

End Issue SB104

