

OUR LORD AND THE THIEF IN PARADISE

(The discourse below is by J. Dennis Wright, in the 1909 Convention report, starting on page 243.)

Text: “*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, thou shalt be with me in paradise.*” (Luke 23:42, 43)

This text is ordinarily understood to afford sufficient justification of deathbed repentances and assurance that all thus repenting will go to heaven—paradise—when they die. And as the text stands in our common—King James version—of the Scriptures, such might seem to be the proper view to take respecting it.

All who have given the subject any proper amount of consideration must admit that it is a part of the Divine Plan to exalt some of the human family to heavenly conditions, but such will be a very small number—a “little flock”—to whom it is our Heavenly Father’s good pleasure to give the kingdom. These, however, can not be translated to heavenly conditions upon so slender a pretext as that apparently indicated in our text. Rather, as Paul says, “If CHILDREN, then heirs; heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, *if so be that we suffer with him* that we might be also glorified together.” (Rom. 8:17) That is, those who would obtain a heavenly glory must not only repent, but must believe also with all their hearts on the name of the only begotten Son of God; then, because of their faith, God will justify them freely from all sin and from death and will freely accept them as His justified children. But as yet such an one would not be prepared for the kingdom, for, as the Word declares, “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.” 1 Cor. 15:50.

But one might inquire, “What further could be asked of a person than that he be justified from all sin?” To this I would reply that a justified human being is “flesh and blood” still, and, therefore, could not inherit the glory of the kingdom, except he become a “New Creature in Christ,” and be thereby changed in the First Resurrection, for “We (the Church) shall be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump; for the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall all be changed.” (1 Cor. 15:51, 52) Thus we shall be like our Lord and Head—Divine, immortal. But in order to be thus changed we must first “suffer with him.” For “If we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him.” “If we suffer, we shall also reign with him.” Rom. 6:8; 2 Tim. 2:12.

Let us note further that it is not as a thief or as any other evildoer suffering the penalty of his sin, that one must suffer with Christ, but rather as a follower of Jesus, “Suffering for righteousness’ sake.” “We must, therefore, following the steps of him who hath left us the example,” learn obedience through suffering, meanwhile growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We must, therefore, present ourselves a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is our reasonable service, and thus consecrating ourselves we are constituted “new creatures in Christ.” If now we be faithful unto death, “adding to our faith virtue, and to our virtue knowledge; and to knowledge self-control; and to self-control patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness love. . . and if we do these things, we shall never fail, for so an entrance shall be ministered unto us abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” 2 Pet. 1:5-11.

So while it is right and proper for any and all to repent on their deathbeds, if they cannot be brought to that point sooner; and while this fact will be a benefit to them in a later time of blessing, the Scriptures do not warrant the thought that anyone can go to heaven until the kingdom time is come, and no one then, except those who have been “called and chosen and faithful.” Rev. 17:14.

What and Where Is Paradise?

All who are quite familiar with what the Bible has to say in respect to Paradise should know that the primary thought is that of a garden. “The Garden of Eden” was the original Paradise which had been prepared for the man who had been created in God’s image. It was made to bring forth “every tree that was good for food and pleasant to the sight”—a most desirable place to live—where the fruit of the trees would sustain life forever.

When the perfect man was placed in Paradise with his perfect and beautiful companion, God gave them a law, saying: “Of every tree of the garden (paradise) thou mayest freely eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die,” or as the margin more properly reads, “Dying thou shalt die.” In a very short time the man disobeyed the simple law, and the sentence of death that had been imposed was caused to go into effect by driving the man from the garden—away from the life sustaining trees. (Gen. 3:22-24) Since then death has been passing upon all men. Rom. 5:12.

Paradise Lost

Paradise was lost, therefore, through man’s transgression and death and imperfection have been inherited by all the race. So, never during the six thousand years that have passed has man been able to regain what was originally lost. He may employ physicians and surgeons, baths and dietings, instruments and batteries; but not all of these, either singly or combined, can restore him to his former perfect condition. He may build elegant mansions, lay out great and beautiful parks and make whole cities the grandest places on earth, but sin and death mar it all.

Meanwhile man longs for something better. “The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain until now,” hoping for a golden age to come. Republicans say, “Give us a chance;

be patient and our administration will bring about the desired results and conditions.” But conditions grow worse and the people become more and more dissatisfied. Democrats say: “Well, Republican misrule is to be tried for another four-year period, then we will show you what we can do, for Democratic ideas have not been given a fair showing.” Then Socialism comes to the front and says, “Everything political today is rotten, and all present institutions must be laid aside or, at least, revolutionized, and then we will show you a thing or two.” Thus all are thinking of something good for the people and planning to bring it about; but no party, sect or creed will ever succeed in bringing back lost conditions. Not until the “King of kings and Lord of lords” takes to Himself His great power and reigns, “putting down all rule and authority and power, when all enemies shall be put under his feet” (1 Cor. 15:24-26) will the “desire of all nations” be realized fully. (Hag. 2:7) Then, as the Prophet says again, “Many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord...and he will teach us of his ways and we shall walk in his paths.” (Isa. 2:3.) Truly, therefore, paradise had been lost to the human family and cannot be restored by fallen man.

Paradise Restored

He who first caused man to be turned out of the first paradise condition and caused the utter destruction of that beautiful garden, will not only reconstruct the garden on a much larger scale, but will restore to man all that was lost. We reason thus: Man was made perfect—in God’s own image. (Gen. 1:26-28) He was a perfect human, earthly being; not a heavenly or spiritual creature. When man sinned, God turned him out of his Eden home, on to the broad road to destruction, saying: “The man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: lest he put forth his hand and take of the tree of life and live forever, we will drive him out.” So God drove out the man that he might be destroyed by the unfavorable conditions, so that dying he would die in due time.

However, God designed a blessing for the fallen man, saying to Abraham: “In thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.” (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 28:14) But 4,000 years were allowed to pass before the “Seed”—which is Christ—began to appear, and then St. Paul taught that the “seed” was not Jesus Christ alone, but included also the whole faithful Church. (Gal. 3:8, 16, 27, 29) Jesus came first and gave himself a ransom for all, or redeemed all the race with His own precious blood. Man had been made perfect, but lost his perfection through sin. Jesus being a perfect man came and gave His perfect life for the forfeited life of Adam, and so procured to Himself the right to rule the race; as Paul says: “To this end Christ both died and rose again, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.” (Rom. 14:9) Hence, by reason of the fact that Jesus gave Himself a ransom for the race, man is to be restored to the original condition and the earth is to be restored to its Edenic perfection and beauty. Paradise will then have been fully restored. Then both Jesus and the crucified thief will be in paradise, for then will the “residue of men” be privileged to “seek after the Lord, and all the heathen upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord.” (Acts 15:17.)

A Case of Punctuation

Let us notice now, that our text is not properly punctuated. The original Scriptures had no punctuation, as almost anyone may know by consulting one of the older Bagster's Teachers' Bibles, which contain a cut at the front of the book, showing a facsimile (or exact copy) of a portion of the Vatican Manuscript which not only shows no punctuation at all, but shows no space even between the words. When it was translated into English it was done the same way, printed in large capitals with neither punctuation or spacing, thus:

VERILYISAYUNTOTHEETODAYTHOUSHALTBEWITHMEINPARADISE, etc.

Punctuation is only about 400 years old, and the various points may be so placed in a sentence as to give just the reverse meaning from what might be intended. Note the following illustrations:

The Barber's Sign

A barber, so the story goes, put up a sign on the outside of his shop which read:

“What do you think?

I'll shave you for nothing

And give you a drink!”

One thought the idea of getting a free shave and a free drink a fine thing, but almost too good to be true. Where could the barber make his money? However, he decides to go in and try him. He gets into the chair, throws his head back on the rest, and behold what meets his eyes! The identical words, but only a little difference in punctuation; it there read:

“What! do you think

I'll shave you for nothing

And give you a drink?”

A member of the English Parliament, it is said, once called a fellow member a “liar,” and was required to apologize. This he did, saying: “I called him a liar, it is true, and I am sorry for it.” This was satisfactory; but it appeared in print the next morning punctuated thus: “I called him a liar. It is true and I am sorry for it.”

Bad punctuation is responsible for the misapprehension so many have in regard to the Lord's reply to the thief. Punctuated properly the text would read: “Verily, I say unto thee today, thou shalt be with me in paradise.” Thus rendered it thoroughly agrees with God's great plan for man's salvation. The thief had said to the Lord, “Remember me *when thou comest into thy kingdom.*” Jesus merely replied to that request assuring the man that *when he should come into His Kingdom* and the paradise conditions should be

established, that this thief and all other thieves who had not had a fair trial and full opportunity for salvation would be given such an opportunity.

That Jesus did not go to paradise or heaven on that day is clear from the fact that He said less than three days afterward, “I am not yet ascended to my Father and your Father; to my God and your God.” Moreover He was on earth after that for 40 days before He ascended to the right hand of the Father.

The Conclusion

To sum up, this is what we find:

1. God made man perfect, and made a perfect paradise for him.
2. Man disobeyed God’s simple law and was placed under the sentence of death—“death passed upon all men.”
3. Man has been redeemed with the precious blood of Christ—“a ransom (corresponding price) for all”—“He tasted death for every man.”
4. Since man, who was created perfect, and who fell into sin and was cursed with death, has been redeemed by a “ransom”—even “the man Christ Jesus”—the logical result must be a “restitution of all things spoken,” when all who have not been fully enlightened by the Gospel shall be made to see the Truth, when “the knowledge of the glory of the Lord shall fill the earth as the waters cover the sea.” (Isa. 11:9.)
5. And during this present age the Lord is calling a special class from among the nations that they might be joint heirs with His Son Jesus in the Millennial Kingdom. (Acts 15:14-18; Rom. 8:17.)