



Paradise

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Paradise

*“Verily, I say unto thee this day:
With me, shalt thou be in Paradise.”
—Luke 23:43, Rotherham Emphasized Bible*

It is generally supposed by most professed Christians that the words “paradise” and “heaven” are essentially synonymous, and that in the Bible they are both used to describe the eternal home of the saved. There is one tradition, however, which makes paradise an intermediate state into which the righteous go, to await the time of the resurrection at the end of the world, when they will be transferred to their permanent home in heaven.

Doubtless many suppose that the word paradise appears many times in the Bible, but actually it does not. It is not used in the Old Testament at all, and occurs only three times in the New Testament, one being in Jesus’ promise to the thief on the cross, “Thou shalt be with me in paradise.” It translates the Greek word *paradelsos*, which, according to Professor Strong, is of oriental origin, the literal meaning of which is “park,” or “garden,” and by implication, “Eden.”

The Bible tells us that God “planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed.” (Gen. 2:8) Since there is no suggestion of a heavenly, or spiritual park, or garden, in the word paradise itself, it seems obvious that its uses in the New Testament are directly or indirectly related to the divine purpose in the creation of man, and to God’s provision of the garden home for him “eastward in Eden.” Certainly the Garden of Eden was a paradise.

However, because of sin, man was driven out of Eden, out into the unsubdued earth to eke out an existence by the sweat of his face, until he returned to the dust from whence he was taken. (Gen. 3:17-21) Paradise was lost, but not forever, for the Bible clearly reveals that the divine plan of redemption through Christ, the Redeemer and Savior of the human race, is designed to restore man to life and to his lost paradise.

Although the word paradise simply means a park, or garden, we believe that we are within the larger meaning of the word paradise as used in the Bible when we say that it denotes man’s earthly home, and the blessings of everlasting life which all the willing and obedient will ultimately enjoy in that home. The restoration of paradise, then, would involve much more than

planting beautiful fruit trees and flowers in the ancient land of Mesopotamia, where it is believed the original Garden of Eden was situated. The Apostle Peter speaks of the period of Christ's second presence as including "times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began." —Acts 3:20,21

The "all things" to be restored are the all things which were lost. When these all things are restored, paradise will be restored. The work of restoring paradise is to be accomplished by the reign of Christ, when those who, during the Gospel Age, have suffered and died following in the footsteps of Christ, will live and reign with him.

THE MESSIAH

The coming of the Messiah and the establishment of his kingdom was the hope of Israel. Promise after promise in the Old Testament gave them the assurance that this was the divine plan for Israel and for the whole world of mankind. They believed not only that the Messiah, the great king of promise, would deliver them from bondage to the Gentiles, but also from bondage to sin and death. "In this mountain," or kingdom, the Lord had promised, there

would be a “feast of fat things,” and that he would “swallow up death in victory.”—Isa. 25:6-9

Jesus came to be the king in this long-promised kingdom. His disciples had accepted him as the Messiah, and had given up all to follow him. Together with Jesus and the assistance of seventy evangelists selected and appointed by Jesus, the original twelve preached the Gospel of the kingdom throughout Judea for more than three years. It was not a large country, and we may safely assume that essentially all of the nation had learned more or less about Jesus, although few had a clear understanding of just who he was.

When Jesus was arrested by his enemies with the intent of having him put to death, one of the charges brought against him was that he claimed to be a king. Ordinarily, if a charge like this were true, it would mean treason to the Roman government to which the Jewish nation was at that time subject. Jesus did not deny the charge, but acknowledged that it was to this end he was born.

An inscription over the cross on which Jesus was crucified proclaimed him “The King of the Jews.” So it was general knowledge in Israel that Jesus and his

followers expected the establishment of the Messianic kingdom with Jesus as its head.

The two malefactors, or thieves, being crucified with Jesus could not have been unaware of these circumstances. While the prejudice and hatred of the people against Jesus influenced one of the thieves to rail against the Master, the other thief took a more realistic view. Inasmuch as they were dying, and the situation seemed hopeless, it could do no harm, the thief apparently reasoned, to ask a favor of this man who was supposed to be a king. So, turning to Jesus he said, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom."—Luke 23:42

NOT A CHRISTIAN

In an effort to find something in the Bible to support the tradition that the righteous go immediately to heaven when they die, this account of the thief on the cross has been seized upon. Actually, however, there is nothing in the record to indicate that this thief was righteous, or that he even repented of his sin. Certainly there is nothing in the narrative to indicate that he accepted Jesus as his Redeemer and Savior.

Stripped of its traditional coloring, all this account shows is that the dying thief,

knowing that in some way Jesus was supposed to be a king, asked to be remembered when he came into his kingdom. As one dying man to another, the thief was sympathetic toward Jesus, and hoped that in return this unusual “criminal” would do something for him, if and when he could. What else could he ask than to be remembered when Jesus came into his kingdom?

While the thief was grasping at a straw in a situation in which there apparently was no basis for hope, it was different with Jesus. He knew that his death on the cross would not destroy God’s kingdom plan, but was a necessary part of it. Unlike the rulership of other kings, the divine plan for Jesus was that he would reign, not over dying subjects, but over subjects redeemed from death with an opportunity of proving their worthiness of everlasting life. Jesus knew that he was even then dying for his subjects, dying that they might live.

Jesus also knew that, in the divine plan of salvation, provision had not only been made for redemption through the shedding of his own blood, but also for the restoration of those redeemed. He knew, too, that the restoration of the redeemed world would be the work of his coming kingdom. He knew that when the

work of his kingdom was complete, the lost paradise would be restored. Knowing this, and having absolute confidence in the outworking of his Father's purposes, he gave the reassuring reply that the thief would be with him in paradise.

It is doubtful if the thief understood the full significance of the reply to his request to be remembered in Jesus' kingdom. It was not necessary that he should. To Jesus it was an opportunity to express his confidence in his Heavenly Father's promises, and to bear testimony once more to the truth, and to do it in an hour of darkness and great trial.

"Verily I say unto thee today," said Jesus, "shalt thou be with me in paradise." Who but Jesus could have made such a promise on such a day! The misplacement of the comma in the King James Version has hidden the true meaning of what Jesus said to the thief, and has caused many to believe that Jesus and the thief both went to paradise that day, which is contrary to the teachings of God's Word.

DIED FOR SIN

The Bible teaches that Jesus died, that he "poured out his soul unto death." (Isa. 53:12) From Psalm 16:10 we learn that Jesus' soul was in the death condition from

the time he expired on the cross until he was raised from the dead on the third day, being in the Bible hell, the state of death, during that time. After his resurrection, Jesus said to Mary, "I am not yet ascended to my Father." (John 20:17) From these texts of Scripture we know positively that Jesus did not go anywhere at the time he died except into death. The same was true of the thief.

On that memorable day, his enemies had seemingly gained a complete victory over him. He was being put to death, and from the human standpoint it appeared that there was no hope that he would ever have a kingdom. His faith, however, enabled him to say to the thief that he would be remembered in the kingdom, remembered in paradise. This not only meant that the Messianic kingdom would be established in God's due time, but that it would be completely victorious over all the enemies of God and of righteousness, and that through its administration the lost earthly paradise would be restored.

We make no apology for changing the position of the comma as it appears in the King James Version, for the punctuation of the Bible is not inspired. It did not come into use until several centuries after the Bible was written. Joseph Rotherham, an

eminent biblical scholar, recognized the intent of Jesus' reply to the thief, and in his translation, as is noted at the head of this article, punctuates the sentence as it should be.

In using this mannerism of speech, Jesus was simply following a much used pattern in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 4:39 reads, "Know therefore this day, and consider it in thine heart, that the LORD he is God in heaven above, and upon the earth beneath: there is none else." How wrong it would be to punctuate this text to mean that the LORD is God of heaven and earth this day. It could imply that someone else was god on other days. Deuteronomy 6:6 reads, "These words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart." Simply by changing the position of the second comma, this text would read: "These words, which I command thee, this day shall be in thine heart," leaving a possible implication that on future days these words need not be in their hearts.

In the case of Jesus' statement to the thief on the cross, those who were looking for every possible opportunity to bolster traditional theology that the dead are not really dead, did not hesitate to place the comma to give this thought. As we have

seen, both reason and the Scriptures dictate that the text, should be punctuated as Joseph Rotherham has done, thus placing the emphasis on the day in which the Master, in demonstration of his faith, made this remarkable promise to the thief regarding the coming Messianic kingdom and the blessings to be dispensed to the dying world at that time.

CAUGHT UP TO PARADISE

The second use of the word paradise in the Bible is in II Corinthians 12:2-4, which we quote: "I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) how that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which is not lawful for a man to utter."

Without doubt the man here referred to was Paul himself. His statement that he could not tell whether he was in the body or out of the body, is simply his way of emphasizing the great reality of this vision, and the vivid manner in which it portrayed truths to him concerning the third heaven and paradise. Paul's account of this vision

has been used by many in an effort to prove that heaven and paradise are one and the same place. A casual reading of the passage could give this impression.

If we were to use the passage for this purpose, we would have to conclude that paradise and the third heaven are the same, which, of course, presents the necessity of explaining the difference between the third heaven, and the regular heaven. Indeed, in order to understand the meaning of this vision with any degree of clarity it is essential to determine, if possible, just what Paul means by the third heaven.

The word heaven is used in the Bible with a number of different connotations. In some instances it simply denotes the atmosphere above the earth which we call the sky, as well as the sun, moon, and stars, located in the literal heavens. In other instances the word heaven describes a plane of life higher than the human, and, of course, the place where these spirit beings abide. Thus we speak of the angels of heaven. The Bible speaks of the "heavenly calling" which is extended to the followers of Jesus in this age.—Heb. 3:1

The highest form of life in heaven is the divine, which means that God dwells

in heaven. Jesus was exalted to the divine nature when he was raised from the dead. His footstep followers are promised the same exaltation. So we properly say that the Christian has a heavenly hope.—
II Pet. 1:4

God said, "The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool." (Isa. 66:1) This suggests that heaven is not only the abode of the Creator, and of those whom he has created on the spirit plane of life, but also that it is the divine seat of government over the affairs of the earth and, without doubt, the entire universe.

ANGELS

Narrowing this down to God's relationship to his human creatures, the Scriptures indicate that he works through his spirit creatures, one order of which is referred to in the Bible as angels. In this connection a study of the Bible's accounts of the various ways in which God used the holy angels to guide and protect his servants on earth is very revealing.

The Bible shows that some of the holy angels, including the mighty Lucifer, rebelled against God and his laws and, throughout the centuries from Eden until now, have sought, by deception and otherwise, to lead the human race away from

God. A large measure of success has attended their efforts. This, of course, has been by divine permission in order that both men and angels might learn that it is impossible to disobey God's law and enjoy everlasting life.

The point we wish especially to emphasize is that beings in the spiritual world exercise a potent influence in the affairs of men. It is also true that the material heavens above—the sun, moon, stars, and even clouds, and atmosphere—are vitally related to life on the earth. Because this is true of the spiritual world and also of the firmament above, God used the term heavens to symbolize spiritual ruling power in the affairs of men.

It is in this sense that Paul uses the expression, the third heaven. The Apostle Peter identifies all three of these heavens. First, he speaks of a heavens that existed before the Flood. Then he mentions the heavens which now are. Then he mentions that we, according to God's promise, "look for new heavens . . . wherein dwelleth righteousness."—II Peter 3:5-7,10,13

The first two of these symbolic heavens are not righteous, for they embrace the period of human history when Satan and his fallen angels are the dominant unseen power which rule in the affairs of men.

Righteousness will dwell in the third heaven, as Peter explained. The exalted Jesus, and with him those who have proven worthy to live and reign with him, will be the spiritual, invisible rulers in the third or new heavens, while Satan will be bound and ultimately destroyed.

Paul was given a wonderful vision in which he was carried down the stream of time to the period when Christ's kingdom would be ruling the world. Instead of speaking of what he saw as being the conditions which would exist in the Messianic kingdom, he used the scriptural symbolisms for the spiritual and material aspects of the kingdom, heaven and paradise, the latter being but a synonym for what Peter described as the "new earth."

The kingdom of Christ will have its spiritual and earthly phases right from the beginning. We would suppose that it will be some time before the earthly phase of the kingdom has expanded to the point where conditions as a whole throughout the earth could very well be symbolized by the thought of paradise. (Ezek. 36:35) Probably what Paul saw in his vision, which he says—according to the marginal translation—was not "possible" for him to utter, were conditions in the earth well on toward the end of Christ's thousand-year reign, hence his use

of the word paradise as a symbol rather than the more common one, new earth.

THE PARADISE OF GOD

There is only one more use of the word paradise in the Bible, and that is in Revelation 2:7, where we read, "To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God." This is a promise to the church—that class called out from the world—who are promised a heavenly reward with Jesus.

A casual reading of the text suggests that these overcomers will enjoy the blessings of the restored paradise, as symbolized by the original Garden of Eden. However, a more careful study reveals a deeper meaning to this promise, one that is harmonious with the general testimony of the Scriptures which assure the church, not life in an earthly paradise, but in a heavenly home—indeed, in a place which Jesus went away to prepare.—John 14:2,3

Practically all the important lessons in the Book of Revelation are taught by symbols. The symbols used in Revelation, and in fact throughout the entire Bible, are things and circumstances concerning which we, as humans, have at least some knowledge, otherwise the symbolic language of the Bible would have no meaning to us.

There are facts we know about the sun, the moon, the stars; and about sheep and goats; wheat and tares; rivers and trees; storms and earthquakes. So when the Bible uses these as symbols, certain lessons are conveyed to us.

In the second and third chapters of Revelation, seven wonderful promises are made to the faithful footstep followers of Jesus, the overcomers of the Gospel Age. All of these promises are illustrated by things with which we have at least some acquaintance. Verse ten of the second chapter reads, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." No Christian in reading this supposes that he will be wearing a literal crown in heaven. A crown suggests rulership, and the overcomers will be exalted to the highest form of life, the divine, to be associated with Jesus in his kingdom.

In verse seventeen of this chapter, the promise is given, "To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it." The expression, hidden manna, takes our minds back to the Tabernacle in the wilderness. In the Most Holy of this Tabernacle, representing heaven, was the ark of the

covenant. (Heb. 9:4) In this was placed a golden bowl of manna. While the manna collected daily by the Israelites corrupted, that which they placed in this gold bowl did not. This, then, conveys the thought of incorruptibility.

No one supposes, however, that when the overcomers reach heaven they will eat literal manna from a golden bowl. Yet all true Christians do rejoice in the hope of immortality which the hidden manna symbolized.—I Cor. 15:54

“Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God.” (Rev. 3:12) No overcomer will be transformed literally into a pillar to be placed in an actual temple in heaven. This is a symbol of the sure, supportive, fixed position to be enjoyed by those who prove faithful. Now we are being tried and tested. There is a possibility of failing. Then, however, the testing will have been finished, and those who have overcome will be as pillars, fixed and secure, in that glorious spiritual temple which will be the meeting place between God and men.

We should view the promise relating to paradise in the same manner. (Rev. 2:7) We know the story of the original paradise, and its tree of life in the midst of the Garden. We know that because of disobedience our

first parents were driven out of Eden to die. Flaming swords were put up to prevent their return to the garden and partaking of the tree of life, and living forever.

Knowing these circumstances, God uses them symbolically to assure the overcomers who follow Jesus faithfully into death, that it will not be thus with them. Continuous access to the tree of life in the original paradise would have meant eternal life for our first parents, so God used this fact to assure us that if we are overcomers we will be rewarded with everlasting life.

This does not mean that the overcomers of the present age will live in an earthly paradise, any more than the other promises mean that they will wear literal crowns, eat manna from a golden bowl, or become marble pillars in a literal temple.

While this promise assures the overcomers of eternal life, which, in reality, will be immortality, the tenth verse reveals that with this life will also be given ruling authority, as symbolized by the crown. By the use of all the various symbols in these promises to the overcomers, we get a comprehensive understanding of the great "prize of the high calling" for which every follower of the Master is striving.—Phil. 3:14

Paradise, then, properly and scripturally speaking, is the home on earth, and the blessings of that earthly plane of life which will be enjoyed by the restored human race—a small sample of which was prepared for our first parents eastward in Eden. While, as we have seen, the word means a garden, or park, the original Garden of Eden which, in itself, was glorious and a marvelous provision for man, also foreshadowed all the blessings God designed for his earthly creature, man, including everlasting life and his dominion over earth.

All this will be restored during the times of restitution of all things. Truly this will be paradise restored. With that restoration will come the full answer to our Lord's prayer, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven."—Matt. 6:10