

The Thief on the Cross



By Steven Cox

Contents

Introduction :	3
A mistake in translation	4
Part One: What the rest of the Bible teaches	6
Bible teaching on death	9
Souls	10
Spirits	12
Sleep, resurrection and eternal life	14
Where did Christ go on that day?	15
Preaching to the spirits in prison	17
Part Two: The thief's request	20
Heaven comes to earth..	20
God can make the earth good again	22
'Paradise' means garden, not heaven	24
The "Third Heaven"	25
Paradise restored in the Kingdom	27
Appendix: The Greek text of Luke 23:43	30
Questions:	32

Cover: detail from Mantegna's 'Crucifixion' circa 1457

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The Thief on the Cross

Introduction

The story of the thief on the cross is much loved by Christians everywhere. It concerns a man who was not only, like all men, a sinner, but who by his own admission deserved the death penalty. Despite this Christ not only forgave the man, but also promised him life after death. So the thief became the only person in the New Testament, (apart from the disciples in Matthew 19:28), to whom Jesus promised a place in paradise.

The thief on the cross is not only important because the promise of eternal life is central to the Gospel, but also because the incident shows the eagerness of Christ to give this promise to anyone who genuinely repents, no matter what wrong they may have done in the past.

Unfortunately there is also another reason why this detail of the crucifixion story is popular today, and that is because it is the only passage in the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, that can be clearly used to support the idea that when people die, they (or rather their 'immortal souls' according to popular belief), go to Heaven. From this point of view the key point in the story, to be found in the Gospel of Luke chapter 23, is verse 43: "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise. "

A Mistake in Translation

Sadly the popularity of the verse is due to a translation error. Once this mistake is recognised, then the story of the thief on the cross can be seen to mean exactly the opposite of what many readers would like it to mean.

What happened is this: The original Greek New Testament documents were written all in capital letters, and without punctuation such as commas:

AMENAMENLEGOSOISEMERONMETEMOUEISEENTWPARADEISO

So in English Luke 23:43 would look like this:

ITELLYOUTHETRUTHTODAYYOUWILLBEWITHMEINPARADISE

This means that the translator has to decide where one part of a sentence ends, and another begins. Therefore the translator has to decide between two possibilities:

(A) Today I tell you the truth: you will be with me in paradise.

(B) I tell you the truth: you will be with me in paradise today.

In the case of Luke 23:43 it can easily be shown that the correct translation is the first, (A), and this can be demonstrated in three different ways:

1. From the rest of the Bible

The best way to work out difficult passages is to let the Bible explain itself. Anyone who believes the Bible is God's message to man ought also to believe that the Bible doesn't contradict itself. The reader honest enough to accept this principle will soon find that 'difficulties' with the Bible are all in man's understanding of it, and not in God's word itself.

2. From context

The circumstances of why, how, when, and where something was said or written are usually at least as important as the actual words in understanding exactly what the words mean. By the end of this small booklet it is hoped to show that the full context of Christ's promise to the thief contains an important and positive message to all men, a real hope for the future, and also a promise better and greater than the popular (but unscriptural) hope of the 'immortal soul' going up to heaven.

3. From the Greek original text

Because this method is probably not of much interest to most of the readers of this booklet, the linguistic argument, which is largely to do with Greek grammar, has been left till an appendix at the back of the booklet for those who want to refer to it.

Part One

What the Rest of the Bible teaches

Heaven

Many sincere people take the story of the thief on the cross to be about going to Heaven, so it is only fair to examine this idea by comparison with the teachings in the rest of the Bible. However, use of a concordance to follow up verses where 'Heaven' is mentioned in the Bible soon show that Heaven is for God and the angels only, and never, not once, promised to man:

"The highest heavens belong to the LORD, but the earth he has given to man." (Psalm 115: 16)

"The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men" (Psalm 14:2)

"Whom have I in heaven but you?" (Psalm 73:25)

This same basic truth (God in heaven, man on earth) is found in two of the most famous parts of the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer:

"Blessed are the meek; for they will inherit the earth." (Matthew 5:5 quoting Psalm 37:11)

"Our Father in heaven ...your kingdom come, your will be done on earth" (Matthew 6:8-10 AV Please note that it does not say "the meek shall inherit heaven" (sic).

The New Testament is clear that no one has gone up to heaven:

"David did not ascend to heaven" (Acts 3:34)

"No one has ever gone into heaven" (John 3:13)

The only exception to this rule is Christ himself who 40 days after his resurrection was taken up into heaven from the Mount of Olives, to sit on the right hand of God, and who will one day return from heaven to earth, as the disciples were promised:

"Men of Galilee, " they said, "Why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." (Acts 1: 11)

But, it must be emphasized, Christ is the exception. This is why Paul refers to Christ as the "first fruits" (1 Corinthians 15:20), and "firstborn from the dead" (Colossians 1: 18). This means what it says: if men had been going into heaven since Adam then Paul was talking nonsense: Christ was not the first. Worse still, if man automatically went up into heaven when he died, then what did Christ's life and death and resurrection achieve? How could Jesus say "no one goes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6) if all those people in the Old Testament had already done exactly that?

Whenever it is said that Christ is "firstborn from the dead", questions are asked about three possible exceptions - Enoch, Elijah, and Lazarus - who it is popularly believed preceded Christ into heaven. Other booklets examine these three apparent 'exceptions' in detail, so there is no intention to attempt that here, but, in short, Enoch died without receiving what was promised (Hebrews 11:13, Romans 5:14), as did Elijah and the other prophets (Hebrews 11 :39-40), while Lazarus and the Rich Man (Luke 16) are figures in a difficult, and highly political, parable which should not be misused to contradict the teaching of the rest of the Bible.

Whatever people want to believe, looking at what the Bible actually says it has to be faced that, with only one great exception - the Lord Jesus Christ, "the firstborn from the dead" - the Bible is totally opposed to the idea of men going to heaven when they die:

"No one has ever gone into heaven, except the one who came from heaven." (John 3: 13)

Unlike the holy books of some other religions, in the Jewish and Christian holy book, the Bible, 'death' really means death. The fact that the Bible doesn't teach that men go to heaven when they die may come as a surprise to some people, but really it should not do so, because the Bible never makes a secret about man's destiny:

"Dust you are and to dust you will return" (Genesis 3:19)

"When you (God) take away their breath, they die and return to the dust." (Psalm 104.29)

"All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return" (Ecclesiastes 3: 19)

It is possible to try and evade the unpleasant truth of these verses by arguing that they only describe the death of the body, and that somehow the 'soul' or 'spirit' lives on, but the Bible clearly rules this out:

"No one remembers you (God) when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave?" (Psalm 6:5)

"The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing" (Ecclesiastes 9:5)

"In the grave, where you are going, there is neither working, nor planning, nor knowledge nor wisdom. " (Ecclesiastes 9: 10)

"For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either... then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost" (1 Corinthians 15: 16-18)

Like it or not, in the Bible, just as birth means birth, death means death. Everyone agrees that before God made Adam from the earth he did not exist. In the same way the Bible says that after man returns to the earth he will again cease to exist:

"Dust you are and to dust you will return" (Genesis 3:19)

Bible teaching on Death

Death is not a pleasant subject. The complete death that the Bible describes is even more disturbing. Most of us have loved ones who have died already and it is only natural to want to hold on to some hope for them.

Then, if we are honest, there is also our own position. No one can welcome death if, as the Bible says:

"the dead know nothing" (Ecclesiastes 9:5).

Other religions do not recognise death as absolute. Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, spirit religions, and others, all agree in one thing; namely that when a man's body dies the life continues. The natural inclination of all people is, (despite all the evidence to the contrary), to believe that they are immortal. This is why even many Christian churches are at odds with their own Holy Scriptures.

The religion of the Bible is unique in many ways, and one of the greatest differences from all other beliefs is the seriousness with which the Bible treats death and the other problems of this world, and because of this, the completeness with which it promises a solution. Man's religions generally seek an escape both from the physical body and the earth itself, but instead the Gospel of Christ is concerned with putting both man and the physical world right, not with providing an escape into a 'spirit world'. While popular ideas about heaven going, both Christian and non-Christian, sound attractive to the individual they can be seen to be essentially selfish when we consider that while the departed soul is (supposedly) in bliss, this does nothing for those millions left behind to live out their lives in suffering on earth.

What the Bible teaches about souls The Bible has a lot to say about eternal life, but the reader needs to start as if with a clean sheet of paper because we all have preconceptions about what certain words mean that are often at odds with the Bible For example a reader looking in the New Testament sees a reference to a man's 'soul'. "Aha", thinks the reader, "this proves that man does have a soul, and that some part of man does survive after death". But the reader is wrong, the word translated 'soul' can only mean what the Bible makes it mean.

So when the Bible says that souls die...

"The man [the soul] who sins is the one who will die" (Ezekiel 18:4, 20 original Hebrew text) .

*"Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his ways shall save him [his soul] from death"
(James 5:21 original Greek text)*

"Every living thing [soul] in the sea died" (Rev 16:3) .

..and that God can destroy the soul:

"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28)

...then it is the Bible itself that explains that the soul is not immortal.

Back to the Beginning

The best way to start on that clean sheet of paper is to go to the very beginning of the Bible:

"The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils he breath of life, and the man became a living being [living soul]. (Genesis 2:7 Hebrew)

This verse is also quoted in the New Testament:

"So it is written: The first man, Adam, became a living soul, the last Adam [meaning Christ] became a life-giving spirit." (1 Corinthians 15:45)

So in both Old and New Testaments the first man was a 'living soul'. The expression 'living soul' may sound strange but it is necessary because the Bible has many examples of 'souls' dying. The use of these words in Genesis 2, when man was made, is the first sign that man is not immortal. The proof of this is found in the next chapter, Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve disobey God and are told they will return to dust. Whatever associations the word 'soul' may have in other books, in other religions, or in popular sayings, it is important to recognise that in the Bible 'souls' are always mortal.

Here is some basic Bible maths:

Dust + Breath = Living soul (Genesis 2:7)

Living soul - Breath = Dust (Genesis 3:19)

The mortality of man's living soul is not just proved by the mentions of 'soul' and 'dust', but also by the way the Bible talks of the 'breath' which God breathed (temporarily) into man's nostrils. It is worth examining what the Bible says about 'breath' and the related word 'spirit'.

Spirits

'Spirit' is often thought of as being just another word for 'soul', but this is not the way the Bible uses the word. The very first place in the Bible where a 'spirit' in living beings is

mentioned does not even concern man but the animals in Noah's ark (Genesis 6: 17 and 7: 15).

The basic meaning of spirit is breath as can be seen by the way it is described as in the nostrils:

*"Everything on dry land that had the breath ['spirit' in Hebrew] of life in its nostrils died."
(Genesis 7:22)*

Of course in Bible times, just like today, many people believed in spirit beings of one sort or another. (For example; the Gospels mention 'unclean spirits' which people believed were responsible for sickness). But this is a separate subject (and a separate booklet), because what we are interested in here is whether the Bible teaches that man has a spirit that goes up to heaven or not.

Christ's teaching about Spirits

As the only person, according to the Bible, to have actually gone up to heaven, Christ understood about death. Did he become a spirit? Christ's own answer is emphatically "no". Please note that in the following text where Christ first appears to the disciples after the resurrection the original Greek word used is 'spirit':

" Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost [a spirit]. He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost [a spirit] does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." (Luke 24:36-39)

It is interesting that despite the disciples' superstition about spirits, Christ was at pains to prove to them that he (his body) really was alive again:

*"When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have something here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence."
(Luke 24:40-43)*

Why go to all this trouble to prove to the disciples that after death he was not a spirit? The Bible is clear in its teachings that souls die, and Christ clearly wants all his disciples, then and today, to accept the idea of physical resurrection, not that of a spirit afterlife.

Sleep, Resurrection, and Eternal Life

The many references in the Bible to death as 'sleep' are themselves a denial of non-Christian ideas about souls living on after death in heaven or some other spirit-world. If a man sleeps, then he is not active as a spirit. The Bible teaches that man's only hope is to be awakened from the grave:

"Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt." (Daniel 12: 2)

There have always been people who did not accept the idea of the dead sleeping until the day they are raised. But, Paul argues that if a Christian does not accept the idea of resurrection, then logically they ought not even believe in Christ's resurrection, and therefore their 'Christianity' is pointless:

"How can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised our preaching is useless and so is your faith." (1 Corinthians 15: 12)

"But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ the first fruits; then when he comes, those who belong to him." (1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

Paul's words leave no room for doubt. The dead are still dead. Eternal life is not automatic. It is not entered into at the moment of death. This life depends on Christ. Christ is the first, and so far the only, one to receive eternal life. Paul said this when "those that sleep" would have included Christians who had died since Jesus rose (15:6).

Paul tells us also that "those who belong to him", both asleep or awake, must wait "to be made alive" until Christ comes. Until Christ comes where? Evidently back to the earth. The reason for this is not only that those who have 'fallen asleep' must be raised . from the earth, but also that eternal life is to be lived on earth.

Where did Christ go on that day?

Before going on to look at the text of the conversation between the thief and Christ on the cross, it is worth considering one last reason why the story cannot mean what so many people want it to mean, and that is the Bible's teaching about where Jesus went after he died on the cross. This is important because Jesus promised to the thief that he would be "with him". The Bible record states that Jesus was taken down from the cross, wrapped in linen, and placed in a newly cut rock tomb which was then sealed up. This is all the Bible says and it is clear enough. This is what Christ himself prophesied: .

"The Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Matthew 12:40)

And what King David prophesied:

"you will not abandon me to Sheol" (Psalm 16:10 Hebrew, quoted as "you will not abandon me to Hades" in Acts 2:27, Greek)

And what Peter preached at Pentecost:

"he spoke of the resurrection of Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades." (Acts 2:31 Greek)

It is unfortunate that many apparently sincere Christians believe and teach that Jesus did not really die, at least as anyone would normally understand the meaning of the word

"die", nor spend three days in the grave. It is generally taught that only the Lord's body died on the cross, while his "spirit" went up to heaven. This follows on from popular ideas about the "immortal soul", but it needs to be recognised that if Christ was not really in the grave it follows that he did not really die, and therefore was not really raised from the dead. To teach this is to propose a "different Gospel" from that preached by the Apostles.

Those are hard words, but this is what Paul says:

"By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word preached to you, otherwise you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance:

(1) that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures

(2) that he was buried

(3) that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures" (1Cor15:3-4)

The idea that he was in heaven is disproved by Christ's own testimony. After the three days in the grave he said:

"Do not touch me because I have not yet gone up to my Father" (John 20:17)

Preaching to the spirits in prison?

Because John 20:17 clearly rules out Christ, (and therefore also the thief), being in heaven, another idea has been put about, namely that Christ was busy for those three days preaching to the spirits of the dead in the underworld. The support for this idea comes from only one verse, which concerns Christ having "preached unto the spirits in prison" (1 Peter 3: 19), and the idea is based on two misreadings: .

The first misreading is that it is not Christ himself preaching, but preaching done through his spirit (1Peter 3:18). Peter has already explained that the "Spirit of Christ" was in the Old Testament prophets (1 Peter 1: 11). Therefore the "Spirit of Christ" which prophesied in the days of Noah, was none other than Noah himself, inspired by the Spirit and with foreknowledge of the Gospel of Christ. And Noah prophesied to the men and women of his day, not to disembodied spirits.

The second misreading is that "prison" is taken to mean "Hell" (here meaning the fiery underworld of Christian tradition, not the silent Sheol of the Bible) All the other references to "prison" or "prisoners" in the New Testament are without exception to literal prisons, complete with chains and dungeons, such as Peter was himself put in. "Prison" is never once is used as another name for "Hell". In the Old Testament too "prison" never means the resting place of the dead. Others have suggested that it may be that the prison Peter is referring to is a comment referring to a Jewish legend about angels who were imprisoned in Tartarus in the days of Noah. If it is then it is a heavily ironic comment because Peter's second letter shows that he was bitterly critical of such "myths" and that he considered that any Jews or Christians who taught them were "blaspheming" against heavenly beings.

A more scriptural answer would be that Peter is referring to Isaiah where a prophecy describes Christ's work in preaching to those in the "prison" of sin:

"He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives, and release from darkness for the prisoners" (Isaiah 61:1)

This fits better with Peter's own explanation of how the "Spirit of Christ" was in the Old Testament prophets (1: 11), and with the immediate context of 3:18 and 3:20, both of which clearly speak about Christ and Noah having preached to the living, not to the dead.

Is paradise Hell?

In any case, whichever interpretation of 1 Peter 3: 19 is correct, the conflict of the mistaken idea of Christ "preaching in Hell" with the story of the thief on the cross is immediately obvious. It is claimed that Christ said the thief would be with him in paradise that same day, but is "Hell" paradise? Did Christ take the thief with him there for three days? And what happened to the thief after the resurrection while Christ was on earth for 40 days? He appears to have left him there, because he went up from the Mount of Olives alone (Acts 1"10)..

It is surprising that there are many churches which preach these two ideas simultaneously without realising they are contradicting themselves. Logically one can either believe that "today" Christ was in paradise with the thief, or believe that "today" Christ was in the underworld not paradise, but one cannot preach both at the same time.

Of course the position of this booklet is that both of these ideas are wrong - Paul says in Romans 14:9 that "Christ returned to life".. The word "revived", literally means "live again" (Revelation 20:5) It needs to be clearly stated that if Christ died and rose to "live again" then the Bible is saying that he was not alive between the two events - neither in heaven, nor in some smoky underworld. When Christ was dead, he was dead (Rev.1:18).

If we really want to understand what Jesus' words to the thief we should disregard these kind of bizarre ideas about what happened to the thief, and pay some attention to what the thief himself believed would happen to him.. That is the purpose of part two.

Part Two The Thief's Request

Considering how famous the verse "today in paradise" is (Luke 23:43), it is amazing how little attention is paid to the verse preceding it (23:42). Without looking at the Bible, how many can remember the request the thief made to Jesus? It is surprising the answers that the challenge to quote this verse without looking at the Bible brings forth. For example:

"Jesus, take me to heaven with you" (!!!)

But no. The thief never mentioned heaven. His request was simply this:

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (Luke 23:42)

Now, for the difference to be appreciated between this request and what people think the thief asked for, some knowledge about Bible teaching on the Kingdom is needed. The Kingdom -Heaven comes to earth While the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John speak about the coming of the "Kingdom of God", Matthew always describes this as the "Kingdom of Heaven".

Paul also speaks of the Kingdom as a "heavenly kingdom" in 2 Timothy 4:18. This has led some people to suppose that the Kingdom of God is actually in heaven, and that there will never be a Kingdom on earth. This cannot be correct because the Bible tells us that Christ will establish his kingdom here on earth:

"The Lord God will give him (Christ) the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever. "(Luke 1:32-33)

"You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on earth." (Revelation 5: 10)

"Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth.. " (Matthew 6:10) .

So what does the Kingdom of Heaven mean? Simply this, not that men go to heaven, but that heaven is to come to men. All the following verses are commonly misread to say that men go to heaven, but when read carefully can be seen to be saying the exact opposite:

"When men hate you... in that day... great is your reward in heaven" (Luke 6:23 Greek)

"Behold I am coming soon; My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done" (Revelation 22:12)

"An inheritance... kept in heaven for you... until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:4)

"Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ." (Philippians 3:20)

"We have... an eternal house in heaven... meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life." (2 Corinthians 5:2)

"In my father's house there are many rooms... I go and prepare a place. .I will come back." (John 14:3, compare same Greek word "mansions" "abode" in v.23)

"I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God." (Revelation 21:2)

The above show what Paul meant when he talked of "the hope that is stored up for you in heaven", that the hope of Christ's kingdom is presently stored up in heaven, but we must wait for Christ to bring it to us on earth. This should not surprise anyone for Christ himself waits in heaven, and without Christ, the King, there can be no kingdom. Nevertheless popular resistance to the Bible's teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven coming to earth is so deeply rooted that all of the above passages are frequently misused in attempts to

prove that the kingdom will only be in heaven, despite the fact that they clearly teach the opposite: "from there", "from heaven", "I will come back".

God can make the earth good again The only difficulty that remains with accepting the idea of a kingdom from heaven on earth is the same problem that we have already faced in showing that eternal life is conditional on the resurrection of the body (in the section on Sleep, Resurrection and Eternal life); namely this problem - the peculiar human wish to abandon all things physical for some imagined spirit world.

Up to a point this wish is understandable because the physical world we know now is full of pain and problems, but it is wrong to deny God's power to put right the problems of our world. After all, it was God who made the earth in the first place:

"God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." (Genesis 1:31)

The Bible is full of beautiful prophecies describing how God will restore the earth that man has spoiled, to make it as good as it was in the Garden of Eden:

"The desert and the parched land will be glad. The wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus it will burst into bloom." (Isaiah 35.1-2)

"They will say: "This land that was laid waste has become like the garden of Eden." (Ezekiel 36:35)

"For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." (Habakkuk 2:14)

The key element in this transformation will be the king of the Kingdom of Heaven, Christ, who will govern the world as the King of Kings:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him.. " (Matthew 25:31-32)

"He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears, but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth." (Isaiah 11:3-4)

"He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more. (Isaiah 2:4)

'Paradise' means 'garden', not 'heaven' The word 'paradise' is an ancient Persian word meaning garden, but was specifically used for the royal parks. In the Hebrew Old Testament the word can be found translated as "orchard" (Song of Songs 4:13), "forest" (Nehemiah 2:8), and "gardens" (Ecclesiastes 2:5), with in each case the owner being a king.

By the time of Christ the Old Testament used by most people, including the apostles, was usually not the Hebrew original but the popular Greek translation. In the Greek Old Testament not only royal gardens but also the garden of Eden were rendered "paradise":

"Now the Lord planted a paradise in the east, in Eden... In the middle of the paradise were the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. " (Genesis 2:8-9 in Greek)

The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on her ruins; He will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the paradise of the LORD." (Isaiah 51:3 in Greek)

Therefore, as you would expect, when the Greek New Testament refers to the garden of Eden the word used is "paradise":

"To him who overcomes I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. 11 (Revelation 2: 7 in Greek)

Note that both the original Hebrew Old Testament association with royal gardens, and the later Greek Old Testament association with the garden of Eden, are beautifully appropriate if the thief on the cross was to be with Christ in a heavenly kingdom on earth, and totally inappropriate if Christ had meant heaven. In fact, if Christ had meant to promise the thief life away from the earth, then why did he not simply say "you will be with me in heaven"?

The "Third Heaven"

We cannot leave this discussion without mentioning the one apparent exception to all the previous Bible verses where 'paradise' means a garden on earth.

"I know a man in Christ who fourteen years earlier as caught up to the third heaven. ...I know that his man was caught up to Paradise". (2 Corinthians 2:2-3)

There we have it, paradise = heaven, apparently as plain as one could wish! At this point many readers will be tempted to throw aside the hundreds of Bible verses on death and resurrection, the several hundred more in the restoration of God's kingdom on earth, and quickly return to a satisfied belief in souls going to heaven. (It's often been said that one Bible verse which appears to say what we want to believe, is worth many dozens more like John 3:13 which say what we do not want to believe).

However, if the fact that one Bible verse 'contradicts' another concerns us, let us look more closely at 2 Corinthians 12:2-3.

1. First, the translation "caught up" is spurious. The Greek says "caught away" not "up".
2. Second, Paul says that this is a "vision" (12:1)
3. Third, if the man himself did not know if this experience was "in the body, or apart from the body" (12:3), then how can anyone know?
4. Fourth, whether real or vision, either way, this is the experience of someone alive, not dead.

5. Fifth, where in the Bible do we read about there being a "third heaven"? The answer is that we do not, not once. However, the idea of a "third heaven" is found among Jewish teachers contemporary with Paul. In apocryphal Jewish books like the so-called 'Apocalypse of Moses' (a third-rate fiction which has nothing to do with the real Moses or the Bible), the Third Heaven is the place where the imagined 'immortal souls' of pious Jews await the resurrection. Several Jewish myths of this period contain the accounts of men who supposedly went on tours of the "third" and other heavens.

6. Sixth, the context of the previous chapter (2 Corinthians 11) is all about "false apostles" (11: 13), Jewish teachers (11 :22), who were boasting of their own achievements - including it appears, "visions and revelations" (12: 1). In this context we need to treat a "vision" of the "third heaven" with extreme caution.

7. Seventh, and finally, the context suggests very strongly that, despite his apparent denial (12:5), the man in question is Paul himself (see 12:1, 6, 7,11). One reason for thinking this is that apart from the context, Paul tells the Corinthians that the vision took place 14 years earlier. This suggests that the Corinthians knew well which vision he was referring to. If, as scholars think, 2 Corinthians was written around 64AD, then "fourteen years earlier" places the vision back in 50AD, at the time when Paul was in Corinth and saw the vision of Christ described in Acts 18:9.

Paul's vision - on earth not in heaven

Putting all these clues together we can conjecture that Paul's opponents in Corinth had been boasting of the kind of visions of the "third heaven" that are preserved in Jewish writings of this period. Paul, reduced to desperation by the Corinthians, was forced to remind them of the vision, a real revelation, that he had personally seen in Corinth. In this the Lord Jesus had encouraged him to stay in the city for a year and a half (Acts 18: 11), and without this vision it is unlikely that the Corinthians would have even been converted. This helps explain Paul's strange words earlier: "What anyone else dares boast about - I am speaking as a fool - I also dare boast about." (2 Corinthians 11:21).

So why does Paul use the word "paradise"? Presumably because he had (like James, John and Peter in Matthew 16:28) been shown a vision of the kingdom. And Paul knew that in the Old Testament "paradise" was used for the Garden of Eden, on earth. This would agree with his emphasis in writing to the church in Corinth about "inheriting the kingdom" (1 Corinthians 4:20,6:9, 15:24', 50).

Paradise restored in the Kingdom

Having seen that in the Bible paradise means garden, and that in Genesis and Isaiah the word is used of Eden it is no surprise that Christ should apply the word to the Kingdom in Revelation 2:7. What we should consider here is that if Christ promised the first church in Revelation (Ephesus) that if they "overcame" they would eat of the tree of life in the "paradise of God", then the promises to the other six churches will not disagree with this.

Reading through Revelation we see that the promises to the seven churches are all related to the kingdom (Revelation 2:7,11,17,26,3:5,12,21 and 5:10).

This is why that when the thief asked; "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (23:42)

And why Jesus could answer him: "you will be with me in paradise." (23:43)

In this the thief displayed a far better understanding of the "Gospel of the Kingdom" than some people who have taken refuge in a mistaken understanding of his story today. The thief did not believe in heaven-going, in 'immortal souls', or a spirit world; he believed simply and clearly that this Jesus of Nazareth, on the cross next to him, would return to "judge the living and the dead" and establish his kingdom (2 Timothy 4:1).

Jesus' answer is basically 'Yes, I promise to remember you', but it is more than that. Look at the word "today", which so many people see as the key word in the whole story. People are wrong in interpreting it as 'in heaven today', but they are right to sense that the word is important. Look at verse 42 again: the thief did not ask to be in the kingdom today, he instead asked that Jesus remember him when he came "into his kingdom", only then and not before. He did not ask for Christ to act immediately. But the reply was more than he asked for:

"Yes, but not only later when I come into the kingdom, I can promise you right now, today, that I will remember you, and I promise that you will be with me in paradise, and eat from the tree of life". (paraphrase)

That is the true promise that Jesus made to the thief on the cross. And not just to the thief, it also happens to be the same promise Jesus has made to each and every one of us:

"To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God". (Revelation 2: 7)

In many ways this simple quote of Revelation 2:7 removes the need for this entire booklet. The reader who isn't convinced by the booklet, probably won't be convinced by further discussion either, so instead he or she is invited to themselves go to Revelation Ch.2-3 and compare the seven promises Jesus gave "to him who overcomes" in each of the seven letters to the seven churches. Make a list of the seven promises (2:7, 11,17,28 3:5,12,23) and ask "when is Jesus going to fulfill these seven promises to "he who overcomes"? The moment that person dies? Or the day when Jesus returns?

STEVEN COX

Appendix: The Greek Text of Luke 23:43

The Greek text in all manuscripts reads as follows:

Amen soi lego semeron met emou ese en to paradeiso.

Truly to-you I-say with me you-will-be in the paradise.

Attribution of the adverb

The key word '*semeron*' (*today*) is an adverb. Most words in Greek, verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, inflect to make the grammatical relation of each word clear no matter where its place in the sentence. But adverbs, such as 'today', do not change. In Luke 23:43 the translator can only be guided by word order and common usage to decide whether *semeron* (*today*) relates to the verb *ego* (*I-say*) before it, or the verb *ese* (*you-will-be*) after it.

Word order It is normal to find adverbs of time related to the verb before them in Greek. For example, this is the first use of 'today' in the New Testament:

ton brion emon ton epiousion dos emin semeron. = *our-bread daily give to-us*
(*Matthew 6: 11*)

It is often said that the position of the adverb, the word order, in Luke 23:43 is 'ambiguous', meaning that it could be read either way, However it is interesting that classical Greek scholars (as opposed to those who only study New Testament Greek) do not generally consider that Luke 23:43 is ambiguous, many consider that the natural and normal way to read Luke 23:43 would be to read the adverb "today" as belonging to the verb "I say". In other words, the natural way to read the verse is the opposite way to the way church tradition would like to read it.

This view of non-seminary trained Greek scholars is supported by the simple observation that if Jesus has really meant to say "in paradise today", then the New Testament ought to read as follows:

Lego soi; met emou ese semeron en to paradeiso. = I tell you; you will be with me in paradise today (but isn't what the NT says).

It must be noted that the example above has been altered. No Greek manuscript of the New Testament has this reading. In the altered example the word *semeron* (today), has been moved to refer to the verb *ese* (to be).

Common usage of 'today' with speech verbs

Because emphasis and other factors can change word order, the above does not by itself prove that "in paradise today" is a wrong translation. Common usage is perhaps equally as good a guide as word order. In Jewish speech there was a common idiom of adding the adverb 'today' to speech verbs for emphasis only, without the time 'today' being stressed.

"Swear to me today.. " (*Genesis 25:33*)

"I command you today." (*Exodus 34:11*)

"I declare in your hearing today.." (*Deuteronomy 8: 19*)

The apostle Paul shows this same style was in use in Christ's day, again in connection with verbs of speech:

"I declare to you today.. "(Acts 20:26)

"I will testify to you today" (Acts 26:2)

From this it should now be demonstrated that Christ's words to the thief are most naturally read:

"I say to you today: You will be with me in paradise"

Questions

1. What are the two possible translations of Luke 23:43?
 2. Why is there confusion between the two possible translations?
 3. What is a "living soul"? And what is the relation of "man" to "soul" and "dust"?
 4. Explain the meaning of "reward in heaven"?
 5. What did the thief ask Jesus to do for him?
 6. What are the "Kingdom of God" and the "Kingdom of Heaven"?
 7. What is the meaning of "Paradise" in the Old Testament and the New Testament?
 8. Where did Christ go on the day he died?
 9. After he rose on the third day, was Christ a spirit or physical?
 10. Where is the thief now?
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