



"The more purely God's word is preached, the more deeply it pierces and the more kindly it works."
—William Gouge

15-May-15

What Happened to the Thief on the Cross? (Part Four)

Even though interpreting [Luke 23:43](#) as saying that [Jesus Christ](#) and the criminal would both be in Paradise that very day contradicts many clear scriptures, some still hold onto this idea because of the unique construction of the sentence. They point out that, while there are many places where Jesus begins an important statement with "Assuredly, I say to you" or "Verily, I say unto thee" (KJV) or "I tell you the truth" (NIV), in no other place is the phrase accompanied by an explanatory clause relating to time—yesterday, today, etc.

Structurally, these critics say, Christ's important statements always follow a set pattern: "Assuredly, I say to you, [important statement]." In this view, to include the word "today" with the phrase "assuredly, I say to you" creates a structural anomaly. They do not argue that the structure is wrong, only that it is unlikely to have been what Jesus meant because His many other emphatic statements in the New Testament all follow the same pattern. They allege the word "today" would be superfluous if it were added to the phrase "I say to you" because "I say" is already in the present tense, which implies "today" or "now."

However, this objection overlooks a foundational and crucial point. The use of "today" or "this day" is a common idiom used by both [God](#) and man in both Testaments. This idiom adds tremendous emphasis and gravity to the statement it accompanies. Consider [Deuteronomy 4:26](#): "I call heaven and earth to witness against you *this day*, that you will

CGG Weekly: What Happened to the Thief on the Cross? (Part Four) (15-May-15)

soon utterly perish from the land which you cross over the Jordan to possess; you will not prolong your days in it, but will be utterly destroyed" (emphasis ours).

The Hebrew behind "this day" is translated in other places simply as "today." When used in this way, it is not intended to draw attention to the 24-hour period during which it was spoken, but rather to convey significance and to communicate the solemnity of the declaration. If we were to examine the chapter's preceding verses, we would see that God is not drawing our attention to a specific day but is demonstrating the *seriousness* of what He is saying by using the Hebrew idiom "this day."

This peculiar idiom appears throughout the Bible—literally hundreds of times. It is frequently used when God is speaking about the commandments He has given and when He tells His people what He expects of them. Occasionally, "this day" or "today" is not idiomatic, as when the speaker is actually drawing attention to a specific day, such as a [Sabbath](#) or other holy day. However, for the most part, this term is intended to add emphasis, solemnity, and importance.

We cannot ignore the fact that the words in [Luke 23:43](#) are spoken by the same Person who used this idiom repeatedly when addressing ancient Israel. When we understand this, we can see that the comma is misplaced and that to make His statement more easily understandable, the comma should *follow* the word "today": "Assuredly, *I say to you today*, you shall be [with Me in Paradise](#)." Jesus is adding solemn emphasis to His statement that at some point the criminal would be with Him in His Kingdom on earth.

But this begs the question: Why does Jesus speak so emphatically? The answer can be found in the unique qualities of the book of Luke. He is the only gospel writer who includes this encounter, so it is tied to his own distinct perspective.

Throughout his gospel, Luke emphasizes the fact that Christ was a man, while the other writers emphasize His kingship (Matthew), His servitude (Mark), or His divinity (John). Luke stresses Christ's humble beginnings in a manger, surrounded by shepherds and common people. He shows Jesus going through the same human experiences that everyone around Him went through. He highlights His humanity and the fact that He is the Savior of *all* mankind, not just of Israel. Luke, a Gentile himself, writes for other Gentiles, which is why many of his descriptions of events omit details that non-Israelites would not relate to, while emphasizing the things that all people could connect with. In Luke's writing, Jesus is depicted as the *universal* Man, Someone every person could identify with and respect.

This helps to explain Jesus' words to the criminal. Here is a common thug—having been

CGG Weekly: What Happened to the Thief on the Cross? (Part Four) (15-May-15)

caught in a crime against the state and paying the price for it—who has the audacity to beseech the dying Messiah for favor. Yet the Son of Man, the perfect Man that He is, does not brush him aside or castigate him. Instead, He recognizes that the criminal is expressing [faith](#), however rudimentary, in the coming [Kingdom of God](#), as well as in the fact that Jesus would not be held down by death—for the only way He could come into His Kingdom is through a resurrection from the dead.

The criminal has the eyes to see Jesus Christ for who He is. He can comprehend what would happen after Christ died. He understands that, when Jesus returns in His Kingdom, He would *remember* the criminal and act in a way that would be beneficial to him. Taking this a step farther, the criminal knows what condition he would be in himself—he would be dead. Thus, he knows that Christ's remembrance of him will have to begin with his own resurrection. Jesus is able to assure him that he will indeed be with Him at some point in Paradise.

Luke highlights Christ's willingness, even as His own life is draining out, to give comfort and encouragement to the man dying next to Him that he *would* live again and be with the Son of God in Paradise. However, He does not say this to the criminal alone. His declaration is underlined with a Hebrew idiom that is solemn and emphatic yet also universally encouraging. As long as we have not turned away, He is speaking to us also when He says, "Truly, I say to you today, you *will* be with Me in Paradise."

- David C. Grabbe

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

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