

Jesus And The Robber

Did the Robber Go To Heaven?

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A verse that many people, Protestants and Catholics primarily, used to prove the immortality of their soul, and their belief in a person going directly to heaven when he dies, is Luke 23:43.

This of course is the account of the robber, who is on the cross next to Jesus, and he repents, and Jesus answers him,

Luke 23:43 And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise."

Now that is how we say it, and I will get to that later, but I want to explain this section today. We will start in verse 39, because this section in itself is interesting in its own right, notwithstanding the general misunderstanding of verse 43. So let us go there. We will read down through verse 43.

Luke 23:39-43 Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us." But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

The first thing we notice when we go through this section is a contrast, a very marked contrast between the two criminals. I should explain this word that is translated "criminals." Criminals is fine, but it is a rather general term. You could be a criminal and be a child molester; you can be a criminal and a murderer; you could be a criminal in this country if you run a red light or whatnot. It would not be the same *type* of crime, but it is still a crime.

This particular word is really better as “robber.” I think the King James version has it as robber. [transcriber’s note: Douay-Rheims uses robbers] I am not exactly sure of that, but that is better because what it is actually implying is not just someone who commits a crime, but someone who commits a crime with violence. And that is exactly what robbery implies.

Thievery is any old burglar that goes in the house and takes something; or maybe a pickpocket you would call a thief, or someone who steals a purse. But if that person comes up to you, knocks you on the head, and steals your purse, he has become a robber. Robbery implies not just thievery, but thievery with violence. So that is what this is. It is a person who took things violently.

Some go so far as to say it should probably properly be a highwayman. You know, the Robin Hood type who goes and steals from the rich, and gives to the poor, that sort of thing, or steals from the rich and keeps everything. What it was, was probably these two were part of a group, or separate groups of insurrectionists. They hated the Romans, and part of their rebellion against the Romans was to waylay wealthy people—mostly Romans—who would come along the road, and they would take their money, and use it to finance their rebellion. And so either robbers, or insurrectionists, even highwaymen, would work fine: These were men that were violent criminals, not just your run of the mill thieves.

Anyway, in this contrast between the two criminals, we find that they were both justly condemned to be crucified; that is, they had gone through the same process that Jesus Christ had and been condemned as a criminal, and probably as traitors to the nation, a capital crime.

But we find that one of them is simply an evil man through and through. The other one, if we can take something from the way he replies here, we would call him a freedom fighter. He was not necessarily an evil man, but he did hate the Romans, and he did want his country to be free. We might call him a patriot. And so he was basically a good man as humans go, but he had felt that doing acts of violence for his nation, as he called it, was fine, and so he had done these deeds, and had been caught, and he was justly condemned.

Here in verse 39, we also have the word “blasphemed.” Again, it is a fine translation. It works, but it could be better, because the word implies something that keeps on happening. So what we find is the first criminal kept on blaspheming or kept on reviling. It was like he had this constant torrent of abuse that he was putting on Jesus, mocking Him that He was supposedly the Messiah, “Why can’t he save Himself, and the rest of us that are up here for the nation? You know, we’re all on the same team here. If you’re really the Messiah, get Yourself down off that cross, and save us, and we’ll go kill some more Romans” is basically the idea he had.

So we find here that he was just constantly demeaning and deriding Jesus. As we go into verse 40, we find that this is what got the other robber to start speaking.

We have the word “rebuked” here. The other answered, and rebuked him. It is a fine word. It does the job. But the sense is that not only did he rebuke him, he stopped him from talking. He checked him; he interrupted him. It is like this one robber was up there just pouring on the venom on Jesus, and the other one said, “Enough already! Stop your jabbering.” And then he went on with what he said, “Is this really how you want to spend your last breaths? Is this how you want to meet your Maker? Who are you to spout such condemnation knowing that you are under the same sentence of death? You know, where’s your high moral ground, buddy?” What the second robber said certainly shut the first one up because he does not say anything again.

In verse 41 we have the second robber admitting his guilt. In fact, he says, “We’re only getting what we deserve for our crimes. We’re here because we did it, and we got caught, and now we have already faced the executioner. We’re just waiting to die.”

So in terms of spirituality or repentance, this is the first step. He admits his guilt, and in Jesus’ hearing he confesses it to God. He confesses that he is a sinner. He confesses that he has done these crimes.

Most people, when they get into these situations, they say, “I’m innocent! I’m pure as the driven snow! I’m lily white!” But he says, “No, we were wrong. We sinned. We’re guilty of the crime.”

So as it says in I John 1:9 this is the step that we must take. If we have sin, then we confess it to God, and He is very just and fair and wonderful to forgive us our sins.

And then the robber goes a step further, where he professes Jesus' innocence. Here is one who is on a stake, next to Him suffering the same sentence of crucifixion, but he says, "This Man has done nothing improper." That word maybe is best translated "amiss." "There is nothing out of sorts about this man. He's done nothing perverse or out of place or improper. This Man is innocent." How he knew this we do not know. But it is possible that in his travels around the nation, these two may have crossed paths before; that the robber may have even heard Him preach at some point. We do not know.

Now if this one was an insurrectionist, he would have been waiting for Messiah to come to take them from under the burden of the Romans. So he would have been aware of the various ones around that were preaching and those who seemed to be maybe a Messiah. He might have had some idea that this is the sort of thing that Jesus was preaching. But up until this point, he had not put two and two together yet.

While up on the cross or on the stake, I think he began to get an inkling of what everything was about. What he says in verse 42 gives an indication that he knew something of Jesus' doctrine. He says, "Lord, remember me when you come into Your kingdom." And what did Jesus preach? The gospel of the Kingdom of God. And so, he put two and two together here.

Notice also, he does not ask for forgiveness or salvation. All he says, is, "Remember me when Your kingdom comes, when Your reign begins." Now there is a hint here that the robber realized that Christ's Kingdom was a literal future kingdom beyond the death of Jesus. Because he puts a future cast on it, "When you come into Your kingdom." It is not something that was happening at that time, but it was something that would come in the future. And so the robber says, "When that time comes, Lord, remember me. Remember the one who died next to You."

And if this was what he had done, and he had put these two things together, he had made a leap of faith and understanding even beyond what Jesus' own disciples had figured out by this point. Maybe it was because he was actually

going through this fulfillment of prophecy that the light came on, and he remembered all those Old Testament prophecies that talked about the Messiah, and how things would have to be. I do not know. I am just saying perhaps, that in the stress of the situation when his mind was so focused because of all the suffering and the pain he was going through in crucifixion, that the leap was made in his mind, and it triggered from what he knew of Christ's teaching and what was actually taking place at the time, and he saw "Aha! This is what He meant! This is what the prophets meant!" I do not know. It is possible. It could be that the Father was also working with his mind. I would say that would probably be a very good possibility.

We have in verse 43 Jesus' reply. It is an affirmation that He recognized that this robber understood a very important point. That he got it. That he had understood things correctly and put things into their proper perspective. And, if he continued in this understanding and the attitude of humility in which he approached Jesus, and attitude of repentance; if he still had this attitude when he was resurrected, then he would surely be in His Kingdom.

This is what it takes to be in His Kingdom: Recognition of his own sins; recognition of Christ's sinlessness; a willingness and desire to be there with Christ (among other things). Those are good places to start. And so Jesus says, "If you continue with this, you will surely be in My Kingdom with Me."

Now, this verse contains a grammatical ambiguity. This is probably what most of you understand. And it centers on the word "today." In the Greek, as in the English, it can go with either part of the sentence. It can be read as, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise," or it can be read, "Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise."

The word "today" in its proximity, though, in the way that it is in the Greek, seems to refer or to modify the verb "say," rather than the verb "will be." It stands between them. And we can see this a little bit better if we see what the Greek literally says. As we would translate it, it goes this way: "Assuredly, to you I say today with Me you will be in paradise."

So the way it is in the Greek, coming directly after the word "say," seems to modify the word "say" rather than the words "will be," which are several words down in the sentence.

The comma, which is not in the Greek, obviously, it is an English piece of punctuation, is thus misplaced. It should come after the word “today,” rather than before the word “today,” and that way it would read, “Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise.” He is saying that, “I am saying this *today*.” And He is assuring him that he will be with Him in paradise.

One of the things we should remember, where was Jesus later that day? He was in the tomb. He was dead. Jesus was not in paradise that day. Nor could the robber be in paradise that day. Both of them were dead. And so, even if we took it as, “I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise,” it is not true. And so, we would therefore, say that Jesus was a liar. But He did not say that. He said, “I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise.”

Now the commentators make a big deal of the word “paradise” here. But it really should not be that difficult for us to figure out what it refers to. It is a reference to the story of the Garden of Eden. The Garden of Eden was known, and still is known as Paradise. It does not suggest a place so much as a condition, a condition untainted by sin or corruption. The Garden of Eden was paradise. But it ceased being paradise once Adam and Eve sinned, and were kicked out of it, forbidden to return.

But if we look in the context, and it is so important that we always look at things in context here, you will see what Jesus responded to. The robber said, “Lord, remember me when you come into Your kingdom.” And Jesus' reply was, “You will be with Me in Paradise.”

So what does paradise refer to? It refers to God's Kingdom, which will be a time untainted by sin, correct? Or a time untainted by the corruption of human nature in its ultimate reality, its ultimate form.

You also know that when Christ returns to rule on the earth, it is not heaven, which many believe this word means, but He comes back to the earth—and He rules on the earth. Revelation 5:10 says that they will rule with Him on the earth.

Now, you may be thinking of II Corinthians 12:4, where Paul says he was taken up to paradise, but right in that context, the word paradise is modified. It is actually defined in verse 2 as the third heaven.

So we must allow the context to define its terms. In this case, the same word means two different things. However, both mean times and places of sinlessness and incorruption. So, both would be accurate understandings as in the third heaven with God and Christ, as well as God's Kingdom. So we need to look to see how it is modified and defined within the context.

Let us finish in Hebrews 11. I think this puts the final nail in the coffin, so to speak. Hebrews 11, verses 37 through 40 at the end of the faith chapter where all the heroes of faith have been talked about, and how they have done great things for Christ. And then Paul makes some summing comments as he finishes.

Hebrews 11:37-40 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.

So my question is: If the heroes of faith from Seth, or Abel, all the way down through these prophets that were tormented in such a way, have not been made perfect apart from us, and we certainly have not been made perfect yet, then why would God give priority to a man—a robber, a criminal who made what is really a deathbed repentance? Why would this robber be allowed to go to heaven and be perfected, and Abraham was not? We have to remember that all others, including David (as it says in Acts 2:29 and 34), and this man, this robber, is awaiting the resurrection in the grave.