

The Thief on the Cross

The Promise of Paradise

by Steven Cox

Cover: Detail from Mantegna "The Crucifixion" c.1457

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ISBN 81-87409-35-5

Published and Printed by
Printland Publishers
GPO Box 159
Hyderabad A.P. 500001
India

To where enquiries may be directed if no local
address is stamped at the back of the booklet.

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INTRODUCTION: A UNIQUE PROMISE

Firstly, what is so special about a promise? We all know from experience that often ‘talk is cheap’, and promises are sometimes just as easily broken as spoken. However this is a booklet about a Bible subject and it is hoped that it is understood that a “promise” in Bible terms is something different from a human promise. In the Old Testament God made promises to Adam and Eve, to Abraham, to David, and others, and these are special because we know that a promise given by God is a promise that will be kept. The same is true of the promises of Jesus, of which there are hundreds in the New Testament. Among them one of the most famous is the promise made by Jesus to one of two thieves crucified with him in Jerusalem. This was the last promise Jesus made before his death and resurrection.

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, even by human standards. Despite this Christ not only forgave the man but also promised him life after death. The thief was further promised that in this new life he would be together with Christ. So this criminal, about whom we know nothing, not even his name, then became the only person in the New Testament, apart from the disciples (Matt 19:28), that we know for certain has been guaranteed 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 with some people, and that is because it is almost 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.”

This verse has become one of the best known verses in the whole Bible due to its rarity as a proof passage for ‘heaven-going’.

A Mistake in Translation

Sadly the popularity of the verse is based on a simple, but easily made, translator’s error. Once the error is recognised the story of the thief on the cross can be seen to prove exactly the opposite of what most readers think it proves.

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What happened is that, because the original New Testament documents were written all in capital letters, and without punctuation such as, full stops, commas, question marks, and so on, then it is up to the translator to decide where one sentence or part of a sentence ends and another begins:

ITELLYOUTHETRUTHTODAYYOUWILLBEWITHMEINPARADISE

So when a translator comes to the original text:

“I tell you the truth today you will be with me in paradise”

He or she 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 this case it is quite easily demonstrable that the correct translation is the first, (A) above, and this can be proved 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 words alone in working out 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 popularly held 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 many of the readers of this booklet, the linguistic argument, which is largely to do with 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

Since so many sincere people take the story of the thief on the cross to be about going to Heaven, it is only fair to examine this idea by comparison with the teachings in the rest of the Bible. However, use of a concordance, or index, to follow up places 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, namely the Beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer:

“Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5 quoting Psalm 37:9,11,12 AV)

“Our Father who art in heaven...Thy will be done on earth” (Matthew 6:8-10 AV)

Note that it does not say “the meek shall inherit the heaven”. But in case there was any chance of misunderstanding this, the New Testament is explicit:

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

“No one has ever gone into heaven, except the one who came from heaven - the Son of Man” (John 3:13)

The one exception to this rule of course is Christ himself who 40 days after his resurrection from the dead 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 (the angels) 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. It is precisely because of this that Paul refers to Christ as the “*firstfruits*” (1Co 15:20), and “*firstborn from the dead*” (Col 1:18). If men had been going into heaven since Adam then Paul was talking

nonsense: Christ was plainly not the first. Worse still, if man naturally went up into heaven when he died, then what did Christ's life and death achieve?

Whenever the mention of Christ as "firstborn from the dead" is made, 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 'exceptions' in detail so there is no intention to attempt that here, but in short Enoch died without receiving what was promised (Heb 11:13) as did Elijah and the other prophets (Heb 11:39,40), while Lazarus and the Rich Man (Luke 16) are figures in a parable and are not able to over-ride straight teaching.

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 - the Son of Man." (John 3:13)

In 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 and similar passages by arguing that they only describe the death of the body and that somehow the 'soul' or mind lives on, but the Bible just as 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 Co 15:16-18)

“Brothers we do not want to you to be ignorant about those who have fallen asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope” (1 Th 4:13,16)

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, the Bible says that, in the same way, 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 people is, despite all the evidence to the contrary, to believe that they are immortal. This is why even many Christian churches are sadly 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 primarily concerned with putting both man and the world right, and 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 before being able to appreciate the message, the reader needs to start as if with a clean sheet of paper.

The problem is that we all have preconceptions about what certain words mean that are often quite different from what the original writers meant by those words.

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

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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 soul that sins shall die” (Ezekiel 18:4,20)

“Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way shall save his soul from death”
(James 5:21)

“Every living soul 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” (Matt 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 the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” (Genesis 2:7)

In the original language of the Old Testament, Hebrew, and also in old Bibles like the English King James Version, the words for this verse are ‘living soul’, meaning a soul which is alive not dead. The 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)

Again in the original language of the New Testament, which was written in Greek, the words used are ‘living’ and ‘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 arithmetic from Genesis 2 & 3:

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 (for a time) 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] 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 are full of references to the '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.

Unfortunately the terminology for soul, life, breath, and spirit is the one area where translators really have not been consistent in their treatment of the Bible text. For example some translators have translated the original word for 'soul' only sometimes with 'soul', sometimes with 'life', sometimes with other words, all depending on whether each passage fits their idea about what a soul was or not. In normal translation, of say a novel, this is fine, but when dealing with a sacred text like the Bible this is dangerous. In this way the reader comes away with the translator's ideas rather than those of the original writers. The result is that the whole area is very confused, although it is still possible for a diligent reader, with the aid of a good concordance, to check what the original word is, to note this in his or her Bible, and in this way restore what the writers intended to say.

Leaving aside the matter of the original words, the best approach is still for each individual reader to start with the plain Genesis text as a base and be sceptical of (and check) any variant translations in other parts of the Bible that appear to contradict it. Despite popular misconceptions about souls and spirits, the teaching of the Bible, and Christ himself, is absolutely clear about life and death, and no other part of the Bible contradicts the account of how God made Adam.

Christ's teaching about Spirits

As the only person, according to the Bible, to have actually gone up to heaven, it is obviously best to look at what the Bible says about Christ after his death. Did he become a spirit? Christ's own answer is emphatically "no". Please note that in the following verses 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 to see that despite the disciples' superstition about spirits, Christ was at pains to prove to them that his body was really and truly 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, as Paul argues below, if someone does not accept the idea of resurrection, they cannot believe in Christ's resurrection, and they cannot claim to be a Christian:

“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 15:12-14)

“But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits 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 all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ the firstfruits; 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. We do not already have eternal life. Eternal life is not automatic. It is not entered into at the moment of death. This life depends on Christ. Christ was the first, and so far the only, one to receive eternal life. Paul was still saying this even in the context that those who slept already included Christians who had died since Jesus rose (15:6).

Why does Paul link *“the resurrection of the dead”* to *“being made alive”*? And why describe Christ as the *“firstfruits”* in this? Well consider the alternative - that resurrection, meaning physical resurrection of the body, was not part of Christ’s resurrection then why was not the Lord’s physical body left behind lying in the tomb? Or at least when Jesus ascended into heaven from the Mount of Olives in Acts 1 why was his physical body not left behind on earth? The only reason that makes sense is that the resurrection body was still needed. Paul argues that if it was needed for Christ, the firstfruits, then the same is true for us.

Paul tells us more; (look again at the verse above), 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.

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)

“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 a part, at least, of Christ’s kingdom is presently stored up in heaven, waiting 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 even some of the above passages have often been misused in attempts to prove that the kingdom will only be in heaven, despite their clear references to Christ returning to us and bringing his kingdom with him.

God can make the Earth good again

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

Up to a point this 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)

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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 - The King's Garden

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 garden [paradise] in the east, in Eden... In the middle of the garden [paradise] were the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.” (Genesis 2:8-9 in Greek)

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

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“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)

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. However if Christ had meant to promise the thief life away from the earth then instead of mentioning “paradise” he could have simply said “you will be with me in heaven”.

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)

It is unfortunate that many 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” (1Cor 15:3-4)*

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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)

Because this 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 spirits in Hell. The support for this idea comes from only one verse, that concerning Christ having “preached unto the spirits in prison” (1Peter 3:19) but is based on two misreadings:

The first misreading is that it is not Christ himself preaching done through his spirit (1Pe3:19). Peter has already explained that the Spirit of Christ was in the Old Testament prophets (1:11). Therefore the Spirit of Christ which prophesied in the days of Noah was none other than the Spirit of Christ in Noah as he warned those who disobeyed God in his day.

The second misreading is that “prison” is taken to mean “Hell”, although all the other dozens of references to “prison” or “prisoners” in the New Testament are without exception all 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 Hell, but some have suggested 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)

Others have suggested that it may be that the prison Peter is referring to is a comment on certain teachings in the early church based on Jewish teachings that we know from church historians were still current in the early church even 300 years later. Some of these teachings concern legendary events in the days of Noah. This may be part of the answer -although again this is a separate subject and following that idea through to 2 Peter and Jude shows that the inspired writers of the New Testament were bitterly critical of these popular legends, and the echo of Isaiah's “prisoners” might fit better with what Peter has already said concerning the Spirit of Christ in the prophets - Isaiah included.

Whichever interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19 is correct, in any case the conflict of the 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?

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” (Rev20:5). 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 Paradise, nor in the underworld.

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 CONTEXT OF THE THIEF’S WORDS

Having gone through the Bible’s teaching about heaven, death, spirits and souls, resurrection, the Kingdom of Heaven, and paradise, it should be clear that the story of the thief on the cross cannot mean what many people think it means, but we have not yet looked at the story to see what it does mean.

Turning to the Gospel of Luke, chapter 23 verse 39, the story begins with Jesus hanging in agony on the cross. Above his head was written KING OF THE JEWS. At his feet were gathered a mixed mob of Jews and Gentiles taunting him. On either side of him hung a criminal:

39. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”

“Aren’t you the Christ?” The criminal was joining in with the mocking of the mob: “If he is the Christ of God let him save himself” and the Roman soldiers: “If you are the King of the Jews save yourself!”. It is almost beyond belief that a man who himself was being crucified would derive pleasure from joining in the insults of those crucifying him against another in the same situation. Perhaps he thought that if he joined in the mocking then the mob and the soldiers would treat him more kindly?

The word Christ is the same as Messiah, a Jewish word meaning “one anointed to be king”, who appears in the Old Testament prophecies as the one who would come to Israel to set up God’s Kingdom on earth. All Jews, including the two criminals, knew very well of these prophecies. To understand the words of the other criminal which follow we should recognise that that all the Old Testament verses that have been mentioned so far in this booklet would have been known to the thief since childhood:

40. But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? 41. We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

The Thief on the Cross – The Promise of Paradise

From the time he had been betrayed by Judas the previous night, everyone had denied Jesus, even Peter. What a joy it must have been for him to hear these words. This thief silenced the other, and no doubt the Jewish mob and the soldiers at their feet as well. Then the man went on to confess his guilt and acknowledge Jesus' innocence. What he said next was even more surprising:

42. Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

It is this request more than Jesus' answer which is the most significant point in the story of the thief on the cross.

There is nothing strange in Jesus agreeing to the man's request. What is amazing is that this nameless man should, when everyone else - including the disciples - had given up on Jesus, show such understanding and faith. Consider what his request meant:

1. Unlike the soldiers and the other criminal who had merely been taunting, he genuinely recognised Jesus as the Christ, the Jewish Messiah and heir of the Kingdom of God.
2. He believed that despite the crucifixion Jesus would still one day come into his kingdom, which the Bible - as we have seen - teaches is to be physically established on earth. In other words the thief understood that Jesus would have to be physically raised from the dead to become King.
3. He had the faith in him to ask for a place in that kingdom. This is very important, because to believe this he must have recognised Christ as the actual Son of God with the power to forgive sins.
4. He believed that he too could be raised from the dead. And he knew he **needed** to be raised from the dead, because he didn't believe that crucifixion would automatically release his 'soul' to a blissful afterlife. This man was facing death. He knew that he was really dying. It needs to be underlined that he did not ask "Jesus, please take me to heaven with you" as many people carelessly misread his words, but "Jesus, **when** you come into your kingdom, please remember me too!"

The reaction of the mob at the feet of the three crosses is not recorded by Luke. Did they mock the thief as they had mocked Christ? Yet the few disciples hiding anonymously among the crowd must have been ashamed by his faith.

43. Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth today you will be with me in paradise."

Jesus' answer is basically "Yes, I promise to remember you", but it is more than that. Look at the word "today" which is what 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 on when I come into the kingdom, there is no need to wait, I can promise you right now, today, even as we face death together, that I will certainly remember you, and I promise you will be with me in paradise, and eat from the tree of life.”

That is the true promise to the thief on the cross.

CONCLUSION: THE GOSPEL OF THE THIEF

A careful reading of the story of the thief gives a short summary of the Gospel:

Repentance

The thief starts with acknowledging his need for Christ. Without this nothing is possible. (Luke 13:3)

Faith

The thief then puts faith in Christ’s willingness and power to save him. Faith in both is equally important. (Romans 3:22)

Death with Christ

“If we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him” (Romans 6:4-8 and Colossians 2:12). For other believers to be ‘buried with Christ’ means baptism, but the thief did it literally.

The Return of Christ

“When you come into your kingdom”, said the thief, not *“if”*. There is no doubt about his coming, and no secret. As Christ himself had said only two days earlier: *“For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.”* (Matthew 24:27)

Resurrection

The thief accepted that he was going to die, but trusted that Christ would not forget him when he came to raise the dead. This was the hope of faithful men in the Old Testament too: *“Remember me”* was Job’s prayer; *“If only you would hide me in the grave and conceal me until your anger has passed... and then remember me.”* (Job 14:13)

The Promise of Paradise

Earlier we said that by the end of the booklet it was hoped to show that Christ's promise to the thief contains a message to all men, a glorious hope, and a promise greater than the one that is often misunderstood from those words.

The message is clear enough: like the thief, all of us face death, but we only have to appeal to Christ and he has the power to grant us, even today, a reserved place in the paradise he will soon come to create on earth.

We saw from the text of the thief's words that he had a hope for the future. It was not a selfish hope limited to his own soul, but a belief that God would establish a kingdom on earth that would provide a divine answer to all the world's problems, and an antidote to death itself.

Christ's promise to the thief was that he would return, to rule as King of the whole earth, and to return the world to the paradise it was before man disobeyed God.

Having reached the end of this booklet, it is worth stopping for a moment and compare Christ's promise to the thief with those ideas about man going to heaven mentioned earlier. We have all heard religious teachers make promises of an afterlife very different from the garden paradise in the Bible. Sometimes even Hollywood makes these kinds of promises (take the films *Ghost* and *What Dreams May Come* as examples). But do we really want a floating spirit life, endlessly looking down from the clouds above on loved ones below who must struggle on in a sick world below? Many religious teachers say the earth is beyond cure, and that its maker has abandoned it. But what kind of promise is that? Isn't that far inferior to the total solution promised by Christ.

What the Bible promises us is not a quick ticket to Heaven, that leaves behind us unrelieved all the pain and suffering of a world run according to man's laws not God's. The Bible has a solution - a promise that the world will be a paradise again:

“The Lord will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; He will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing” (Isaiah 51:3)

All that remains is for each of us individually to come to Christ and ask: “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom”.

Steven Cox

APPENDIX: THE GREEK TEXT OF LUKE 23:43

Αμην σοι λεγο σημερον μετ εμου εση εν τω παραδεισω.
Amén soi lego sémeron met emou esé en to paradeiso.
Truly to-you I-say today with me you-will-be in the paradise.

Attribution of the adverb ‘sémeron’ (today)

Most words in Greek, like verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, change their spelling to make the relation of each word clear no matter where its place in the sentence. But adverbs, like ‘today’, do not change. In Luke 23:43 the translator can only be guided by word order and common usage to decide whether *sémeron* (today) relates to the verb *lego* (I-say) before it, or the verb *esé* (you-will-be) after it.

Word order

It is completely normal to find adverbs related to the verb before them in Greek. For example, this is the first use of ‘today’ in the New Testament: (Matthew 6:11):

τον αρτον ημων τον επιουσιονδος ημιν σημερον.
ton arton émon ton epiousion dos émin sémeron.
our-bread daily give to-us today.

However, because emphasis and other factors can change word order, this does not by itself prove that “today in heaven” is a wrong translation. Common usage is a better guide than word order.

Colloquial usage

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..” (Gen 25:33)

“I command you today..” (Ex 34:11)

“I declare in your hearing today..” (De 8:19)

The apostle Paul shows this same style was in use in New Testament times, 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?