

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

35 What Paradise Was Promised the Dying Thief?

Scripture: Luke 23:39-43

“And one of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!” But the other answered, and rebuking him said, “Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” And he was saying, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” And He said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you shall come with Me in Paradise.”

The question we have before us deals with the subject of death and personal immortality. Death has always been a vexed subject and ignorance concerning it is common. This was brought to my attention not long ago as a panel of so-called experts on the subject of death answered questions on the morning talk show, **Not For Women Only**. When asked by Barbara Walters, “What do you know about death that I don’t?” the answer came, “Actually we do not know anything more than you do, we are struggling with our own death as you are with yours.” I did not find this surprising inasmuch as there is a world of difference in the way man approaches the matter of death and the manner in which the Bible speaks about it. The highest thoughts of men are at best only speculation and have brought confusion and despair. We know this from experience and because it is the teaching of the Bible. The Apostle Paul uses an expression several times when he is dealing with matters of perplexity and difficulty. It is the expression, *“I would not have you to be ignorant (or unaware).”* He uses it in Romans 1:13; I Corinthians 10:1, 12:1; II Corinthians 1:8 and I Thessalonians 4:13. The last reference has to do with death as he writes to Thessalonian believers, *“But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.”* In other words, there is a great lack of understanding abroad in the world about death, but it is not true of you. Paul was saying that Christians are in a position to understand more about death than nonbelievers. They are in a position to know exactly what happens to a person when the last breath is drawn. Lack of knowledge here is

a result of disregard of what the Scriptures teach. The Lord Jesus Christ brought this to the attention of the Sadducees as He corrected their outlook with the words, *"Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven."* (Matthew 22:29-30) So I repeat, it is a subject, this subject of personal immortality, where lack of knowledge abounds. From Solomon to George Bernard Shaw there is the despair that life is a breath and that a living dog is better than a dead lion, but not that much better. Thankfully, we can go beyond that position. In the Thessalonian passage mentioned, chapter 4, verse 15, Paul declares the authority by which it is possible to have an additional source of information. He writes, *"this we say unto you by the word of the Lord..."* What God has done is to inscripturate this information in a book, the Bible. Here we find no doubt about the state of the dead.

Paul moves on to say that the understanding the Word of the Lord gives is a solace and comfort to those who believe. In verse 14 he writes, *"If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him."* Finally, he urges, *"Wherefore comfort one another with these words."* The crux of the matter here is that there are two kinds of people among the three billion who inhabit this planet. There are the people who are ignorant of what the Word of the Lord teaches about death which is always equal to sorrowing with no hope, and there are those who believe that Jesus died and rose again so as to call upon Him as Savior, who are comforted. With every tick of the clock someone dies somewhere which means that the ranks of the sorrowing and the comforted are increased immeasurably every twenty-four hours. We enter the routine of daily work and play not realizing that at any moment death can enter upon our lives. The great tragedy for multitudes of people is that the bottom falls out and there is nothing for them to hold on to. To ignore the Word of the Lord at this point is to walk away from all true knowledge and hope. The Christian, on the other hand, reflects his faith in Christ and is thus comforted. Oh, it is not that they do not sorrow. Of course the Christian sorrows at the loss of a friend or loved one. Christians are not made of concrete, they have feelings and the absence is felt. But for the Christian the sting of finality and the pain of mystery has been taken away, and that is a comfort. A favorite passage of Scripture is Hebrews 2:9-15 where the inspired writer describes the fact that death loses its terror for the Christian. The child of God ceases from carnal fear by understanding what Christ has done. Now, let us go on to examine various Scriptures inasmuch as it is true that the Word of the Lord does bring comfort to

us when it comes to dying and death. We will have to take this in stages and will begin with the thought of personal immortality.

I. BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY AND CONTINUING LIFE:

The Bible has a definite teaching about the future. Theologians call this doctrine or teaching, "eschatology." We needn't labor the word which is a marriage of two Greek words, "eschatos" meaning furthest or last, and "logic" meaning saying or teaching. The idea contained in the word relates to the expressions in the New Testament, which speak of a "last day." A sample passage is John 6:39. *"And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day."* I Peter 1:20 expresses the same idea. You may not care to remember the word, but you should remember that we would expect Christianity to have a view of the future. It is an inevitable concern. Science has its eschatology as does philosophy. The various religions of the world have their view of the future. Biblical eschatology deals with the coming again of Christ and the events which precede His coming, certain judgments which will take place, and the nature of the eternal kingdom. Of course, included here is the subject of one's personal future, and eternal destiny. Contrary to what materialists, naturalists and annihilationists believe, I think it can be shown clearly from the Scripture that there is the life which continues once the body hits the grave and begins its march toward dust. Man may be determined to want to believe otherwise, but there is no viable appeal to Scripture to support these views. God tells us that man is an inventor. Eccl.7:29 reads, *"God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions."*

The occasion of Christ's death upon the cross and the words which passed between Jesus and one of the men beside Him are helpful in our grasping what the Bible teaches about the afterlife. The details of the scene are doubtless familiar and we are aware that Jesus did not die alone. There were three crosses and three men who expired on the hill that day. One of the men who died with Jesus reviled Him, while the other made a request. He asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His kingdom. You may recall that Jesus had predicted that if He be lifted up from the earth He would draw all men unto Him. This is recorded in John 12:32. He claimed to have universal appeal. This was not a numerical promise. He did not mean to draw all men without exception. He meant that He would draw all men without distinction. Now, no sooner is He lifted from the earth upon a cross and they begin to come. The robber was to be the first of the millions. Jesus speaks to the man who requested a place in His

kingdom with the clear announcement that there would be continuing life after death and that it would be further enhanced by no time of separation from Him. I am aware that among some believers there is the feeling that a period of soul-sleep until Christ's return to gather His church will separate the Christian from the Lord's presence at death. It is true that sleep is one of the figures employed to help us understand death in the Bible. In fact, Christians long ago called their cemeteries, **cubacula's**, which meant sleeping places. Verses which speak of sleep in connection with death are John 11:11; Matthew 7:52; Acts 7:60, 13:36; I Corinthians 11:30, 15:6,51; I Thessalonians 4:13-15; II Peter 3:4. Surely, there is no question that the analogy is used many times. The point is, what is it that sleeps? Is it the soul or is it the body. Some do feel that it is the soul. There is no knowledge, consciousness, or activity following the moment of death. This belief is held by Advent Christians as well as being one of the distinctive tenets of Jehovah's witnesses. The verses which have been mentioned do not present any problem if you understand them as language of appearance. This is how a dead person appears to be, not as he really is. It is the body that sleeps, that remains inactive and insensible to what is around. Taken in context these verses teach that the reference is to the body, and not to the soul. This figure of speech has to do with the body. In Matthew 17:1-8 Moses and Elijah with Jesus, they were not asleep. In Matthew 27:52 it was the bodies which were raised because they had fallen asleep. We also know that angels, who are pure spirits without material bodies, are very much active as ministering spirits to those who will inherit eternal life. (Hebrews 1:14) In fact, this was one of the arguments set forth by the Pharisees against their rivals the Sadducees to prove the existence of angels. This is the fact that spirits do live apart from the body. The dying deacon, Stephen, did not lapse into sleep but saw Jesus waiting for him at the right hand of the Father. (Acts 7:56) Paul expected to go and be with Jesus. (Philippians 1:21, 23). He further taught to be out of the body was to be present with the Lord. (II Corinthians 5:6 and 8) In II Corinthians 5:1-3 he makes it clear that we would know the difference between having a body and not having a body. Some feel Paul died on one occasion and described his experience in II Corinthians 12:4. Sleep brings release from the frustration and harassment of this life. Sleep is the end of labor. Sleep is a release from suffering and pain. Sleep is a fine figure for God to use. Beside, we are not, strictly speaking, unconscious when we are asleep. We are operating on a different level of consciousness. There is a great deal of awareness that is able to transpire while the body is inactive. Those who teach soul sleep are confusing what is said of the body in applying it

to the soul. Now, as we continue, this is a long way of getting around to the question at hand and the promise of Christ to the thief by His side, the promise about Paradise that day.

Concerning this statement of Jesus, some displace the comma to indicate that Jesus was speaking to the thief on that very day. Accordingly Jesus said to the man, *“Verily I say unto you today, thou shalt be with me in Paradise.”* I believe that this is certainly forcing the meaning of the passage because it really is quite impossible for Jesus to have spoken to him directly on any other day. It would not have made much sense for Jesus to have said, *“Verily, I say unto you yesterday or tomorrow...”* What was actually meant to be the pivotal word then becomes meaningless. The best way to understand what Jesus meant is to see His statement as a direct response to the request which was made. The form of the Lord's reply adapts perfectly to the petition the robber made. Dr. Anderson Perry in his book, **The Seven Savings Of Christ On The Cross**, has done something very helpful in arranging the statements in parallel couplets as follows:

And he said unto Jesus
And Jesus said unto him

Lord
Verily I say unto thee

Remember me
Thou shalt be with me

When Thou comest
Today

Into Thy Kingdom
In Paradise

When Jesus died He went to Hell which was the place of departed spirits. Paradise was in Hell before the time of Christ because, as I have said, this was the abode of the dead. At this point we are concerned with the fact that life did continue following death on the cross. Within a few hours the dying thief expired, his soul-spirit immediately left his body and joined Christ in Paradise. The significance of the Lord's words are that the soul survives the body and no interval marks reassociation with Christ. Jesus emphasizes this truth with the solemn preface, *“Verily, I say unto you.”*

II. THE CONDITION BETWEEN DEATH AND THE RESURRECTION:

The whole point of our study has to do with this matter. It is known to theologians as the intermediate state, that is, the place of the soul between death and resurrection. Those who believe in a resurrection at all acknowledge that such a state exists. Some think it is purgatorial in nature, while others feel that is a condition of complete unconsciousness. The belief of the early Jews was that of a dreamy, semi-conscious state, characterized by neither happiness nor misery. As we would desire to learn more about this state it is necessary for us to have a proper understanding of certain terms. We must familiarize ourselves with them and their use in Scriptures.

There are four terms which I would like us to examine together. They are the words Sheol, Hades, Paradise and Heaven. We will study them in that order.

1. SHEOL:

This is a Hebrew term. Actually, it is a transliteration of the word. In the authorized version of the Bible this word is translated hell 31 times, grave 31 times and pit 3 times. I believe that the word should never be translated grave and the reason it was spoken of as the grave arose out of a lack of understanding about the exact nature of Sheol so that when the Old Testament saints were spoken of as going to Sheol the translators thought it could not possibly mean the same place as the wicked's abode, so they translated it grave. In none of the 64 texts is Sheol mentioned in plural, of a body going there, of being located on the surface of the earth, of it belonging to an individual, of being dug, or of a person touching Sheol. Yet all of these things are spoken of in connection with the word which is mentioned with the proper Hebrew word grave, which is Queber. I believe that this is important inasmuch as we do not want to confuse the grave where the body goes with Sheol where the soul goes. Queber is used in the plural 29 times, it is said the body goes there 37 times, it is described as being on earth 32 times, it speaks of an individual's queber 44 times, man digs it 6 times, and man can touch it 5 times. If Sheol and Queber are closely compared, it can be shown that Sheol does not mean grave. Verses which deal with the grave are Exodus 14:11; 1 Kings 13:30; Numbers 19:16-18; and II Samuel 21:14. Sometimes queber is translated sepulcher or burying place.

Sheol is the word used to describe the place of the souls of the dead. There is much difference of opinion as to the precise meaning of the word among liberal and evangelical scholars. The word itself appears to be a neutral term which indicates neither reward nor punishment. It appears to be used to speak of the unseen world, a conscious state of being without a body. Both the righteous and the wicked are spoken of as descending into Sheol. Concerning the righteous we can begin with Joseph in the 37th chapter of Genesis. (37:29-35) (42:38) Psalm 9:17 speaks of the wicked being turned into Sheol even all nations that forget God. In Proverbs 7:27 there is a warning about the strange woman's house as the way of Sheol. Present liberal theology thinks of Sheol as a place without blessedness or loss of any kind. It is not a happy place or a place of punishment. It is a kind of half substantial place where there is weakened consciousness. People are without strength, they are only shades of their real selves. It is very difficult to describe because we are not able to compare it with anything.

Verses which contain the word sheol are: Deuteronomy 32:22; II Samuel 22:6; Job 11:8, 26:6; Psalm 6:5, 9:17, 16:10, 18:5, 30:3, 31:17, 49:14-15, 55:15, 86:13, 88:3, 89:48, 116:3, 139:8, 141:7; Proverbs 1:12, 5:5, 14:9, 14:15, 28:15, 30:16, 57:9; Isaiah 5:14, 14:9, 11, 15, 28:15, 28:18, 38:10, 18; Ezekiel 31: 15-17, 32:21, 32:27; Amos 9:2; Jonah 2:2; Habakkuk 2:5; Genesis 37:35, 42:38, 44:29, 44:31; I Samuel 2:6; 1 Kings 2:6,9; Job 7:9, 14:13, 17:13, 21:13, 24:19; Ecclesiastes 9:10; Song of Solomon 8:6; Hosea 13:14.

Reference to these verses will reveal that Sheol itself does not indicate happiness nor misery because all the dead have gone there. Beyond that, and by context we can conclude that there is spiritual distinction among those who are there and that the word is not always used in the same sense. Concerning the righteous it was written, *"Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his."* (Numbers 23:10) About the wicked we read, *"They are appointed as a flock for Sheol; death shall be their shepherd; And their beauty shall be for Sheol to consume."* (Psalm 49:14)

Let me review by saying that it is due to the fact that both the souls of believers and unbelievers are represented as going to Sheol that prompted the translators to use the word *"grave"* instead of *"Sheol."* The fact that an entirely different word is used in Hebrew for the word grave should have prevented that from happening. The Holy Spirit carefully preserved the distinction with the word *"queber."* The body enters *"queber,"* but it is

never said that the body enters Sheol I have mentioned several things which are said of the grave which are never said of Sheol which should show that Sheol is not the grave. We conclude by saying that evidence from the Old Testament is sufficient to support belief in the continuance of consciousness for both believers and unbelievers after the death of the body. The Jews had a faint view of the after life. There are not many passages, but there are a few. I have listed them for you and will mention David's experience by way of losing his son (II Samuel 12:20-23) and Job whose confidence was very great. (Job 19:23-27)

2. HADES:

This is a Greek word. It is the word which means the same as the Hebrew word Sheol and the English word Hell. Three hundred years before Christ the Old Testament was translated into Greek. This was brought about through Alexander the Great who spread Greek culture throughout his empire. The translation was known as the Septuagint and it was made in Alexandria about 285 B.C. It is the Old Testament text that Jesus and the apostles were familiar with. Hades was the term used in Greek for the Hebrew Sheol. The identification is established by a comparison of Psalm 16:10. *"Thou wilt not leave my soul in Sheol"* with Acts 2:27, *"Thou shalt not leave my soul in Hades."* The New Testament information we have concerning the abode of the dead is much stronger than that of the Old. Hades is a generic term for the unseen world into which the souls of all people passed before the resurrection of Christ. Here again the Holy Spirit was careful to give a different word for "grave" so as not to confuse it with the place where the soul abides after death. This is the Greek word *"mnemeion."* It is found in Matthew 27:60; 23:29. Hades is not the grave. Hades is used in Matthew 11:23, 16:18; Luke 10:15, 16:23; Acts 2:27, 2:31; Revelation 1:18, 6:8, 20:13-14. In the 16th chapter of Luke the Lord Jesus Christ lifts the veil to give an astonishing glimpse of the nature of Hades. In this story we find the record of two historical men. Both died and went to the place which is called. Sheol, Hades and Hell. At this point there was a distinction in the exact place of their abode and they were separated by a great gulf. One of the men died having a relationship with God through the covenant God had made with Abraham. His name was Lazarus and it is said of him that he was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. (Luke 16:23-26) Before Christ arose from the dead, and before He died no believer went to Heaven with the exception

of Enoch and Elijah. Everyone went to Abraham's bosom which was located in Sheol, Hades, or Hell, where it appears, they were in a state of consciousness so much so that they could see, speak, feel, remember, reason and be comforted. This was Hades, a place where all who died went, somehow to be separated from one another. Believers evidently were in a state of joy though separated from the fullness of God's presence. They are described as being in a state of captivity. (Ephesians 4:8-10) It was to this place that Christ went spending three full nights and days apart from His body. His soul went to Hell. Listen to Peter in Acts 2:25-27, *"moreover my flesh shall rest in hope; because thou wilt not leave my soul in Hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption."* Peter then points out that this prophecy did not apply to David because we know that his body did see corruption. He shows that it was Jesus who died and went to Hell and who arose from the dead.

(Acts 2:28-32)

3. PARADISE:

The word is an oriental expression meaning parks or pleasure gardens. It is used only three times in the New Testament. The references are Luke 23:43; II Corinthians 12:4, and Revelation 2:7. Paradise was that place in Hades which housed the believing dead before the death and resurrection of Christ. When Christ died His spirit went to Paradise in Hell. It was there that He promised to meet the thief who asked to be remembered. The passages I have just mentioned in Acts. 2 indicate where Christ was during His absence from His body. On the day of resurrection Christ came out of Hell and took Paradise to Heaven with Him. In Ephesians 4:8-10, Paul describes this transfer of the souls of believers from the intermediate state in Paradise to their eternal dwelling place in Heaven. Separated from the fullness of God's presence they were in a state of captivity. When Christ arose from the dead He took captivity captive. He emptied Hell of Paradise and took it to Heaven. Paul wrote to the believers that Paradise is now located in Heaven (II Corinthians 12:2-4). Christ promised that He would build His church and that the gates of Hades would not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18). Today when a Christian dies this prediction comes true for him. The gates of Hades do not contain him. Paradise in Hell has been moved to Heaven. Heaven is where Christ is. Someone has said that Paradise is Heaven without a body, and I suppose there is a great deal of truth to that. Death and the grave still

holds the body. That is why Paul wrote, *“to be absent from the body and present with the Lord.”* (II Corinthians 5:6-8)

There are many lessons to be learned from the man who asked Jesus to remember him. From the few words which came from his lips he emerges to challenge every one of us today. He believed in a future life as is evidenced by the way he turned on his companion with the words, *“Dost thou not fear God?”* He knew he was a man to be justly condemned for his life. *“Thou art in the same condemnation. And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds.”* (Luke 23:40-41) He saw the righteousness of Christ and he said, *“This man hath done nothing amiss.”* (Luke 23:41) He somehow came to see the ability of Jesus to save him. *“Lord, remember me.”* He had a vision of Christ's kingdom as he cried, *“when Thou comest into Thy Kingdom.”* It was to this man who so looked to Christ that the words of salvation came. We began by saying that death is a vexed subject. People have said to me, “Don't talk to me about death, it upsets me. It disturbs me. I don't want to think about it.” Yes, death is that kind of a subject. I do not enjoy talking about death. The only reason I do is because I have something to say about it that is worth knowing. Death need not mean doom. Death need not mean a sorrow borne of hopelessness. Christ has died and lived again to rid death of the fear it creates in you. Look to Christ as did the dying robber of old. Behold in Jesus your Savior. Confess your sin to Him. Admit to Him that you have erred. Call upon Him while He is near. Be among those who know the comfort of the Word of God when death visits your life. I make no apology for speaking to you in this way, or for teaching a lesson of this kind. Some may listen with dismay, but it ill behooves a pastor of a Christian congregation to spend energy and time for that which is not bread for your lives. Come to the Lord as did the man who died with Him. The word of salvation will come to you.

Let us pray: Dear Lord, be pleased to use this teaching from your Word as a means of turning those whom you will to yourself. May we come to see your death in its deepest significance, and then in that understanding apply its truth to our lives. Do this through your mighty Holy Spirit and in your precious name.
Amen

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