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THE THIEF ON THE 'CROSS'

Here is a statement that Jesus Christ made to the thief who was crucified with Him.

And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise. (Luke 23:43 AV)

This statement has been used by many people to claim that both, Jesus Christ and that thief, went to paradise ON THAT VERY DAY! But that is not at all what Jesus Christ said or meant. Here is the Greek text for this verse.

kai eipen auto ho Iesous amen lego soi semeron met emou ese en to paradeiso (Luke 23:43, TR)

Translated literally word for word, and retaining the word order, this reads:

"And said to him the Jesus truly I say to you today with me you shall be in the paradise."

In the original Greek text there was no punctuation. In the Greek MSS all the words on one line were written together, without any spaces between them. This obviously didn't allow for punctuation. It was also somewhat difficult to read such a text, creating the potential for ambiguity.

The punctuation that CORRECTLY conveys what Jesus Christ meant here is as follows:

"And said to him the Jesus, truly I say to you today: with me you shall be in the paradise."

Or changing the word order to conform to our grammatical expectations:

And Jesus said to him, truly I say to you today: you shall be with me in paradise. (Luke 23:43 AV, with corrected punctuation)

The emphasis is on WHEN Christ said this to the thief. The emphasis is NOT on when that would actually take place. A free paraphrase of the intended thought here is: "I AM TELLING YOU RIGHT NOW THAT YOU ARE GOING TO BE WITH ME IN MY KINGDOM."

Jesus Christ's own testimony THREE DAYS LATER makes clear that He had not gone to paradise, or anywhere else, on the day that He died. Three days after His crucifixion, and after He had been resurrected, Christ said to Mary:

Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; FOR I AM NOT YET ASCENDED TO MY FATHER: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God,

and your God. (John 20:17 AV)

IF Christ had NOT YET seen God the Father when He was first resurrected, then He CERTAINLY had also not seen the Father on the day that he spoke those words to the thief who was crucified with Him, the day that He had died. But God the Father is certainly going to be in paradise, as much as any thief who had been crucified. It is not that Jesus Christ and this thief somehow went off to some place called "paradise", but which place is not where God the Father is; and then Christ three days later went back to Jerusalem, to the location where He had been buried three days earlier ... so that He could talk to Mary BEFORE then ascending to God the Father. If Jesus Christ had not yet seen God the Father three days after He had spoken those words to the thief, then He certainly had also not seen God the Father on the day that He died. And therefore He could not possibly have gone "to paradise" on the day that He died.

However, we should recognize that MANY TIMES Christ's statements were somewhat ambiguous to many people. And so there were many occasions when people did not really understand what Christ actually meant.

Here in Luke 23:43 we are dealing with a situation where the translators all misunderstood what Christ was really saying to this man. And so the translators all provided the wrong punctuation for this text. But this punctuation was not inspired. And it is the punctuation they chose which has created a totally unnecessary ambiguity here.

Anyone who reads the New Testament even superficially will readily recognize that for many people Christ's words were QUITE OFTEN ambiguous! Here are just a few examples that illustrate this point:

And he called the multitude, and said unto them, Hear, and understand: Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man. (Matthew 15:10-11)

This was unclear to the disciples and so Christ explained further:

Do not ye yet understand, that whatsoever entereth in at the mouth goeth into the belly, and is cast out into the draught? (Matthew 15:17)

Notice also that Christ KNEW most people didn't understand the things He explained:

Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. (Matthew 13:13)

And again to the disciples:

How is it that ye do not understand that I spake [it] not to you concerning bread, that ye should beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees? (Matthew 16:11)

The general population often didn't understand:

Why do ye not understand my speech? [even] because ye cannot hear my word. (John 8:43)

At the last Passover which Christ observed, the apostles didn't understand many things:

Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way?
(John 14:5)

Philip saith unto him, Lord, shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us. (John 14:8)

Judas saith unto him, not Iscariot, Lord, how is it that thou wilt manifest thyself unto us, and not unto the world? (John 14:22)

Right at the end of the gospel of John another statement was misunderstood:

For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so THE THINGS OF GOD KNOWETH NO MAN, BUT THE SPIRIT OF GOD. (1 Corinthians 2:11 AV)

Let's now take a closer look at the word "paradise".

THE WORD "PARADISE"

Let's now examine what Christ was actually saying to the man. A key is to examine the place Christ referred to, paradise!

The meanings human traditions have given to this word are unimportant. This word "paradise" is used only three times in the Bible. All three places are in the New Testament. In two of those places it is JESUS CHRIST Himself who uses this word; in the third passage it is used by Paul.

Now whatever meaning Christ attached to the word "paradise" in speaking to the malefactor, He had the same meaning in mind when He used the word again in the book of Revelation. And Paul likewise had the same meaning in mind. So let's notice:

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that OVERCOMETH will I give to eat of THE TREE OF LIFE, WHICH IS IN THE MIDST OF THE PARADISE OF GOD. (Revelation 2:7)

Most scholars are agreed that this word is of Persian origin, where among the Persians it referred to a grand park-like enclosed garden belonging to royalty. That is precisely what Jesus Christ is describing. The tree of life is going to be in the New Jerusalem, as described in Revelation 22:1-3. Jesus Christ was saying in Revelation 2:7 that those who "overcome" are going to have access to the New Jerusalem! Being "in paradise" amounts to being IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD. Currently God is still in "the third heaven". But Revelation chapters 21-22 focus on the time when God the Father Himself will come to the new earth.

According to Revelation 2:7 "overcoming" is a REQUIREMENT for being granted such access into the presence of God. But the "thief" was not in any position to do any overcoming; he was only a few hours away from death! Furthermore, here in Revelation 2:7 Jesus Christ very clearly intended "paradise" to refer to something that is still future! Let's look at the next Scripture.

How that he was caught up INTO PARADISE, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not

lawful for a man to utter. (2 Corinthians 12:4)

Two verses earlier, in 2 Corinthians 12:2, Paul had talked about being "... caught up to THE THIRD HEAVEN" in vision. This he equates in verse 4 with being "... caught up into paradise". The "third heaven" is a reference to THE PRESENCE OF GOD THE FATHER. Thus in both these uses the word "paradise" refers to being in the presence of God. So now let's look again at Luke 23:43, without punctuation:

And Jesus said unto him verily I say unto thee today shalt thou be with me in paradise. (Luke 23:43)

The meaning of Christ's statement is exactly the same as if He had said:

"verily I say unto you today you shall be with me IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD THE FATHER."

It is GOD the Father who is in "paradise"! That is precisely why it is "the paradise of God". The biblical meaning of "paradise" refers to being in the New Jerusalem with God the Father at the time of the new heaven and the new earth. That is way into the future, more than 1000 years from today! And "the thief on the cross" was certainly not taken into the New Jerusalem the moment he died. There is no other biblical meaning to the word "paradise"! Paradise will not exist UNTIL the time of the New Jerusalem.

Now let's note the context of this verse. Here is the previous verse.

And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me WHEN THOU COMEST into thy kingdom. (Luke 23:42 AV)

In this verse the man had asked Christ to "remember" him WHEN Christ would return in glory to set up the kingdom of God. The man was referring to THE FUTURE! The word translated "remember" in verse 42 is "mnestheti", the aorist, passive, imperative of the older middle voice form "mnaomai", and it is an URGENT request (the imperative mood) to Christ to later "remind Himself of this man", "to be mindful of him when the time of His kingdom would come". Jesus Christ very clearly understood this request! The man was asking Christ to remember him LATER, in the future.

It is in answer to the man's request to LATER "call him to remembrance" that Jesus Christ used the word "TODAY"! Christ said to the man: "I am telling you TODAY --- not LATER, when I come in My kingdom, but TODAY --- that you will be with Me in paradise, in the presence of God the Father. You don't have to worry that I will forget you. With the attitude you now have, I know that one day in the future you will indeed be a part of Our Family, the Family of God. That assurance I can already give you TODAY, right now."

The man's deathbed repentance was driven by urgent desperation in the face of his own imminent death. He will come up in the second resurrection, and the attitude he displayed here in Luke 23:42 will form the foundation on which he can then build real, godly and enduring character. That character will be put to the test over a period of time. That will then ensure that he will be a part of God's Family, when God the Father eventually comes down to the new earth with the New Jerusalem. The man will THEN have the opportunity to be WITH CHRIST IN PARADISE!

The word "today" was used by Christ for EMPHASIS!

It should be clear that "the thief on the cross" did NOT go to paradise the day he died.

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