

## Today you will be with Me in Paradise

by Hendrik Joubert

What did Jesus mean when He uttered these words to the thief on the cross: "***Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.***" (Luke 23:43) Popular conclusions concerning *death* and the *final* judgment may place this passage in the category of *exceptions*; if you have not already decided to move ***today*** by working on the punctuation. The case of the rich man and Lazarus explains much of what is said, and both passages help us to understand why Paul, including the plural pronoun "***we***," was looking forward to death so that "***we***," like the thief on the cross, may ***be present with the Lord.*** (2Corinthians 5:8)

The word *paradise* is used three times in the New Testament, twice by the Lord and once by the apostle Paul. Through His Revelation to John the Lord exhorts: "***To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.***" (Revelation 2:7) Paul uses the concept in the context of one taken up into the ***third heaven***, where *paradise* seems to serve as an alternative description of this location. (2Corinthians 12:2-4)

Before we consider the concept *paradise* more specifically, reflect upon the following statement in the context of the Lord's statement as well as the desire expressed by Paul: ***For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.*** (1Thessalonians 4:14) The idea of sleeping causes a problem for some. For them it suggests *unconsciousness* of both body and soul. The warnings against placing the emphasis on the things of this life – pertaining to the flesh – as expressed through Solomon in *Ecclesiastes*, are used to suggest that it is not only the ***carnal body*** which returns to the earth to *sleep* until the final judgment, but also ***the spirit*** which ***returns to God who gave it.*** (Ecclesiastes 9:5-8; 12:7)

The *depression* expressed by Solomon as he discusses the answer to the question: ***What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?*** (Ecclesiastes 1:3) may be difficult to deal with until one realizes that ***vanity*** is connected with everything one may do ***under the sun*** – *the things of this life*. Solomon uses the phrase ***under the sun*** 29 times. Perhaps the belief of the Sadducees, that there is no life after death, was founded upon the words given us through Solomon? ***Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.*** (Ecclesiastes 9:10)

We put so much emphasis on the things ***under the sun***, but little on knowing the Bible, the book by which God will judge us. (John 12:48; Hebrews 1:1-2:4; 2Timothy 3:16-17) We encourage our children to get an education and make lots of money, but hardly ever speak to them specifically about preparing for eternity. This is a spontaneous expression of our values and amounts to ***vanity***. ***For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?*** (Matthew 16:26)

The part of man we nurture and care for has no future: ***Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption.*** (1Corinthians 15:50) The only thing that really matters is: ***Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is man's all.*** <sup>14</sup> ***For God will bring every work into judgment, Including every secret thing, Whether good or evil.*** (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14)

If the thief on the cross was to be with Jesus ***in paradise*** that same day, where is this and what is the nature of this place? In Jesus' exhortation we find terminology very similar to that of the beginning of creation – ***the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.*** (Revelation 2:7; Genesis 2:9; 3:24) In Genesis we find that cherubim and a flaming sword ***guard the way to the tree of life***. Those who overcome the desires of the flesh and remain faithful to God will be granted permission to access the ***tree of life*** in the ***paradise of God***. Jesus promised the thief access that very same day, and we find that before the Lord ascended Lazarus was in the company of Abraham.

When Paul writes: ***So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord.*** <sup>7</sup> ***For we walk by faith, not by sight.*** <sup>8</sup> ***We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.*** (2Corinthians 5:6-8) who are the "***we***" he is referring to? Because of the promise by Jesus the thief on the cross departed to be with the Lord, as his spirit returned to God who gave it, while the dust returned to the earth as it was. (Ecclesiastes 12:7) The soul of the rich man returned to God for his reward.

Once we die, there is nothing we can do to change our destination (**Hebrews 9:27**), and from the rich man's example we learn that we will be in torment while waiting for the final judgment of God.