

The Thief on the Cross

One Simple Sentence has been cited to Interject Profound Considerations into Christian Main-Stream Theological Processes.

What Does Christ's Seemingly Straightforward Assurance Actually Indicate?

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With the dearth of clear and unequivocal Scriptures stating that it the destiny of the saved to ascend up to Heaven at the moment of death, it is no surprise that less direct passages are brought into the forefront to make up for what is lacking. In response to the condemned man's request to be remembered when He came into His Kingdom, Christ said, *"This day shall you be with me in Paradise."* And with the possible exception of the account of Lazarus and the rich man, this passage provides effective confirmation, as many see it, that the thief would be 'with the Lord' in Heaven on that very day!

Thus, religious people say, we believers also can rest assured of a transfer up to a 'heavenly abode' as it's the destiny of our souls when we die. The vast majority of 'christian' religions teach this with great dependence!

What Was Actually Said

The passage in question reads thus: Luke 23:39-43 *"And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, **Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.** And Jesus said unto him, **Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.**"* Now this passage is a little more specific than are the other two synoptic Gospel accounts. The other two, in Matthew 27 and Mark 15 indicate that the two reproached Him also, like the crowds were doing!

That brings out an important question. Was this man converted? Did he ever have the opportunity

to be 'called of God' and respond appropriately? Was he ever baptized, with hands laid upon him, and did he receive God's Spirit? I suspect that most people would surmise that he in fact was an unconverted man. And, if so, the statement to him raises other profound considerations. Was it that he came to 'believe' ('belief only' is the only requirement for salvation as some proclaim) at this one specific moment, and did that 'belief' make all the difference?

Is faith, repentance, baptism and the receipt of God's Spirit unimportant? Because, IF the common take on this particular assurance is correct, that issue is before each of us. It suggests a momentary pre-death plea outweighs all of these other issues. It suggests a full life of overcoming can effectively be bypassed. Are YOU comfortable with that thought?

WHAT Did He Know?

Let's be realistic. If WE know with reasonable certainty that the thief was unconverted, wouldn't Christ have known the same? Was Christ's statement to the man indication that one's conversion status doesn't matter as it regards going to heaven? How would that idea be received among the diligent overcomers?

Further, was Christ responding to the thief's actual request, and did He answer him appropriately?

What Did the Thief Know?

The thief's request is typically interpreted from the point of view that people have today. He didn't necessarily mean what people today take him to have meant. The common belief system in the first century did not include the idea of people going to heaven at death. That was a later idea (though it was found in pagan religions of the time.) we need

to ask, what was the thief actually asking? Because, if we don't know what either of them meant, then we're left to interpret-in a change of subject missing the real intent of the conversation.

Both Were Facing Imminent Death!

Why would the thief ask for something that Christ wasn't teaching? Also, the thief knew that Christ was going to be dead, as he himself would be, not many hours hence. The question had to involve them both being restored back to life.

We can see from the understanding that the Disciples had, even very late in Christ's ministry, that they expected Christ's Kingdom to be set-up within the nation in their generation. As late as just weeks after His crucifixion, the Disciples asked this question, reflecting what THEY understood: *"When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?"* (Acts 1:6) They thought in terms of His Kingdom taking Power over the nations on earth, as so many Old Testament prophecies describe. WHY would the thief have thought otherwise?

Nor does the final written New Testament book present a different picture. Christ's spirit-born Saints will rule all nations with Him here on the earth! *"To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne."* (Rev. 3:21) *"And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give **power over the nations:**"* (Rev. 2:26) *"And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth."* (Rev. 5:9-10)

This reflects what the early Church believed even a full generation later when Revelation was written. Christ's Kingdom was to be a world-ruling administration, here on earth, with the Saints (the Bride of Christ) ruling with Him. The Disciples' after-resurrection question mirrored the same idea. Then, why would we assume the thief was asking something totally different?

When we interpret the thief's request in light of this understanding, a very different picture emerges. But, when we interpret it with the 'heaven and hell' belief system in mind, the whole picture is changed. That's where we are with this.

Did Christ Mislead the man?

We are also faced with the question of whether or not Christ **lied** to him. This question is obvious, as we know that He wasn't up in heaven That Day! Many religions (even those who claim that the thief was taken to heaven with Christ that very day) also teach that Christ instead was in hell preaching to the dead at the time! That's not true either!


Christ fully understood what "His Kingdom" meant, as He taught it, and what was in the mind of the thief. He knew of the man's conversion situation, that even IF heaven was the destiny of the 'saved', the man wasn't Kingdom worthy just then. So, what do we make of His answer?

But, is the assurance that he would be in His Kingdom a certainty? Was there a possibility of a 'maybe' involved? Why was Christ so sure? How could He know?

What IS Paradise?

When we know the dynamics of Christ's Earthly Kingdom, which He came to earth to reveal in greater detail, and when we understand the matter of the resurrections of the dead (a major doctrine of the Church) Christ's assurance is understandable.

Christ wasn't assuring an unconverted man that he would go to heaven that very day, but He was assuring him that he would rise again, in the resurrection, along with the rest of the dead, after the 1000 years ¹ in the second resurrection era. There he would live in a paradise-like society, a physical society, but without Satan's influences, and be able to pursue conversion, something he hadn't been provided opportunity to do in his current life experience.

This message is applicable not only to him, but it extends also to all who have ever lived, who were not 'called of the Father' (John 6:44). 

¹ Revelation 20:5