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THE THIEF IN PARADISE.

"He said to Jesus, Remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And he [Jesus] said to him [the penitent thief], Indeed I say to thee this day, thou shalt be with me in Paradise." – Luke 23:42,43.

THOSE who consider salvation to be an escape from everlasting torture to a paradise of pleasure, and dependent only on accidental circumstances of favor, see exemplified in this narrative the doctrine of *election* – that our Lord Jesus, pleased by the consoling words of the one thief, elected him to heaven, and equally elected that the other should suffer to all eternity, unpitied and unrelieved. Truly, if God has made salvation such a lottery, such a chance thing, those who believe it to be such should have little to say against church lotteries, and less against worldly ones.

But this is not the case. This Scripture has been much misunderstood. To get its true import, let us take in the surroundings and connections.

The Lord had just been condemned, and was now being executed on the charge of treason against Caesar's government, in saying that he was a king; though he had told them that his kingdom was "not of this world." There, upon the cross above his head, written in three languages, was the crime charged against him: "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS." Those about knew of his claims and derided him, except one of the thieves crucified alongside. Doubtless he had heard of Jesus and his wonderful character and works, and said in his heart: This is truly a strange and wonderful man. Who can know that there is no foundation to his claims? He certainly lives close to God. I will speak to him in sympathy: it can do no harm. Then he rebuked his companion, mentioning the Lord's innocence; and then the conversation above noted took place.

We cannot suppose that this thief had correct or definite ideas of Jesus – nothing more than a mere feeling that as he was about to die, any straw of hope was better than nothing. To give him credit for more would be to place him *in faith* ahead of all the Lord's apostles and followers, who at this time had fled dismayed, and who, three days after, said: "We [*had*] trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel." – Luke 24:21.

We can have no doubt as to the import of his petition: [R1986 : page 125] he meant that whenever Jesus reached his kingdom power, he desired favor. Now note our Lord's answer. He does not say that he has no kingdom; but, on the contrary, he indicates by his response that the thief's request was a proper one. The word translated "verily" or "indeed" is the Greek word "*amen*," and signifies "*So be it*," or "Your request is granted." "I say to thee this day [this dark day, when it *seems* as though I am an impostor, and I am dying as a felon], thou shalt be with me in Paradise." The substance of this promise is that, when the Lord has established his kingdom it will be a Paradise, and the thief will be remembered and be in it. Notice that we have changed the comma from before to after the word "today."

This makes our Lord's words perfectly clear and reasonable. He might have told the thief more if he had chosen. He might have told him that the reason he would be privileged to be in Paradise was because his *ransom* was then and there being paid. He might have told him further that he was dying for and ransoming the *other* thief also, as well as the whole gaping and deriding multitude before him, the millions then entombed, and the millions yet unborn. We know this because we know that "Jesus Christ, by the grace of God, tasted death for every man," "gave himself a ransom for all," that all in due time might have opportunity to return to the Edenic condition, forfeited by the first man's sin, and redeemed for men by Christ's righteous sacrifice. – Heb. 2:9; 1 Tim. 2:5,6; Acts 3:19.

As already shown, the garden of Eden was but an illustration of what the earth will be when fully released from the curse – perfected and beautified. The word "paradise" is of Arabic origin, and signifies *a garden*. The Septuagint renders Gen. 2:8 thus: "God planted a *paradise* in Eden." When Christ shall have established his kingdom, and bound evil, etc., this earth will gradually become a paradise, and the two thieves and all others that are in their graves shall come into it, and then by becoming obedient to its laws they may live in it and enjoy it forever. We doubt not, however, that the kind words spoken in that dark hour to the suffering Savior will no more lose a special and suitable reward than the gift of a cup of water, or other small kindnesses, done to those whom this King is "not ashamed to call his *brethren*." – Matt. 10:42.

But have we a right to change the comma? Certainly: the punctuation of the Bible is not inspired. The writers of the Bible used *no punctuation*. It was invented about four hundred years ago. It is merely a modern convenience, and should be so used as to bring out sense, and harmony with all other Scriptures. This harmony and sense are obtained only by the punctuation we have given above. As usually punctuated, the passage would teach that the Lord and the thief went that day to a place called paradise, a statement contrary to the following Scriptures, which read carefully: – Luke 24:46; John 20:17; 3:13.
