

Series: The Seven Sayings of the Cross, Part 3

Title: “Father, Forgive Them”

Text: Luke 23:43

Heaven seems to be the longing of every human heart. One popular country song has rightly said — “Everyone wants to go to heaven!” Over and over again, pop culture has demonstrated mankind’s fixation with the hereafter. The 1989 animated film “All Dogs Go to Heaven” even placed pets and animals in the afterlife. Shows like “Highway to Heaven,” “Touched By an Angel,” and countless others have speculated concerning what happens to us when we die. The eagerness of people to buy books like “90 Minutes in Heaven” and “Heaven is for Real,” making such tomes instant bestsellers, demonstrates that humankind seems naturally bent toward heavenly matters.

While the subject of heaven provokes interest from most, views concerning the nature of the place vary. Secularized Americans see it as a place available to all. Admission is free. Everyone goes to heaven, except for really, really bad people. None should have the slightest anxiety about not going to heaven.

World religions offer a smattering of different opinions on the topic. Mormons teach the hereafter is spent in a process known as divine progression. Those who are faithful in this life have the promise of propagating their own planet in the next. Hindus have a worldview that centers on the possibility of reincarnation. Islamic Jihadists often steal the limelight because of their belief that a ticket to Paradise can be earned via holy war. Most Muslims don’t hold to such a horrific view. They maintain that eternal bliss is earned by being faithful to Allah’s teachings.

Others deny the possibility of an afterlife. They live by the mantra — “When you die, you die.” For such people, the present life is regarded as the only possibility for paradise. Heaven is what you make of your life in the here and now. After you die, nothing awaits you other than the black nothingness of an unconscious state.

In the midst of the cultural craze concerning the afterlife, is there any source of truth? What does Scripture say? Fortunately for us, our Lord made claims concerning the hereafter. In fact, His views concerning Heaven were succinctly stated in a smattering of His words from Calvary. The gospel writer Luke recorded: “And he said to him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:39-43).

Jesus’ second saying from the cross can be seen as being closely related to His first. Both showed concern with the subject of forgiveness. Together, the first two statements reveal that Calvary was first and foremost concerned with the pardon of sin.

However, there are differences and distinctions between Jesus’ first two sayings. The first was directed toward God; the second was directed toward man. The first was concerned with forgiving the offenses of others; the second was focused on gaining forgiveness before God. In addition to all of this, the second saying of the cross honed in on a fascinating subject — Paradise.

Opinions concerning the afterlife abound. Speculation about the subject is incessant. However, the words of Jesus provide insight and light. His second saying from the cross gives us a way to cut through the proverbial smoke and gain clear truth concerning a subject that interests us all. From Jesus’ words, let’s note five ideas associated with the after life.

THE CERTAINTY OF PARADISE

According to Jesus, heaven is a real place. It is not a figment of the human imagination, a fairy tale, or an invention of parents eager to coax children into good behavior. Paradise isn’t a pie-in-the-sky type of thing. It’s not a pipe-dream. Jesus maintained that the place really exists.

Prior to His crucifixion, Jesus taught openly on the afterlife. On one occasion, He told self-righteous Pharisees, “I’m going away; you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I’m going, you cannot come” (John 8:21). His religious adversaries mocked Him, insinuating that He was contemplating suicide (John 8:22). They did not perceive that Jesus

was talking about His subsequent death, burial, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of God in heaven.

Jesus also talked to His disciples about the subject. He did so in order to encourage their hearts. On one occasion, He said, "In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? If I go away and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also" (John 14:2-3). Jesus unequivocally promised the possession of heaven. Remarking on the words of our Lord, J.C. Ryle said, "Cold and dull must be the heart that is not roused and stirred by these words."¹ The promise of Paradise should make hope and holy happiness arise in human hearts.

From the cross, Jesus attested to the veracity of heaven. In His second saying on the cross, He told a penitent thief, "*Truly I tell you*, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). Emphasis can be placed on the word translated "truly." In the original language of the New Testament, our Lord used the word from which we get our word "amen." The word was used in the first-century world in religious contexts. It was implemented to strongly affirm the truthfulness of a doxology, a religious creed, or a rabbi's teaching.² Nowadays, some Christians use the term during the time of public preaching in order to express agreement with a preacher's preaching.

While on Earth, Jesus used the term in this regard on numerous occasions. He always spoke truth, and He was often careful to remind His readers of that fact. Consequently, He loved to affix the word "truly" to the beginning of many of His teachings. In Matthew's gospel, He promoted the preservation of Scripture by saying, "For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or one stroke of a letter will pass away from the law until all things are accomplished" (Matthew 5:18).

Jesus' words are so true that He actually called Himself "the Amen" on one occasion. Writing to the first-century church at Laodicea, He used the same Greek word rendered "truly" in Luke 23:43 to say, "Thus says the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the originator, of God's creation: I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were cold or hot" (Revelation 3:14-15). Jesus was and is the embodiment of the truth of God (John 1:1; 14:6). When He spoke, He spoke truth from God. One could be assured that His words were in alignment with the real state of heavenly affairs.

The cultural background behind the term "truly" indicates that Jesus' use of the term on the cross was not incidental. While he was on Earth, our Lord never wasted any words. Like Samuel of the Old Testament, it could be said that Jesus "let none of his words fall to the ground" (1 Samuel 3:19, KJV). Such was especially true at Golgotha. In the throes of pain and agony, our Lord had no time to waste words with filler speech or small talk. As he gasped for air because of the suffocation process associated with crucifixion, each word was carefully consecrated and calculated to communicate redemptive realities.

The term "truly" was intended to express the absolute truthfulness of what Jesus said about Paradise. It served as a solemn declaration that the words of Jesus' mouth were certain and factual. What does all of this tell us about Heaven? It reveals that we can have a certainty concerning the hereafter.

Humanity seems preprogrammed with an awareness of the afterlife. Everyone wants to go to heaven. Fanciful speculation and endless opinions abound. In the mist of the cultural milieu and mania concerning what takes place after death, it is important to remember that we have authoritative truth from Jesus. No science experience can inform us about the afterlife. Human rationalization and speculation can't tell us what exists beyond the veil of this life. We

¹ Ryle, J.C. *Christian Leaders Of The Eighteenth Century*. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2017), 363.

² Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

are dependent upon divine revelation for answers. Fortunately we have an inspired and preserved record of God's Word. We can know about heaven from Jesus!

THE TIMING OF PARADISE

When Jesus made His promise concerning paradise, He did not give any indicator concerning a delay. His language insinuated that the man would be teleported into the presence of God at the very moment of death. The plain meaning of Jesus' words was of an imminent and immediate rapture into heaven. Our Lord said, "... *today* you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

The second saying from the cross contradicts a popular doctrine known as "soul sleep." The teaching reports that "there is a period between one's death and the final resurrection in which one's self ('soul') is in an unconscious state."³ Many base their teaching on this subject off of one verse in the book of Job. In Job 14:12, we read, "...people lie down never to rise again. They will not wake up until the heavens are no more; they will not stir from their sleep." Instead of referencing a state of soul sleep, Job's words were intended as a metaphor for the finality of death.

Consider the context of the passage. In Job 14:7-11, the man used numerous metaphors — a tree, roots, water, twigs, and more — to speak of the irreversible nature of death. His point was to say that there is no undoing the results of death. One's only hope is the resurrection of the last days! This is what He meant by saying, "They will not wake up until the heavens are no more..." (Job 14:12). At the end of human history, the souls of those who have died will be reunited with and take possession of new, glorified bodies. The New Testament speaks of this event in 1 Corinthians 15:51-57.

The confusion concerning Job's words in Job 14:7-11 reminds us of an important principle in Bible study. One should be careful of building a Scriptural view off of one lone, solitary verse. In interpreting Scripture, it is important to remember that each verse must be considered within the overall framework of the Bible. When we compare Scripture with Scripture, we know that Job 14:12 cannot refer to soul sleep. Other passages of Scripture make it plain that one's soul lives on after he or she physically dies.

In fact, Job Himself would later express a confidence in these realities. In Job 19:26-27, the man said, "Even after my skin has been destroyed, yet I will see God in my flesh. I will see him myself; my eyes will look at him, and not as a stranger. My heart longs within me." Job's words in the aforementioned passage, along with the ones from the passage I referenced earlier, should be considered within the context of his physical suffering. The man's body was ravaged by a horrific skin disease (Job 2:7-8). In light of unspeakable pain, Job placed his hope in the promises of God. He looked forward to being in God's presence. He eagerly awaited the day in which he would receive a new body!

Job had the hope that Jesus shared with the man on the cross. When Jesus said, "... *today* you will be with me...", He provided the man a special promise. As soon as the man died, He would be instantaneously translated into the presence of God. This hope is the hope of everyone who knows Christ. At Calvary, Jesus did a work to guarantee the salvation of our souls. In offering His body for ours, He secured the future resurrection of our bodies.

Paul was aware of these realities. In writing to the Corinthians, he said, "We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8, KJV). The apostle was aware that physical death led to the separation of the soul from the body, but he was also aware that the soul lived on. When a Christian dies, his or her inner-being travels beyond the Earth's atmosphere, beyond outer space, and into a place the Bible calls "the third heaven" (2 Corinthians 12:2).

³ McKim, Donald K. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 284.

The third heaven is the place where the transcendent God dwells. It exists somewhere beyond the galaxies. The vast blackness of outer space separates humankind from this realm, but death translates the believer to it.

Isaiah was raptured into this locale (Isaiah 6:1-13). The apostle John was as well. The fourth and fifth chapters of the book of Revelation describe what he saw. It is worth noting that he gave testimony of seeing a great number of believers in the presence of the Lord. He said, “Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones sat twenty-four elders dressed in white clothes, with golden crowns on their heads” (Revelation 12:4). The two groups of twelve elders represented God’s perfectly complete number of people from both eras within His program of redemption — believers from both the Old Testament and New Testament.

All of this reinforces the reality of Jesus’ second saying from the cross. When a believer dies, he or she is immediately carried off into the presence of God. It is for this reason that Paul said, “I long to depart and be with Christ—which is far better—but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for your sake” (Philippians 1:23-24). Those who are in Christ have hope in life. When they die, they have assurance that they will be with God. Death is actually a benefit for a believer, as it is conduit through which the soul is delivered into the perfect paradise of God’s presence.

These things should give us courage and comfort as we live in this dark and difficult world. The puritan Jeremiah Burroughs rightly said, “One drop of the sweetness of heaven is enough to take away all the sourness and bitterness of all the afflictions in the world.”⁴ As our bodies decline, as the world disappoints us, as others hurt us, as expectations go unmet, and as loved ones pass away, we always have hope in Jesus’ reference to “today!” One glimpse of Jesus will wipe away all the pain of this Earth!

THE PERSON OF PARADISE

Paradise is paradise because it is the place in which God dwells. It isn’t special because of *what* is found there. It is special because of *who* is there. Heaven is heaven because it is the home of our Lord. The psalmist sang, “...in your presence is abundant joy; at your right hand are eternal pleasures” (Psalm 16:11).

This is the joy of the hereafter — being with our Lord face to face. Jesus highlighted this reality elsewhere in Luke’s gospel. In Luke 16, he told the story of a poor man who died. The man’s passage into Paradise was contrasted against the death of a rich man. Jesus said:

There was a rich man who would dress in purple and fine linen, feasting lavishly every day. But a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, was lying at his gate. He longed to be filled with what fell from the rich man’s table, but instead the dogs would come and lick his sores. One day the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torment in Hades, he looked up and saw Abraham a long way off, with Lazarus at his side (Luke 16:19-23).

In first-century rabbinical tradition, the phrase “Abraham’s bosom” was like a nickname for heaven.⁵ It emphasized the promises of God given to the Jewish nation’s patriarch, Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3). It also highlighted a sense of intimacy and kinship, as close friends and family members were known to lean on one another’s bosom during times of fellowship (John

⁴ Burroughs, Jeremiah. *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. (East Peoria, Ill: Versa Press, Inc, 2009), 84.

⁵ Walvoord, John. F. and Roy B. Zuck. eds. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary, New Testament Edition*. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 247.

13:23). Altogether, the title upheld the fact that the promises of God provide one with personal access to God in the afterlife.

The Lord is the main attraction of Paradise. The apostle John highlighted these in realities in the book of Revelation:

I also saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband. Then I heard a loud voice from the throne: Look, God's dwelling is with humanity, and he will live with them. They will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them and will be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more, because the previous things have passed away (Revelation 21:2-4).

This is what believers look forward to in heaven — God Himself! Being with Jesus will make all things right. Every injustice will be vindicated, every hurt will be healed, and the emptiness of every heart will be filled. The puritan Thomas Watson exclaimed, “Heaven will make amends for all. One hour in heaven will make us forget all our sorrows! The sun dries up the water; just so one beam of God's glorious face will dry up all our tears.”⁶

THE PERFECTION OF PARADISE

Jesus used one word when describing the presence of God — “Paradise.” The Greek term underlying our English translations also appeared in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. That version of the Hebrew Scriptures was known as “the Septuagint.” It was widely used in Jesus' day. Luke was undoubtedly very familiar with it. The Septuagint used the word rendered “Paradise” in Luke 23:43 to speak of places like a “paradise of pomegranates” (Song of Solomon 4:13), a “forest” (Nehemiah 2:8), or “gardens and parks” (Ecclesiastes 2:5).

The term for “Paradise” was of Persian origin. It originally referred to an enclosed area filled with vegetation, plants, flowers, or fruit. In time, it was used of a beautiful garden.⁷ Judaism borrowed the concept and Hebrew-ized it, making it a technical religious term for “the abode of the redeemed between death and the resurrection.”⁸

Paul used the term to speak of the dwelling place of God in 2 Corinthians 12:4. Jesus used it in a promise to the church at Ephesus. He told them, “Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the *paradise* of God” (Revelation 2:7). Paradise is the promised possession of those who trust in Christ. When a born-again believer's physical life ends, his or her soul is transported to the perfect presence of God.

Interestingly, the Greek version of the Old Testament we mentioned earlier used the word rendered “Paradise” on numerous occasions to refer to the Garden of Eden. The title for Adam and Eve's dwelling place was the same word Jesus used on the cross. See passages like Genesis 2:8, 9, 10, 15, and 16. See also Genesis 3:1, 2, 3, and 10.

It is fascinating to think that Jesus' language on the cross was the very language from Genesis that spoke of Adam and Eve “...walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze” (Genesis 3:8). It is also remarkable to think that the same word for “Paradise” is the one that spoke of the Lord expelling Adam and Eve from God's presence. Genesis 3:23-24 said, “So the Lord God sent him away from the *garden* of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove the man out and stationed the cherubim and the flaming, whirling sword east of the *garden* of Eden to guard the way to the tree of life.”

⁶ Saxton, David W. *God's Battle Plan For The Mind: The Puritan Practice of Biblical Meditation*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 91.

⁷ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

⁸ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, ?.

Perhaps Luke was intentional in using language from the Garden of Eden. Maybe he wanted to send a special message to his readers. Jesus' work on the cross had a way of undoing the catastrophic failure of Adam and Eve. Though humanity was restricted from God's presence because of sin, the Lord's work at Calvary purchased renewed access to the Lord. Because of Jesus, believers have hope of a new Garden of Eden, a "Garden of Eden — Part 2," if you will. Such realities should give believers confidence and courage as they live in a fallen world. In addition, they should move believers to place their affections on things above, not on things below (Colossians 3:1-2).

THE RESPONSE FOR PARADISE

Before moving on from our consideration of the second saying of the cross, it is important to consider the events that solicited Jesus' words. Prior to recording Jesus' response to the dying criminal, Luke spoke of the way in which the Roman soldiers "...crucified him there, along with the criminals, one on the right and one on the left" (Luke 23:33). The men on the right and left of Jesus were rebels. They were insurrectionists who were found guilty of an apparent attempt at a coup d'état against the Roman Empire. The fact that Jesus was crucified alongside such individuals was a fulfillment of prophecy. Isaiah 53:12 foretold of the way in which the Messiah would be "counted among the rebels."

Jesus didn't deserve the punishment He received. The two criminals did. Jesus' presence among them underscored a marvelous gospel theme — one theologians call "the substitutionary atonement of Christ." The doctrine teaches that Christ went to the cross in our place, as a substitute. It also teaches that His work provided a covering for our sins and the death our sins deserve. Isaiah revealed this to be true. He said, "...he bore the sin of many and interceded for the rebels" (Isaiah 53:12).

Interestingly, one of the insurrectionists at Calvary seemed to recognize these realities. While the other cursed our Lord, he said, "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). The name "Jesus" meant "salvation." It was based on the Hebrew name "Joshua." In addressing our Lord by name, the criminal recognized Jesus as his hope of deliverance from sin and death.

In the thief's request from our Lord, we see an example of the type of faith that brings salvation. While the first thief railed against Jesus, the second pleaded for salvation. He had heard Jesus' pronouncement a few moments earlier — "Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). He was undoubtedly aware of the charges against Jesus, and he had surely heard reports that Messianic expectations had swirled around Jesus' ministry. In his dying moments, grace made him aware that the dying man was innocent. Furthermore, his eyes were opened to see that the man was the God-man, the promised Anointed One. Being enlightened to gospel realities, the man cried out, "Remember me..." (Luke 23:43).

In the dying insurrectionist's request, we see an example of how the benefits of salvation are applied to one's life. One must call out to God, trusting in Jesus as Savior. New life and deliverance from sin and death comes through trusting that Jesus was the sinless Son of God who died for sin. The sum of Jesus' preaching was, "Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). The Bible says, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).

The dying criminal did such things, so he experienced salvation. Think about this — he had no opportunity to produce good works, be baptized, or serve Jesus. Yet, a simple confession of faith gave Him access to Paradise. Have you expressed a similar trust in the Lord? Have you asked Him to save you?