

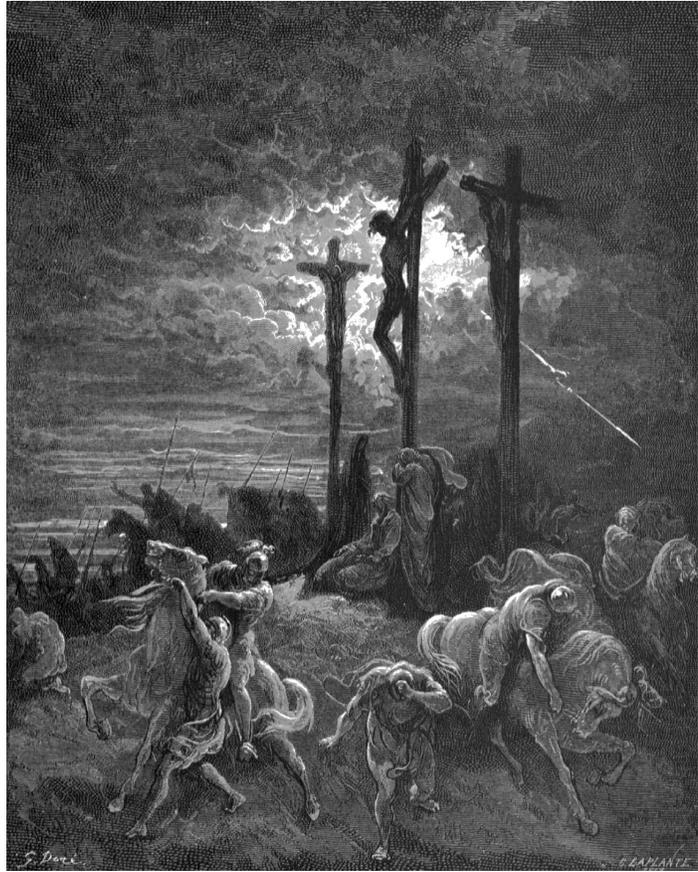
## But Jesus Was Saying ... (2)

For the second time in this series, visit once again Jesus on the cross and the words He spoke. Jesus—“God is salvation”—the One prophesied whose name was proclaimed Immanuel, “with us is God” (**Isaiah 7:14**), gave Himself for you and me. Not only did He give Himself willingly to die in my place, He did it with a most amazing attitude, with a most excellent example, and most worthy words. He “*emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*” (**Philippians 2:7-8**). This is the attitude we must have (**Philippians 2:5**). We must turn our eyes from all else and fix “*our eyes on Jesus, the author and*

*perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart*” (**Hebrews 12:2-3**). This is the example we must follow. “*For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps*” (**1Peter 2:21**). We are often reminded of His attitude and example at the cross, but how often do we reflect on the powerful messages of His words in His hours of suffering? Jesus’ mind is reflected in His words. In situations not so harsh, our words might tend to be different, “But Jesus was saying ...”

“*Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.*” (**Luke 23:43**).

This text has been used, abused, and misused—twisted into all sorts of shapes to fit any number of particular doctrines of men. It is used by some to declare that Jesus was a liar. It is used by many more to declare that Jesus never intended to require baptism as part of salvation. It is used by some to declare that it is proved that after death, man has the opportunity to go to a place with a chance to redo, or even to engage in good works to make up for his lack on this earth. It is likewise used in a material sense to proclaim that this earth is to be the final dwelling place. Instead of looking at the many doctrines of men, the best approach, to come to understanding, is to look at what Jesus actually said, when He said, to whom He was speaking, and to ascertain the understanding of His words for that recipient. It is only then that we will see the application for those of us who read these words now.



## The Scene

The event under consideration is, of course, Jesus dying on the cross. However, the particular scene here is the interaction between Jesus and two others who are being crucified. When we first meet these others, they are insulting Jesus (**Matthew 27:44; Mark 15:32**). In Luke's account, one of the criminals makes a change in his attitude and in his words. He rebukes the other criminal for his insults: "*Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong*" (**Luke 23:40-41**). He then makes a statement to Jesus: "*Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!*" (**Luke 23:42**). This is the statement that gives rise to the response of Jesus that is under consideration.

## The Substance

It is important to grasp the substance of the criminal's knowledge of Jesus if we are to fully understand Jesus' response. What, exactly, did this thief know about his situation and Jesus? I would suggest that perhaps he understood more than any present that day—certainly, he understood more than most.

He acknowledged the existence of God: "*Do you not even fear God ...*" This is more than can be said of most that were present. He believed in a standard of right and wrong: "*we indeed are suffering justly ...*" Do you think the soldiers—even the Jewish leaders—had this same concept? He confessed that he and his companion had guilt: "*we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds ...*" How often are the guilty ready to take the blame? He knew the innocence of Jesus: "*this man has done nothing wrong ...*" Remember, Jesus was being crucified for His claim of being the "*Son of the Blessed One*" (**Mark 14:61-62**). The robber's statement, therefore, is an acknowledgment of the truth of Jesus' claim. He also knew that Jesus was the promised king: "*Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!*" This is astounding! He understood more than even Jesus' disciples seemed to understand—they had fled at His arrest! This man had faith that Jesus, even though dying on a cross right beside him, would be coming into His rightful kingship. To have this depth of faith and understanding would mean that it was extremely likely, even probable, that he was a disciple of John or even Jesus, possibly even suffering consequences now for "coming clean" of his past offenses.

## The Statement

Jesus spoke of being in "paradise." Much has been made of the idea of paradise. Many take it to mean something material, some metaphorical, some to only refer to the eternal abode of God. The word, actually, is very little used. In most modern translations, it is found only two other times, and each of these times, it is in a different context (**2Corinthians 12:4; Revelation 2:7**). This really won't help us here, though, since these parts of Scripture had not yet been written. How then would these Jews of the first century have understood "paradise"? There are a couple of Hebrew words [and corresponding Aramaic words] that give us an idea. Sometimes it was indicative of a very literal garden, forest, or enclosed formal area (see **Nehemiah 2:8**). By the second or third century BC, the Jewish people had begun to use the term as relating the state of souls after death. This is the same idea as Jesus portrays in the story of the rich man and Lazarus (**Luke 16:19-31**). The following quotation sums it up well:

The New Testament understands paradise in terms of its Jewish heritage. In **Luke 23:43** Jesus promises the penitent thief: *"Today you will be with me in paradise."* The intermediate state was transformed by Jesus' emphasis on being with him "today." No longer is paradise just an anticipatory condition awaiting the messianic presence at the end of the age. Those who die in faith will "be with Christ" (**Philippians 1:23**). The dead in Christ will not experience life diminished, but life enhanced, as Jesus' words to Martha in **John 11:23-26** imply. (*Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*).

## The Summation

Jesus and the thief both died. Death is separation; their soul was separated from the body. The souls passed into Paradise. The thief did pass into "torments" as the rich man had done. He had spoken to Jesus face to face with a heart of faith, penitence, and humility. Jesus certainly had authority to forgive while on earth. When Jesus spoke these words, He was not yet dead, but was still alive on this earth; His will and testament instructions to be baptized in His name, in His blood, was not yet in effect. The wonderful thing is that the thief was right. Jesus was raised; He has come into His kingdom. He is both Lord and Christ (**Acts 2:36**). He is declared the Son of God with power (**Romans 1:4**). He is the Savior.

When people speak of being "saved like the thief on the cross," they usually are trying to eliminate one or more of the requirements that Jesus stipulates for salvation. This is not only a dangerous approach to Scripture but a wrong one. However, there is a sense in which the only way to be saved is to be "saved like the thief on the cross." We must hear as he did. We must have his kind of faith. We must have his attitude and action of repentance. We must confess Jesus as Lord and King, just as he did. We must be humbly obedient to the instructions of God for our covenant, as was he. Finally, like him, we must remain faithful until death whatever may face us here.