



Did Jesus and the Thief Go from **+** The Cross to Paradise?

Luke 23:42-43: (KJV) *⁴²And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. ⁴³And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise.*

Special Guest: Wes Cramer

(Commentary has been edited for brevity and clarity. Wes' comments are shown in purple.)



In the immensity and complexity of the book we call the Bible, there are some verses that have become somewhat famous. The Christmas text, *good tidings of great joy which will be for all people*. The football stadium text, *for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son*. The character of God text, *God is love*. Another text that is well known and deeply meaningful is spoken by Jesus to one of the thieves dying on the cross next to him. Jesus said, *today shalt thou be with me in paradise*. This text shows us the power of God's love as expressed through the compassion of Jesus and his sacrifice

and it is truly inspirational in the hope that it portrays. Now, here is a simple and very legitimate question; what was Jesus saying to the thief? What was he promising and why was he promising it? As we find out by examining so many verses of Scripture, what seems to be said is not always what is really meant. Did Jesus really say what most Christians think he said there on the cross?

We know we are going to open up a can of worms when we ask a question like that. We actually have brought in a "special can of worms can opener" to be with us tonight, Wes Cramer.

Good evening, Rick and Jonathan. Thank you, first of all, for inviting me to participate in this program.

Wes, where are you from and what is your background?

I reside in the southwestern Pennsylvania area, quite a distance from you and Jonathan. I've been privileged to be a student of the Bible for most of my life. Over 30 years ago, I was elected pastor of our local congregation and have acted as a pastor to the local congregation throughout that period of time. Also, I have been privileged to be invited to speak at many Christian conferences throughout the United States, Canada and also Israel over the last 30 plus years, so lots of opportunities to study the word of God. We do not do it because of any financial gain. It is a love of passion, just like with you and Jonathan.

We met you through some of the guest speaking appearances at the Bible conferences. I (Rick) heard you give a talk on this very subject and was really impressed with it and asked you to join us on the podcast. Let's go to our first



verse and get Wes started in talking about the step-by-step explanation of what Jesus really meant by what he said.

First, the Scripture we will be discussing:

Luke 23:39-43: (KJV) ³⁹And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, *if thou be Christ, save thyself and us.* ⁴⁰But the other answering rebuked him, saying, *Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?* ⁴¹And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. ⁴²And he said unto Jesus, *Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.* ⁴³And Jesus said unto him, *Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise.*

Wes, this is the scene of the crucifixion. The three are hanging on crosses. What is happening in this interchange?

There is a criminal on each side of Jesus, and both criminals are making a statement. One of the things we take a look at is what Jesus said in his interchange with Pilate. Pilate, when Jesus was on trial in front of him, says, *what is truth?*

What did Jesus mean here? What is the truth of his words?

John 18:37-38: (NASB) ³⁷Therefore Pilate said to him, *so you are a king?* Jesus answered, *you say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.* ³⁸Pilate said to him, *what is truth?*

John 18:38:



Jesus seems to be all about truth. He verifies what Pilate said, but Pilate is just questioning everything. There is a big difference in approach there.

There absolutely is. Jesus is really all about truth. He *is* the truth. He was speaking the truth and speaking it accurately. That is really what he was all about with both thieves.

It is interesting because both thieves had a different take on things, and Jesus does respond to one over the other. When you are reading text from not only a foreign language but an ancient foreign language from thousands of years ago, sometimes it is just hard to find what really is meant by the words spoken.

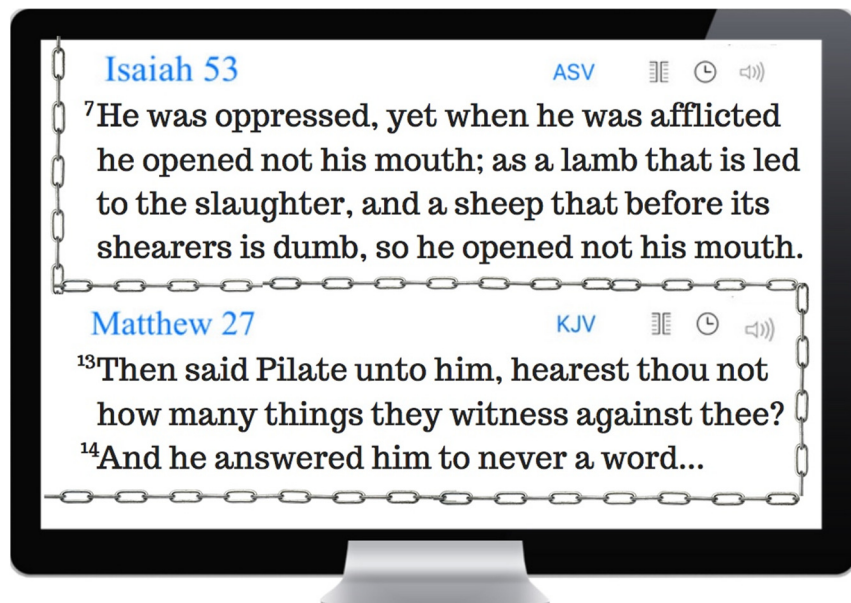


Next the underlying principles for our conversation:

1 Corinthians 2:12-13: (KJV) ¹²Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. ¹³Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost (Spirit) teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual.

Did Jesus and the thief go from the cross to paradise? When you read those words, *today shalt thou be with me in paradise*, that seems to be the logical explanation and interpretation many have. We are going to challenge that explanation and interpretation. What does it mean to compare *spiritual things with spiritual*?

That is an excellent question. We are going to find that this principle is absolutely vital and critical for us to understand the topic we are dealing with, with any biblical topic for that matter. *Comparing spiritual things with spiritual*, if you break it down to its most fundamental component, we are really talking about topical Bible study. We are talking about gathering various texts of Scripture that bear on a particular subject. One of the tools used is a concordance. You can take a word like "kingdom" or "atonement" or any particular topic you want to study, and a concordance helps you to collate or bring together and consider as a group the Bible texts that are on that particular topic. The Bible was not written as a novel where you just start and read from cover to cover and get the whole story. The Bible was written in such a way that you need to put together the various texts of Scripture like you would put together a chain. It might be one link in Isaiah, then another related link in Matthew or another related link in Leviticus. You must put these chains - these links - together in order to know what the Bible really teaches.



Comparing spiritual with spiritual, you have to know how to find the other things that appropriately apply to what you are looking for, not just general reading, verse by verse by verse.

Right. You have to search for it.



Topical Bible study, spiritual with spiritual, is the only way to get the true meaning because the Bible is very complex. We are going to put that thought on the shelf and use it as a reference point. Let's begin to take this verse apart, *verily I say to thee today shalt thou be with me in paradise.*

Wes, there are four things you suggest we need to focus on. What is the first thing?



1. Circumstances: What are the circumstances surrounding the conversation?

We touched on the circumstances a little bit, but let's get to some of the backstory and important circumstances of how Jesus ended up being where he was.

Jesus was condemned to death on a charge of treason against the Roman government:

John 19:12: (NASB) *As a result of this Pilate made efforts to release him, but the Jews cried out saying, if you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar.*

Wes, we'd like to hear about Jesus' and the thieves' circumstances, and how those circumstances play into this particular conversation.

That is a good point because the circumstances are one of the ways that we are beginning to put this chain link together. The predominant circumstances we want to note are the fact that the Jewish leadership hated Jesus. They wanted to get rid of him. He was a thorn in their side, and they tried for quite a while to eliminate him. But at that time the government the Jewish people were permitted to have under Roman rule was not allowed to impose capital punishment themselves. They had to rely on the Roman Empire, the Roman government - in this case Pilate, the local governor. They had to appeal to him. They wanted to show that Jesus said he was going to be a king and he would have a kingdom. They wanted to use that as a charge in front of Pilate, because their idea was to have Jesus tried and convicted on the charge of treason, punishable by death. They actually accomplished that, as we know, through a somewhat reluctant Pilate, but nevertheless he still signed off on that which sealed Jesus' death warrant.



Those are the circumstances of Jesus. What about these two thieves? We do not know a lot about them.

The one thief was rather rude, arrogant. The second thief seemed like he was more contrite, perhaps he had a change of heart. At least that is the impression we get from the Scriptures. This is the one to whom Jesus engaged in this very brief dialogue.

That is an interesting point. Death by crucifixion is a torturous way to die. You hear about the thief that has the bad attitude, and you think, “Well, can you blame him?” He is in this incredible pain. He has been caught for his crimes and is being executed as a result. The remarkable thing is the attitude of the contrite thief who seems to somehow be able to rise above his immediate circumstances because he sees something different in Jesus.

He did. Actually, he saw something very different. He kind of rails on the first thief, who is rather disrespectful. He says, “You know, look, we were rightly condemned. We are rightly dying for our crimes. But this man, (referring to Jesus) he did not do anything wrong. He is innocent.” That is a remarkable comment for someone who is on death row who is only going to live for another hour, maybe two hours. For him to actually be very complimentary of Jesus and what he stood for is to me nothing short of remarkable.

It is an interesting comparison to see how these thieves react to the consequences of their own actions.

**One thief respectfully asks Jesus for future favor.
Do we know what Jesus thought of the request?**

Understanding what the thief was really asking is such an important foundation for this conversation because we know that Jesus, in spite of his own pain and suffering, would have listened carefully and known what was in the man’s heart. Jesus’ response begins with a really important word - one that he spoke a lot - yet one we almost never take the time to focus on.

Let’s go back to that main verse, because we want to understand what Jesus really meant:

Luke 23:43: (KJV) ⁴³And Jesus said unto him, *Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise.*

**2. Verily - other translations say *truly, assuredly, indeed...*
What is the significance of verily?**

The word *verily* is, in this particular instance, translated from the word *amen*, a very common word. It is something you typically hear after someone has offered a prayer, and other members of the congregation will join in and say “Amen!”

When somebody says amen, what does that actually mean? When you say amen to a prayer, what are you saying...I am glad it is over?

Well, maybe sometimes that is what some might mean. But I think it means they agree with what was said. They join in. They support what was already



said. And now what was said, the prayer, has come to a conclusion, they say amen. In other words, “I join in. I support what was said.”

Let's look at how this is used and what it means. Jesus says this word a lot in his ministry, and it has an interesting application here.

What is the Apostle teaching us in this verse about “verily”?

1 Corinthians 14:15-16: (KJV) ¹⁵*What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also. ¹⁶Else when thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest?*

What is being taught by the Apostle Paul?

First, Paul is teaching that it is entirely appropriate, as is customary in Christian congregations at the conclusion of the prayer, to say amen.

Also, he is telling us that those who say amen can only rightfully do so if they really understand what it is that was said that they are saying amen to. I think that is critical. You were not going to say amen to something you did not understand. That would not be an appropriate use of that word; so, amen is preceded by the idea of understanding.

Let's work on that thought because it is important. The idea of saying amen is you have entered into what you heard and can say, in good conscience, “I am in agreement with it.”

Amen is much more than “it is done,” or “it is over with, now our session is over, we can get up, go home and have our Sunday dinner.” It is, “I have entered into, I have paid attention to and entered into the words that have been spoken so that I am joined with those words.”

Why, if “amen” is used to ascribe assent to what has been said, does Jesus use it at the beginning of his own words?

Here is a situation where we have to begin comparing spiritual things with spiritual to try to get even a deeper sense of the word amen.

Interestingly, amen is left untranslated about half the time that it is used throughout the entire Bible. In other words, if you are looking at the Old Testament, which is written in Hebrew, *amen* was left untranslated. In the New Testament, written in Greek, *amen* was also left untranslated. We in English, of course, say “amen.”

This word is very universally used, and I think we have to begin to compare more spiritual things with spiritual in order to dig a little bit deeper into the meaning of this word, and why Jesus used it at the beginning of his remarks and not the end.

Isaiah 65:16: (KJV) *That he who blesseth himself in the earth shall bless himself in the God of truth; and he that sweareth in the earth shall swear by the God of truth; because the former troubles are forgotten, and because they are hid from mine eyes.*

I did not hear any amen in there. What does that verse have to do with what we are talking about?



Good question. It is a bit camouflaged. We find here a phrase that appears twice, *God of truth*. The English word *truth* is translated from the word *amen*. In other words, if you look at the Hebrew word translated into English, it is the word *amen*, the exact word we have been talking about.

So, the word *truth* in this text that appears twice, *God of truth*, is the *God of amen*.

Yes, exactly. The *God of amen* means God is inherently a God of truth, a God of accuracy. I think the translation here of the English word *truth* is accurate. It is a level deeper of showing when we use the word *amen*, it is not just "I join in or I agree with," but what was said is true.

In the King James version, the word used is *verily*. What does that even mean? And now it is not just that I join into the comments, but I see them as absolutely true. Isaiah 65:16 says it is the *God of truth*, the *God of amen* whom we follow. Now we have to figure out what do we do with this scriptural principle. Let's go back to the New Testament. Again, the reason we are going through all of this is so we can understand what Jesus meant when he said, *Verily I say to you*. They are hanging on the cross. They are both dying, and he says to them, *Verily I say unto you*. Why does he say it that way?

What do we do with this scriptural principle of "The God of amen"?

Hebrews 6:17-18: (KJV) *¹⁷Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: ¹⁸That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us.*

I did not hear any *amen* in there. How does this Scripture fit?

I do not believe it is used in this text. But what this does, through the Apostle Paul, is to again underscore the idea that our Heavenly Father, our Creator, is a *God of truth*. It is impossible for Him to lie. That is such strong language that, again, when we talk about the God of *amen* or the God of *truth*, it really underscores that this is 100 percent accurate.

It is saying that God is immutable. That is one of the terms in this verse. He is made of truth. But what about Jesus? Where does Jesus fit in relation to the God of *truth* or the God of *amen*?

What about Jesus - where does he fit in relation to "The God of truth"?

Revelation 3:14: (KJV) *And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God;*

I saw *amen* in this one!

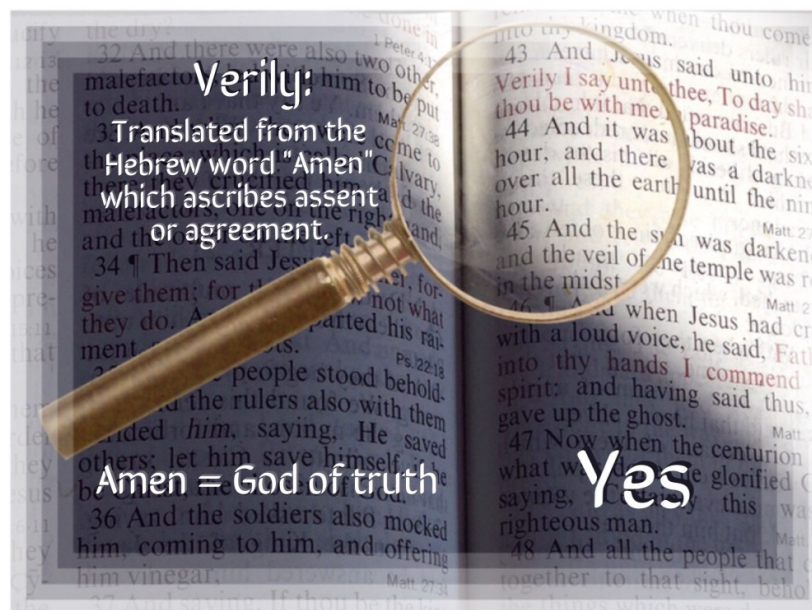
Here it is plainly stated: The word *amen* is what we call "transliterated," which means it is not translated; it is simply left the way it is. Jesus, interestingly enough here, labels himself as the *amen* and then proceeds to explain it. He says, I am the faithful and true witness. In other words, he speaks the truth. He speaks the word of God and speaks it accurately. This builds on the idea that when we see the word "amen," it refers to something that is 100 percent true, 100 percent accurate.



In another verse Jesus says, *I am the way, the truth and the life*. We get a sense that Jesus occupies this privileged position of being the personification of the truth of God's will. So, we are trying to figure out *verily*. When Jesus says to the thief, *Verily I say to thee today shalt thou be with me in paradise*, why did he put that before his statements rather than after? Jesus was clearly supportive, so we have to look at the thief's request. Jesus speaks the word *verily* after the thief's request, correct?

That is right. The request the thief made - which was very simple - was "remember me in your kingdom." By starting with the word *verily*, Jesus was saying to the thief, "I agree that what you just asked me for is a 100 percent proper request. It is a truthful and sincere request." We know Jesus could read the heart and apparently knew this contrite thief was sincere. Jesus is saying to him, "You have asked me to remember you in my kingdom, and that request is a very proper one."

This is a real light bulb experience! When Jesus said, *Verily I say unto you*, he was saying, "I am in agreement with what you have asked me, and it was a truthful, proper and appropriate thing to ask me." Jesus then gave his answer.



Thank you for that specific point, because it is a building block for us to get through to see what Jesus really meant. He is verifying the request, but Jesus did not always do that. Jesus was not always in agreement with everybody.

Example of Jesus having an opposite response?

Luke 12:51: (KJV) *Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division:*

There is no *amen* there!

Here we see it is exactly the opposite. I appreciate this example, because it shows that if Jesus would have disagreed with the thief, or if the thief would have made an improper request, I think Jesus, instead of saying *verily*, would



have said *nay*. Here in the Luke text, he uses *nay*; he was saying essentially that his teachings were going to be controversial.

And the fact that Jesus is *the way, the truth, and the life* and Jesus in Revelation calls himself *the amen*, it means he would always, no matter what happened, fulfill the will of God, and God cannot lie. When Jesus gave that assent to the thief, he was doing something very powerful there. The support Jesus gave this thief is remarkable and inspirational.

The thief's request is good. Now the question - what does Jesus promise and when will it happen?

With an *amen* in place, Jesus now proceeds to support that amen with specific details, the next of which needs careful and honest study as well. Jesus said, *today you will be with me in paradise*. There are two things here: today and paradise.

3. Today - why did Jesus focus on this word? Was it to give instant gratification, as in "I say to you today, here is what is going to happen?"

No, I think the thief knew that he was speaking contemporaneously, and certainly Jesus knew that he was speaking contemporaneously. I don't think he was using the word *today* to somehow verify or underscore the fact that this was a live conversation. This was contemporaneous speech. This was not at all why he was using that word. He could just as easily have said, "I say unto thee, you will be with me in paradise." It was obviously "today." It was a live conversation. Saying *today* here would be meaningless, as you already pointed out.

This is going to begin to create an issue with the typical understanding of this verse, because *today*, in a lot of interpretations, is a really important pivot point to get an understanding of what was said.

Luke 23:43: (KJV) *And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise.*

One of the things that might be useful to interject into our discussion is, while we believe the Bible is the inspired word of God, the punctuation was placed there by the various translators. If you look at almost any translation of this text it says, *Verily, verily I say unto thee (comma) today thou shalt be with me in paradise*. Almost always the comma is before the word *today*.



Remember, though, all of the punctuation, wherever it is, was placed there by *the translators* of the Scriptures, not by the writers and certainly not the Divine Author, God himself.

To translate what you just said about translations, the meaning of the verse changes significantly by the movement of that little comma. If you say, *Verily, I say unto you, today you will be with me in paradise*, it sounds like you are saying, "I say to you, here is what is going to happen today." Moving the comma results in, *Verily I say unto you today, you will be with me in paradise*.



There are two ways of looking at this based on punctuation. One could say, “That is subjective to whatever you want it to be.” But in looking at the study here, there is more to it than just some arbitrary, “Well, it fits my desire to have it mean this, so we need to move the comma here or there.” We want to see how this phrase fits into Jesus’ overall teaching.

And let’s take a little bit of a left turn here. Jesus was the greatest communicator humanity had ever seen. Let us pause for a minute and then come back to this verse.

Let’s talk about Jesus’ ability to communicate:

John 7:45-47: (NASB) ⁴⁵The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, and they said to them, why did you not bring him? ⁴⁶The officers answered, never has a man spoken the way this man speaks. ⁴⁷The Pharisees then answered them, you have not also been led astray, have you?

In terms of Jesus’ communication ability, what is this verse telling us?

It tells us Jesus had a command of language that was second to none. What we extract from that is, while you and I might stumble over our words and we might speak improperly or imprecisely, Jesus had such precision of speech and command of language. He did not use five words when four words were all that were necessary to get the message across. He did not speak excessively. He did not speak imprecisely.

The point is, he used this word *today* for a very good reason. He did not just throw it in because it rolled off the end of his tongue.

You say in your notes there are two specific reasons Jesus used *today*. First let’s go to a CQ App comment:



A CQ App user commented: In Psalm 22, which prophetically recorded Jesus’ thoughts on the cross, he showed similar confidence and assurance in the midst of such pain. He states the surety of the blessing of all the families of the earth, including the thief on the cross. Psalm 22:27-28 (NASB) ²⁷All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will worship before you. ²⁸For the kingdom is the LORD’s and He rules over the nations.

This is an important aspect, as Psalm 22 shows the mind of Jesus on the cross through the suffering and the assurances of why he was suffering. This fits very well into what we are talking about.

Let us get to the reasons Jesus uses the word *today*, because he is doing something dynamically for a very specific reason. What was the first reason he used that particular word?

I think the first reason Jesus used the word in his reply to the thief was to say to him, “Look, I know what this looks like.” As the thief already knew, Jesus had been preaching that he was a king and would have a kingdom. But here it is Jesus has now been terribly disgraced by the Jewish leadership. He has been tried and convicted of a capital offense by the Roman government through Pontius Pilate. He has been crucified. He was hanging on this crucifix, as you



mentioned earlier. It certainly does not look very promising as though he is going to be a king or have a kingdom, because in a few hours he's going to be dead.

I think that one of the reasons he was saying to the thief and underscoring this idea of today is that he was saying to the thief, "Look, no matter what it looks like, no matter how bleak the circumstances are, I am assuring you I am a king. I am going to have a kingdom."

What you are saying is Jesus was saying, "Today it looks dark; it looks hopeless. I look helpless, but today is when I am telling you this, because of the fact that it looks so bad."

Yes. I think what he was trying to do was, maybe in a manner of speaking, he was saying to the thief, "Look, disregard what it looks like, because if you look - if you just consider the fact that I am hanging on a cross and I am about to die, that's the end of the story, you're going to get a wrong impression here."

So, he was saying to the thief, "Put these outward circumstances aside, because that is not what you need to be focusing on. I can assure you I am a king; I am going to have a kingdom."

Let's verify that through Jesus' own words to Pilate:

John 18:36-37: (NASB) ³⁶Jesus answered, my kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, then my servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, my kingdom is not of this realm. ³⁷Therefore Pilate said to him, So You are a king? Jesus answered, you say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.

Wes, in that particular verse, he is very emphatically telling Pilate, "Yes, I have a kingdom. It is not of this realm." And he seems completely unmoved by the potential sentence he is going to have before Pilate.

Reason #1 The first reason: Jesus was saying, *I say to you today*, he is marking the day and saying, "Now, listen to what I am going to verify to you. Because even if it looks so bad, there's something so good that comes from this."

What's the second reason, Wes, that Jesus uses that word "today"?

Reason #2 The second reason is because there would be something that would be accomplished that very day he was hanging on the cross that was going to be very unique and would be absolutely critical to the salvation of mankind.

All right. Something incredibly unique was happening that very day. So, it is interesting because when Jesus says *amen*, when he says *verily* to the request of the thief who says, remember me when you come into your kingdom, Jesus, it is almost like he is saying, I am so glad you said that, because today is the day that kingdom begins its formation, because I am hanging here.

That's absolutely right. And maybe to dig into the details, in Galatians 4:4 the Apostle Paul tells us Jesus was born of an Israelite woman, and he was born under the Law. He was born into the Old Law Covenant. This was a very



demanding contractual arrangement that the nation of Israel had with God. See [Exodus 24](#).

I think that is important because the Covenant, being virtually unforgiving, required absolute perfection. It required absolute 100 percent obedience, and that is what Jesus was subject to. He was under enormous stress to be fully 100 percent obedient to that covenant. If he died without having been 100 percent obedient to that covenant, it would have destroyed man's opportunity for salvation. This was critical for Jesus to stay perfect his entire life, right up to his last breath.

It is almost as though the conversation with the thief could have even served as more of an inspiration to Jesus, reaffirming why he was there.

You mentioned the stress of perfection that was required of him. The next point would be the exhaustion and rejection of the experience.

The stress, exhaustion and rejection of the experience:

[Isaiah 53:3](#): (NASB) *He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; And like one from whom men hide their face he was despised, and we did not esteem him.*

Wes, that means, again prophetically looking at Jesus on the cross, and he was looked at like a common criminal, right?

Exactly. And I think, again, it was not only this huge burden that he was under to comply with the Law Covenant he was born under, but he also had made a commitment at the time of his consecration, at the time of Jordan when he was immersed, to give up his humanity, which was a vital part of what it was going to take to create an opportunity for salvation for the entire world of mankind. You have him under sort of a dual covenant. He has to comply with the old Law Covenant, but he also has to comply with this commitment he made to his Heavenly Father to give up his humanity.

And if that is not enough, here he is, he is unpopular. He was abused. He went all night without sleep. He was hated by the Jews. He was just under enormous distress at this point.

To wrap this up, we are looking at this and seeing that when Jesus says, *I say unto you today*, he is accentuating the day of crucifixion as being the pivot point for all of human history. Jesus needed to tell the thief about their crucifixion day, as all future history would now begin to revolve around it. That day opened the door to humanity's future.



Jesus had so far drawn attention to where and when they were - what about where they would go?

Here again we have seen the depth, character, focus and wisdom of Jesus as he encourages this penitent thief before their deaths. Jesus' focus on the significance of that crucifixion day told the story of how paradise would become available.

Before we define just what paradise is, we need just a few more words on this word “today,” as it is really pivotal. Throughout most of Christianity, it is



interpreted as, *I will say unto you, today you will be with me in paradise.* And we are saying NO. According to what you have given us to work with, *I say unto you today, this day of crucifixion, this dark day, what did "today" not mean in this case?*

Well, "today" did not mean that Jesus was going to go to his reward. It also did not have anything to do with whatever reward that the thief was eventually going to attain to. He was not talking about the reward at all that day. That is *not* why the word was being used.

The reason *today* was being used is because this is the day that Jesus would complete this sacrifice he had agreed to make that was absolutely critical for human salvation, including the salvation of the thief.



We want to understand that the *today* aspect is, "I say to you at this moment, because of the fulfillment of this sacrifice." So, he is not talking about the future. He is talking about, "I am saying to you here and now, because this is THE moment."

It was NOT that crucifixion day. (Here is one of many examples of why it could not be.)

Matthew 16:21: (NASB) *From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day.*

When we read that verse, how does that fit into our conversation about today and the application of it?

Well, it is a real anchor point, because we not only have the text here in Matthew, we have many texts in the Bible where Jesus himself said that he would be killed and that he would rise, *not on that day*. He did not rise the day that he was killed; he did not rise until the third day.

Most Christians believe that Jesus was crucified on Friday afternoon and did not rise from the dead until Sunday morning. So, you cannot use the word today to associate it or connect it to Jesus' reward, because he did not receive his reward that day.

I say to you today - we have this one verse where you can say, "I can take it this way or that way," but when we have other Scriptures talking about him being raised on the third day, Jesus did not go to paradise while he was in the grave. Let's go to another Scripture on that.

Apostle Peter speaking on the Day of Pentecost:

Acts 2:27: (NASB) *Because you will not abandon my soul to hades, not allow your holy one to undergo decay.*

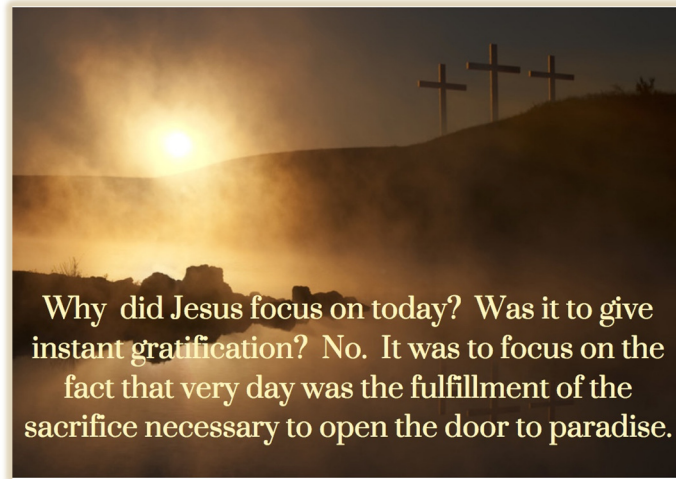
How does that help to build this argument?

If we read that text critically, it says that Jesus' soul was not left in hades. Hades is a Greek term that means "the death state," the state of being dead, the opposite of being alive. The fact that Jesus' soul was not left in hades means it had to *be* in hades for some period of time. In other words, he was asleep in death, we might say, for a period of time.



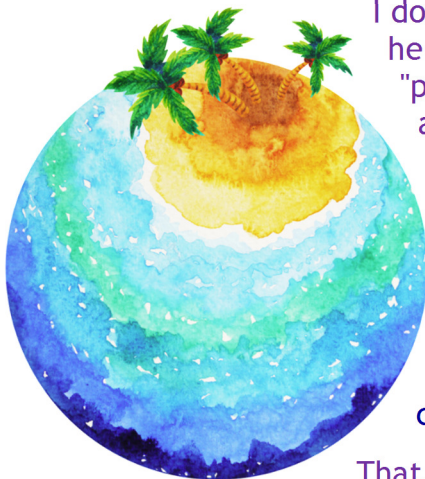
The idea of being asleep in death for a period of time confirms that, again, it cannot be, *I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise* because Jesus did not go to paradise according to these other Scriptures.

That brings out the point we talked about before that God is the God of truth, the God of amen. Even some Christians do not believe that Jesus actually died. But if the Scriptures say he did and God's word cannot lie, that also verifies that he actually was in that tomb parts of three days. So, *today* clearly did not mean that on the crucifixion day he was in paradise.



Why did Jesus focus on today? Was it to give instant gratification? No. It was to focus on the fact that very day was the fulfillment of the sacrifice necessary to open the door to paradise.

4. Paradise - was Jesus promising the thief a place in heaven?



I do not believe he was promising the thief a heavenly reward; rather, what he was saying to the thief is there would be a future paradise. The word "paradise" means garden. There will be a future paradise upon the earth, and that is what the thief would have the privilege of experiencing in due time.

You are saying paradise is talking about a future paradise on earth?

Revelation 2:7: (NASB) *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.*

This verse is talking to called-out Christians who are called to heaven, correct?

That is right. As a matter of fact, this is just one of seven instances. When we are looking at the book of Revelation, we are looking at the seven stages or periods of the true Christian church. This is just one instance where *to him that overcometh*, in other words, "to him that fulfills the commitments that they have made to God," they will experience the paradise of God. They will experience a heavenly reward.

Now you have the heavenly reward that you just said is the paradise of God, but you had just suggested that the paradise of God was an earthly reward. How does that work?



We have to yet compare at least one more *spiritual thing with spiritual things*. So far, you are right. I had suggested the paradise in connection with the thief would be an earthly paradise, not a heavenly paradise, but yet when we look at Revelation, we see that paradise can also be used to refer to a heavenly reward. So apparently, I cannot use Revelation 2:7 to support my point.

That is part of the whole idea of trying to compare *spiritual things to spiritual things*. What does the Bible say as a whole? You cannot just take one Scripture and say, that blew it up. You have to look at other contexts.

Scripture as a basis for the explanation:

2 Corinthians 12:2-4: (NASB) ²I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. ³And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows— ⁴was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.

The Apostle Paul is talking about a vision, but what is this vision and how does it relate to our conversation?

2 Corinthians 12:4 gives us yet another scriptural perspective for the conclusion that it was really an earthly paradise that Jesus was referring to relative to the thief and not a heavenly one.

In this text Paul was under attack from false brethren. They accused him of being a fake and a thief. They accused him of being not an apostle and of teaching error. These false brethren were really undermining the authority of the Apostle Paul to be a mouthpiece of God. Paul realized he had to do something, not defend himself personally, but he realized he had to defend his apostleship because the sincere brethren were relying on his apostleship, his teaching, his leadership ability to know the right message from God.

This vision was part of the way he was underscoring the fact that he was, in fact, an apostle. He was a legitimate apostle, a legitimate spokesperson or mouthpiece of God. That is why it leads us into this concept of the third heaven and paradise he refers to.

When it says, *I was caught up into the third heaven and into paradise*, you are suggesting the third heaven and paradise are focusing on an earthly application of paradise, not one in heaven?

Correct.

This is where you must pay really close attention because the Scriptures interpret themselves, but we have to *let* them interpret themselves.

Isaiah 65:17: (NASB) *For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; And the former things will not be remembered or come to mind.*

We are taking a global perspective of the Bible. The Bible teaches us that there are three different worlds, or three different heavens, if you will. We are not talking about a place. We are talking about new heavens here in Isaiah 65. It is talking about a new spiritual ruling control. It is a spiritual power that is going to control things on earth.



Pause there for a second. What you are saying is *heavens* is not up in heaven but, in fact, spiritual power and control over earth having to do with earth?

That is exactly right. It is a spiritual body governing the affairs of earth.

We actually have a couple of examples of that. If you look at the first "heaven," the first heaven was from man's creation until the Flood. Peter calls that *the world that was* that overflowed. It perished. It overflowed with water. That was the great Flood. 2 Peter 3:6

The second "heaven" is the heaven where Satan is permitted to have a limited degree of control over the affairs of earth for a fairly long period of time. The Apostles called him *the god of this world*. It is referred to as *the present evil world* because evil predominates. Galatians 1:4

But the heaven Isaiah is talking about is the new heaven, the new government which is going to produce a new earth, a new societal structure upon the earth. Isaiah 66:22, 2 Peter 3:13. This new heaven or government is going to make this paradise that Jesus was referring to in his dialogue with the thief.

The idea of "heaven" then, has to do with governing earth. When you say the world that was being overflowed with water perished, it was the governing system that perished.

Right. The whole thing came to an end.

In our world, our timeframe, with Satan being the god of this world, the governor, if you will, because it is evil, that will also come to an end.

That is exactly right. And not only just his governorship, but all of the horrible things he has caused to happen upon this earth - they are also going to be done away with.

Then when we look at the third "heaven." The third heaven is not going up, up, up floors like a different elevator level. It is going forward, not up, but forward in time. The first heaven was *the world that was*. (2 Peter 3:7) The second heaven is the world that is. The third heaven is just simply moving forward in time - past, present and future.





We are looking at is this idea of the paradise of heaven and the paradise of earth. They are attached but different. And we are now talking about governments and it is really confusing.

**The third heaven and paradise are the same.
Practically speaking, what did that mean for the thief?**

So now that we are trying to put all this in order, let's begin to have a quick and precise summary of what Jesus meant by paradise. Then let's look at its practical application. What would it be like for the thief in paradise? When would he be there, and who else would be there with him?

So, again, Wes, I want to step back one more moment here because the idea of the heavens - frankly, it can be confusing, and we did not spend a lot of time on it. There is a whole bunch of scriptural proof you could go into for a subject like this. Once again, the third heaven is *not* what?

It is not a place. It is not going up to the stratosphere. It is not taking a road trip somewhere. The third heaven is a government, a brand-new government. It is a perfect divine government. It is a ruling body. It is Christ's kingdom that he talked about, promised, and said would become a reality.

That is the difference between the two - who is governing. But, again, let's go back to paradise, because Jesus says *verily, amen* to the thief's request. It is true, noble and it is appropriate. "I say to you today on this very day of my crucifixion, this day when the paradise opportunity actually is going to be opening up, you will be with me in paradise."

We had two versions of paradise. You said in Revelation 2:7 it was showing a heavenly paradise, and then in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 that it was showing an earthly paradise. How can we be sure that the thief was not heading to that heavenly paradise and was instead heading to the earthly paradise? How can we be sure of that?



This is where we have to continue to compare spiritual things with spiritual. And we have to ask ourselves, what is necessary for a Christian to receive a heavenly reward? What is required? You know, the common thought is that, well, if I go to church at least most of the time and I do not commit too many crimes in my life and so on, I am kind of a shoo-in for heaven. But when we really dig into the Scriptures, we find there is a lot more involved.



The standard is very high, and we are going to take a look at some Scriptures that show us what that standard is.



Heavenly “paradise” qualifiers:

Matthew 7:13-14: (KJV) ¹³Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in there at: ¹⁴Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

What Jesus is saying here is that it is going to be DIFFICULT for anyone to get to heaven - *and few there be that find it*. Going to heaven is not an easy accomplishment.

He says, *enter ye in at the strait gate*. The gate is difficult. “Strait” means difficult. It is a difficult way to be able to successfully achieve the pathway to heaven. He says, *strait is the gate and narrow is the way*. In other words, this is a difficult climb.

The first Scripture we are looking at in terms of the paradise of heaven just gives you the sense this is no easy task.

Now, let's build on that:

Luke 14:28: (NASB) *For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it?*

Wes, how do you take that and build on what you just talked about?

Again, one of the things that happens as the true Christian is determining whether or not he wants to sign up, so to speak, for this special calling, this special invitation to eventually receive a heavenly reward is to count the cost of discipleship. In other words, consider what is involved. Consider what kind of time it is going to take. Are you willing to make the commitment? Are you willing to spend the time? Are you willing to do what is required to do the will of God to eventually come off victorious and as a fully developed Christian ready for a heavenly reward?

You are saying the implication behind these Scriptures is that there is a sense of serious thoughtfulness in order to take the steps to become that true footstep follower of Christ.

Absolutely.

Let's build another step:

Luke 9:23: (NASB) *And he was saying to them all, if anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me.*

There is a concept we learn about largely from the book of Leviticus called “consecration.” While that is a word that is not used a lot in the Christian community in our day, it is used many, many times in the Old Testament, particularly in Exodus and Leviticus. But a full consecration means a full unreserved commitment. It requires agreeing to give up any prospects of an



earthly life. It means taking on the will of God. We are no longer doing our own will but only the will of God.



It is a very serious commitment, and it is a very difficult commitment to actually achieve. But that is what this Scripture is talking about when it says *deny yourself*, that is, give up your humanity, take up your cross. In other words, are you willing to face all the difficulties of a true Christian walk and *follow me*? In other words, do not follow your own will,

but are you willing to follow my will, my instruction and do what I ask you to do, no matter what it costs in terms of emotion, time or energy - a full consecration?

With all of that explanation and just those three Scriptures, and there are many more on that, what about the thief in relation to these Scriptures? Give us your observation of where he was and does he fit into these Scriptures. What is his situation?

First of all, the life of the Christian is a lifetime of work. It is not something that you are going to do in ten minutes or, in this case, this was a dialogue only two sentences long. Did the criminal make the arduous climb up this narrow way that Jesus talked about? Did he do that in a few minutes?

In Romans 2:7 Paul talks about those who *seek for glory and honor and immortality*. This is something that has to be *sought*. It is not something that is just going to be handed out arbitrarily.

Did the criminal ever seek it? We do not even know if the criminal ever believed in heaven, because there was a large segment of the Jewish population back then who did *not* believe in heaven then. They did not believe in *any* kind of life after death. To say this criminal made this arduous climb in a few minutes would simply be not correct. It would simply not be true.

That is an important aspect of this whole conversation. We are looking at literally a moment in time for that particular thief and his conversation with Jesus. He died before Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given to the Apostles. That should be evidence of those that would receive a heavenly reward, right?

2 Corinthians 5:16-17: (NASB) ¹⁶Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know him in this way no longer. ¹⁷Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.

That is exactly what you were referring to, *new things have come* by way of God's Spirit at Pentecost. Yes, what you are saying is, when we look at paradise, the heavenly application, there is a process, a decision, a lifetime of dedication and sacrifice of one's own will, and it cannot happen in ten minutes.



Right, because, again, what we are talking about in large measure is really character transformation. In other words, one has to become after the likeness of Christ in order to be qualified for a heavenly reward. This qualification, this development of the new creature, takes a lifetime. Someone developing the likeness of Christ in their character does not happen in two sentences or in a day or in an hour or a week or whatever. It is a process.

It is a process, and something that is important to recognize that the rest of the Scriptures teach about the followers of Christ.

Let's look at the other side. Okay, that is a little bit about heavenly paradise. Well, what about earthly paradise? How do you get there? Because that is what the thief was asking for. "When you come into your kingdom, remember me." And Jesus says *amen* to that.

Earthly "paradise" qualifiers:

2 Corinthians 5:18-19: (NASB) ¹⁸Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, ¹⁹namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

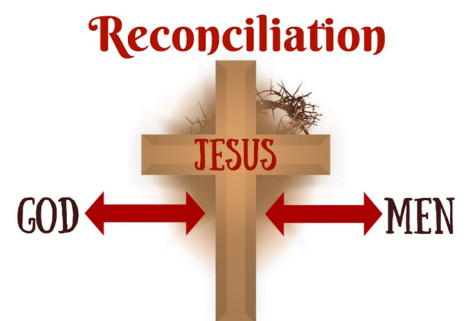
With this verse, paradise on earth and the thief, tie those together.

The word "reconciliation" is really critical, because we are talking about a reconciliation between God and man. If we look at the first man Adam, he was created perfect before he sinned, before he disobeyed. He was a perfect man. He was perfectly happy upon the earth, and that is what we are talking about here. He was reconciled to God. He had wonderful communication with God. They had a wonderful dialogue.

When we talk about reconciliation, it is fine and certainly proper and scriptural to have this idea that there is no more variance, no more enmity, between God and man. That can happen between a spiritual being and earthly being. That is the reconciliation this verse talks about.

Reconciliation - bringing the environment between God and man back together. When the Scripture says, *Jesus came to save that which was lost*, what was lost was the harmony of man on earth with God in heaven.

And to add to that, Adam was not created as a spirit being. He was created as an earthly being. We are talking about reestablishing or restoring that relationship. This is what Christ's kingdom is going to do. This is what the third heaven is going to do.



Picture this then. Jesus is hanging on the cross, and he is dying. When this thief says, "remember me when you come into your kingdom," that is the very reason Jesus was dying, to restore that which was lost, to buy back the sins of Adam essentially and to put mankind back in harmony with God. Essentially paradise, then, can actually be kind of a state of being in harmony with God, whether on earth or in heaven.



Absolutely, either one.

So, the thief is lined up, therefore, for this paradise on earth, harmony with God, because Jesus paid the price right there that very day the thief was talking to Jesus.

Absolutely. To add to that is the fact that *the thief clearly, under no circumstances, qualified for a heavenly reward*. He simply did not meet the qualifications.

But he did not lose out on an incredible opportunity as a result of the sacrifice of Jesus.

Not at all, no. He fully qualified for the participation and the experience of an earthly paradise, a return to earth.

One more verse that describes this reconciliation process:

Isaiah 35:8-10: (NASB) ⁸A highway will be there, a roadway, and it will be called the Highway of Holiness. The unclean will not travel on it, but it will be for him who walks that way, and fools will not wander on it. ⁹No lion will be there, nor will any vicious beast go up on it; These will not be found there. But the redeemed will walk there, ¹⁰And the ransomed of the LORD will return and come with joyful shouting to Zion, With everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.



This is another Old Testament prophecy that puts us in a place where we can look forward essentially to that third heaven that you were talking about. We are looking at a reward because of Jesus' sacrifice, and that is what this conversation was about. Summarize the conversation, what was meant and the implications.

To sum things up, let's start back with the basics. The Bible is the revealed mind of God. It was not written like a novel. We cannot read it like a novel if we want to understand it. If we want to understand God's revealed mind, we have to study His book, His way. And His way, the Apostle Paul tells us is we have to compare spiritual things with spiritual, particularly on these more difficult texts that are, you know, hard to understand.

The thief did not ask Jesus to take him to heaven. The thief did not say a thing about heaven. He simply asked for this unspecified favor in the future when Jesus would establish his kingdom. And Jesus agreed. He agreed wholeheartedly to grant that favor, that favor on the earth, because this thief clearly did not qualify for all the things that Jesus described during his ministry about how difficult it was for one to reach a heavenly reward. This thief clearly did not qualify for that. But he did qualify for this future favor of future paradise on earth.



Again, the thief asks Jesus a simple question. Remember me when you come into your kingdom. Jesus says, "Verily." He says to him, "I have heard you. I agree with you. Your request is true and appropriate." And he says "Today, this day, this day of my crucifixion, which looks like such a dark and terrible day, this day is the beginning of everything because I am paying the price so you can have paradise on earth."

*So, did Jesus and the thief go from the cross to paradise?
For Jonathan and Rick and Christian Questions...
Think about it...!*