

# PARADISE AND HOW TO GET THERE

## A SERMON

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“And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto you, today shall you be with me in paradise.” Luke 23:43

IT appears that when this dying thief was led to pray, and received this gracious and wonderful answer, the Savior had then been about three hours on the cross; and during that time both the thieves, as we learn from Matthew, were enemies to the Lord Jesus Christ. The Savior had three hours more of such work to do as none but an incarnate God could accomplish, in order to reach the goal, to gain the prize, and to authorize him to say “It is finished.” But it does not appear that there are any depths of suffering on the one hand, or any heights of glory on the other, that can turn the Savior's attention away from any one of his people. If ever there was in one respect an unsuitable moment in which to pray, surely this was one, in which deep was calling unto deep, and the waves and billows of God's wrath were rolling over the Redeemer. Yet amidst these mysterious depths, when he seemed to be in the very center thereof, this prayer was addressed to him. So that it seemed to be the very worst time, speaking after the manner of men; and yet it proved to be as acceptable a time to the Savior as any other. Hence the apostle seems to refer to something of this when he speaks of Christ spoiling principalities and powers, that is the ruling powers of sin and death, triumphing over them not merely afterwards, but triumphing over them at the time.

I notice then, first, the object of this promise, “Paradise” Secondly, *the order of this promise*, “Today shall you be with me.” Thirdly and lastly, *the circumstances which led to this promise*.

First, then, *the object of this promise*, “Paradise.” There are people who have tried to distinguish between heaven and paradise, and between the city in heaven and the inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fades not away. You of course must use your own judgment, but all such distinctions appear to me to be absurd to the last degree. It does appear to me that all the similes used mean one and the same thing. There are a variety of representations, all taken from things that we do know, in order to instruct us into the wonderful truth that there are two things in heaven at last, namely, perfect happiness, and the eternal duration or the eternity of that happiness. The psalmist says, that in the Lord's presence, in the paradise of God, there is fulness of joy. So then, call it paradise, garden of delights; call it a city, call it an inheritance, call it what we may, it all appears to me to mean one and the same thing. The Savior is represented, under a vast variety of

similes; but because he is called a rock in one place, a river in another place, a tree in another place, and a pearl of great price in another place, should we therefore conclude that all these similes mean different persons? No; they all mean the same Mediator, in that variety of characters which he bears. So, this paradise into which the thief was to enter is a city wherein there is nothing experienced, nothing seen, nothing felt, nothing enjoyed, nothing cared for, but God himself. It is a state in which God is all and in all. Hence Moses was with God on the mount forty days, six weeks we will call it. We should naturally suppose that Moses at the end of that time would appear very exhausted, and very weak, and very sadly, having been without food and without sleep for six weeks. But instead of that, there was such a sight and sense of God, and such an experience of joy in his presence, that Moses felt no hunger, he felt no thirst, he felt no weariness, he felt no sleepiness; and when he came down from the mountain he was still so filled with the glory of God, and his face so shone, that the children of Israel could not steadfastly behold the face of Moses. That will give you a slight idea of the blessedness of being in the presence of the Lord. Then again, when you come to Stephen, the Lord granted unto Stephen his presence very powerfully, and so filled the soul, and I may as well say the body too of Stephen, the rays of God's glory so shone through his person, that even his adversaries could behold it, though they beheld it to hate it; for "his face shone as an angel." Then you know what the apostle Paul experienced in this paradise into which the thief was to enter. How long the apostle was there is not given us to know; but certainly, however long he was in the paradise of God, in the third heaven, he was not hungry, nor thirsty, nor weary, nor was there any bodily sensation or feeling in exercise of any kind whatever. There was a complete neutralization of mortality; not an annihilation of it, though, bless God, there will by-and-by be an annihilation of mortality; but there was a complete neutralization of it. There was a complete neutralization of his infidelity, of his unbelief, of his hardness of heart; there was a complete neutralization of everything with which he was accustomed to be plagued; and he could not say while he was there, "O wretched man that I am;" For he lays great stress on the fact, that whether in the body or out of the body he could not tell. God knows; I do not know. I knew nothing of the body; I was swallowed up in God's love, in God's grace, in God's salvation, in God's joy, for God joys over his people; I was swallowed up in Christ's achievements, in the majesty of his name; I was swallowed up in the glories of eternity; therefore whether in the body or out of the body I cannot tell. I heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful to utter, or, as it may be rendered, not possible to utter. And if they were possible, they would not have been lawful on earth. God has a language for heaven; there is but one language there. The many languages on earth originated in the tower of Babel, originated in man's rebellion; God confounded their language. But in heaven there is only one language; we shall have no trouble there to understand any one saint, let him have lived in what age or come from what clime he may; all there are one people, and they speak one language. The apostle calls this paradise of God "the third heaven." The learned tell us the clouds are one heaven, the starry regions are the next; and the apostle went beyond them. That is, I believe, the general idea. Well, perhaps, that is the meaning; I do not know. Of course, it is matter of opinion, and not of very much importance, but I am inclined to think that the ceremonial law, or the Old Testament dispensation, is the first heaven; that was the first heavenly dispensation given to man. I am inclined to think that the Christian dispensation, which was next given to man, is the second heaven; for the Christian dispensation is to the Christian his heaven while here below. And I am inclined to think the third heaven is that ultimate and everlasting glorification to which the saints shall come. Now we cannot imagine a greater or a more wonderful promise than this "Today shall you be with me in paradise;" where you cannot hunger, nor thirst, nor be weary, nor sleep, nor sigh, nor cry; and though they that are there are out

of the body, yet the time will come when the body will be conformed to the soul; when the body will be conformed to the glory of the place, for it shall be incorruptible, immortal, like unto his glorious body. It is therefore a wonderful promise. And I am sure if all of us were favored to know that this promise belonged to us, then we should from that fact be sure of something else, namely, that between this and our entering paradise the Lord would take care of us. The reason we question is, because we are not sure of this great matter. Once be assured, or let the Lord bless you with a sweet assurance that your name is on high, that the promise does belong to you, and that you shall reach that blissful scene, let this certainty be brought into your soul, then, whatever lies between this and your final possession, you will feel sure shall go on according to God's will concerning you, and that he will take care of you, keeping you as the apple of his eye from the present moment unto ultimate glory. But I always feel as though it was in a measure presumptuous for me to dwell upon the things of eternity as they shall appear when time shall be no more, because the glory will, so infinitely surpass anything that we have any conception of at present. We simply know that it is a state of happiness, and that that happiness will endure to all eternity; everlasting life, everlasting joy, a new and everlasting song; each department of the gospel has in it absolute eternity. Thus, then, "You shall be with me in paradise," means, You shall be with me in the city of God above; you shall be with me in the inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fades not away; you shall be with me in the everlasting kingdom of glory; you shall be with me in fulness of joy, and pleasures for evermore; for heaven is all this, and we may well say of all the descriptions that they are:

"All too mean to speak his worth,  
Too mean to set the dear Redeemer forth."

We may here glance at the reverse, though I shall not occupy your time in so doing. At the last great day there will be but two classes; it will be either, "Come, you blessed," or "Depart, you cursed." There is no degree, there is no milder course. I do not wonder at some Christians feeling such an interest at the progress of the gospel. Oh, my hearer, what is health or wealth, what is all we can gain under the sun, if the soul at last be shut out of these prospects, sent away from God's presence, and banished from the glory of his power? There is no question, then, so weighty as this, "What must I do to be saved?"

Secondly, I notice *the order of this promise*: "Today shall you be with *me* in paradise." "With *me*." There is an emphasis laid upon this, just to show that Jesus Christ is the way of the promise. And how clear this is; "with *me*" it must be "with *me*," it cannot be without me. Let us trace this out for a moment or two; it will do us no harm. How did Jesus Christ rise from the dead? In the last chapter of the Hebrews we have a beautiful revelation of that by virtue of which he rose from the dead. "The God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant." Here, then, Jesus Christ rose from the dead, for that is the idea, by the perfection of his atonement; and that atonement was a covenant atonement, an atonement that was covenantly appointed and provided; he was brought again from the dead by the blood of the everlasting covenant. And what said the same apostle in another place upon this beautiful theme? He says, "We have boldness by the blood of Jesus to enter into the holy of holies." So, then, Jesus Christ is the way in which the dying thief was to enter heaven, the way in which we are all to enter heaven. Then, again, the apostle, who was wonderfully led into these eternal truths, said, "Not by the blood of calves nor of goats, but by his own blood he entered once

into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.” These are some of the reasons why the Savior lays such emphasis upon this, “with *me*;” it is with me and by me that you shall enter paradise. But we will come closer than this if possible. Now to be with Jesus Christ is to be with God. Oh, look at it. To be with Jesus Christ is to be with God. How am I to be with Jesus Christ? By receiving his own righteousness, and that righteousness becoming mine. How am I to be with Jesus Christ? Simply as a sinner receiving into my soul the testimony of his atonement; and before my sins can send me away, they must send his atonement away, and before the law will send me away it will send Christ’s righteousness away. So, we are to be with God, thanks, eternal thanks, to his dear name! not by any goodness, or holiness, or doings, or merit of our own, but,

“Simply to your cross I cling;”

simply as a sinner. Ah, poor thief, it is with me. My atonement sets everything right, my righteousness sets everything right. You shall be with me. Well, but what will God the Father say? Why, God my Father loves you. I do not make him love you; I am the result of his love; he gave me because he loved you. If you are with me, then you are with God; and let you be with what you may, if you are not with me you are not with God. Hence the Jews that sought to be righteous attained not unto it, because they were not with Christ, and Christ was not with them; but the Gentiles, that sought righteousness by faith in the righteousness already wrought, they attained unto it. “You shall be with me. Why, here there is no dread of God, here there is no terror, here there is nothing to make you uncomfortable; here, by being with Christ, you are with God. Let us still look farther into this matter, and it stands thus, that Jesus Christ in taking human nature took all the election of grace. “He passed by the nature of angels, and took upon him the seed of Abraham.” None of you doubt God’s love to Christ; none of you doubt God’s sympathy with Christ; none of you doubt God’s delight in Christ. Well, if this be true, then you cannot separate the two; for “You have loved them as you have loved me.” He delights in them as he delights in his dear Son, and his sympathy is as much with them as with his dear Son. You cannot separate the two. “The children being partakers of flesh and blood, he likewise partook of the same.” “With me.” As though the Savior should say, Why, you are flesh of my flesh, and bone of my bone, and I have given you my Spirit; so that we are one in spirit, one in flesh; for though your flesh now be mortal, it shall by-and-bye be changed, and we shall be every way one. There is no separation. It is “with me,” and with me you are with God, and God is with you in all the greatness and eternity of his love, in the immutability of his counsel, in all the perfections of his nature. Christ is heir of all things, and the people are joint heirs with him. “You shall be with me in paradise.” So, then, here is a glorious scene of things, and the way to it seems to me as glorious as the end itself, because it accords so very nicely with it. Then, again, it conveys this idea, that whatever joy I have you shall have. You shall go with me into the same department. I am not going into some region that is superior, and put you into some department inferior. That would be like a man marrying a woman he professed to love, and appointing to live a thousand miles apart. That would not do. The Church is the bride, and he is to live with her to all eternity. He has paid dearly enough for her, and has had a great deal of trouble with her, and has undergone a great deal. “He loved the church and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word; that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish.” And he will live with her at the last. Why, she will dwell in the same city, in the same mansion, in the same glory. All creature misery arises, whether in the case of fallen angels or fallen men, from separation from God; and all creature happiness

arises from oneness with God. He is the only fountain that never runs dry; he is the only sun that never goes down; the springs that are in him are the only springs of pleasure that will flow in full tide, and will never, never ebb. See how this accords with that scripture: "Enter you into joy" that would have been great, such poor creatures as we are; but it is, "Enter you into the joy of your Lord." And indeed, to make the matter short, God is all and in all to Christ, and by him all and in all to the people. Therefore, said David, "I will go unto God, my exceeding joy," unlimited happiness. You will not be under any breakable law. It will not be possible for the saints to sin in heaven, because they will be under no breakable law. There is no law that you can break there, do what you may. Well, say you, that is strong. It is true. It will not then be a fiction that the Queen can do no wrong; it will then be the truth that she can do no wrong. God is the strength of every one; Christ is the perfection of every one; the Holy Spirit has made you his temple here, he will make you his palace there for God shall dwell in them, and they in God, and love for ever reign. All we want, then, is for the Lord to make us sensible sinners, to be led into these things, and to receive Christ Jesus the Lord as our only hope of eternal glory.

"He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he has set judgment in the earth." Now he went before the thief; they did not go together; the legs of the thief were broken after the Savior departed. But the Savior was there to receive him. He did not say, "You shall go with me;" no; but you will come after. And that was all the better for the Savior to be there first, ready to receive him. What an entrance that soul must have had to heaven! From public disgrace in this world to universal honor in the world to come. He had made himself so vile, and such a criminal; the world could not tolerate him. But heaven receives him, heaven rejoices, all heaven glories to see this first trophy of the cross of Christ enter the realms of bliss. Here is a poor sinner raised from the lowest degradation of sin to the highest throne of glory. Well might the Savior say, "Go and preach the gospel to every creature." Let them be as low as they may, let them be as far gone as they may, there is not anything that grace cannot do, there is not anything that the Savior cannot accomplish. But if we proclaim these things, why, they say then, We fear the tidings are too good to be true; or you are extravagant; or up comes the greatest objection, Well, if that be so, then we have no occasion to strive, no occasion to be good, and no occasion to be this, and that, and the other. That is the way the natural man talks. Your striving, sir, will make you like the woman we read of; you will be nothing the better, but rather the worse. You will be like the leper, you may try all sorts of remedies, but the leprosy will remain.

But I notice in the last place, *the circumstances which led to this promise*. We now have to deal with the conversion of the thief on the cross, and if you have not the same experience in kind that he had on the cross you will be lost; if you have not the same prayer in spirit and substance, and the same faith, and the same light, if not in the same degree, of the same kind that he had, to all intents and purposes you must be lost. Let me then carefully describe the several items of his conversion, and let us see whether we can come in with it or not. The first thing in his conversion, as is the case in the conversion of every one, is that of godly fear, and an honest conscience. They had both, as we have said, ridiculed the Savior, but all at once the Holy Spirit wrought conviction in this man's mind; he saw sin to be exceeding sinful, he saw that the Messiah by his side was suffering for sin, suffering for the sin of others. He felt all at once a dread of the majesty of heaven that stopped his mouth, so that he could not say another reviling word. He said to his fellow thief, "Do you not fear God?" What! not fear the Judge of all? Like a young convert he thought the other ought to fear God, not knowing as yet whence the distinction came, that the one was left in

blindness and the other convinced of his state; the one was hardened, and the other was softened. "Do you not fear God." Oh, I tremble at God. Before this neither of them appears to have had any fear of God. And there may have been two motives, for aught I know, in both the thieves railing on the Savior; and they are motives which still exist as motives of action among men. The first motive might have been this, We see that the chief priests and authorities are all ridiculing this person. Perhaps if we join with them the authorities will release us from the cross. It is true, we are nailed to the cross, but if they were to take us down now, we should soon recover from our wounds; which has been the case, as we know from history, in several instances. Therefore, in order to please the authorities and to gain their freedom, they would join in the general cry, and say, "If you be the Christ, save yourself and us." And, oh, how many have since that, and how many will, for the sake of worldly ease, and gain, and advantage, join with the multitude to run the truth and people of God down, hoping they shall gain something by it. We have plenty of instances of this, and that might have been their motive for aught I know. It is a mercy to be delivered from the fear of man. If the thieves had this hope in man, see how they were disappointed. So, shall you and I if we turn against God, as Judas did, and many others have, to please men, with the hope we shall yet get something. You may depend upon it that the reality of that scripture will meet us, "Cursed is the man that trusts in man, and makes flesh his arm." How important it is that each Christian should be an independent man, that he should fear God. As the dear Savior beautifully says, "I say unto you, my friends, Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will forewarn you whom you shall fear; fear him which after he has killed has power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, fear him."

And there is another motive, too, for aught I know, from which they might have acted, and that is this, they perhaps thought that if they ridiculed this person, they would so please God, that he would pardon their sins and receive them. We have scripture authority for this; we have scriptural and circumstantial authority. The Savior said, "The time comes that he that kills you will think that he does God service." Now all these great men, these priests and authorities, are putting him out of the way in order to do God service, for these pious people think it is not fit such a man should live. Perhaps if we join with them God will have mercy upon us. And so, Saul of Tarsus acted from this very motive; he thought he ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus; he therefore acted upon that, and thought he should please God by so doing. So now there are many in this country that lay out thousands of pounds against God's truth. There is a little chapel in a village, and with difficulty they maintain the chapel. In steps some rich Pharisee, buys the chapel away from them, turns them out of this place, to drive them out of the village. There is a town where error is rampant, and thousands of pounds are given to buy these dangerous people out, and they think that they shall do God great service in so doing. See, then, how men are deluded, until God shall undeceive us. Now if this was their motive, what a fearful disappointment, expecting God to be favorable to them because they were blindly unfavorable to that person to whom the people at large were unfavorable. I am persuaded of it that some people's religion is the worst part of their sin. I am persuaded of it that some people will receive a greater damnation for their religion than they ever did or ever can be for their sins, in the general acceptation of that word sin. Hence the Savior said to the religious people of old whose religion was a fire of enmity against him, You generation of vipers, how can you escape the damnation of hell?" But as God met Saul of Tarsus, and had mercy upon him in the very height of his enmity and malice, so he met this dying thief, opened his eyes, turned the current of his soul, showed him the fearful condition he was in. "Do not you fear God, seeing you are in the same condemnation?" Here comes the honest conscience.

“And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds.” Just so in conversion, there is an honesty of conscience; there is no hiding the matter, there is no smoothing it over; there is no more of that Ashdod language, namely, if I do not go to heaven, what will become of such an one? for, at any rate, bad as I am, I am not so bad as he is. And that is what the Pharisee said: I am not so bad as that publican; if I do not go to heaven, where will that Publican go to? But when God convinces us of what sin is (and God alone can do this), then away goes all this reasoning, the fear of God becomes predominant, and eternal damnation we confess would only be the due reward of our deeds, and that we have no more power to get away from that damnation by our own doings than the dying thief had to get away from the cross upon which he was nailed, nor so much, for, perhaps, if left to himself, he might have found means of liberating himself; but not so in eternal things. That is the first thing, then, in conversion, to fear God, and an honest conscience. It is a great thing thus to be brought under a conviction of the sinfulness of sin, and a dread of God, and a corresponding concern in the mind as to what is to become of us. You may not as yet know anything about Jesus Christ, but your heart is prepared to know him; you may not as yet know anything of God’s pardoning mercy, nor in what way he is just, and the justifier of him that believes in Jesus, but your heart is prepared. And so, the dying thief was prepared for this exceeding great and wonderful promise, “Today shall you be with me in paradise.” Here was the dread of God, he was honest: “Do not you fear God?” God alone can have mercy upon you. I have cried to men for mercy, but they nailed me to the cross, and showed me no mercy. I know I receive the due reward of my deeds; at the same time, I should have been pleased, as any poor creature would under the circumstances, had I been forgiven; but alas, alas! the help of man is vain. And therefore, “Do not you fear God?” Let me now appeal to God. Feeling in his mind a dread of God, he could no longer speak against him, but felt a desire that God would be his friend. The Holy Spirit all at once opened up to him the perfection, of the Lord Jesus Christ, and who he was. “This man has done nothing amiss.” Why, he is without sin, without fault: he is holy, just, and good. This man, why, he is the long-promised Messiah. He is actually now, in what he is enduring, finishing transgression; he is making an end of sin; he is making reconciliation for iniquity; he is bringing in eternal righteousness for man, to justify man before God. He is sealing or confirming prophecy, and ere long he will be on his lofty throne, reigning over all the world. And amidst all his doings he has done nothing amiss. I have done nothing right, and he has done nothing wrong; I am nothing but sin, and he is nothing but salvation; I am nothing but uncleanness, and he is nothing but a pure fountain to wash the whole away; I am nothing but unrighteousness, and he is nothing but righteousness. The contrast in every part is complete. “This man has done nothing amiss.” Here we are this morning a numerous assembly, and it does my heart good to know that there are hundreds within the sound of my voice now that could not for one instant hear a doctrine that would attribute anything amiss to the Lord Jesus Christ. You can sing that with all your heart, “My Jesus has done all things well.”

You would not hear for one moment a doctrine that would attribute a spot, a blemish, a fault of any kind to him. He is altogether lovely, the chief among ten thousand, he has done nothing amiss. O our God, cause us to lose ourselves in this wonderful Person, that we may be what he is; his life our life, his light our light, his holiness our holiness, his righteousness our righteousness, his victory our victory, his heaven our heaven, his glory our glory. “The glory which you gave me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one.” Are you got thus far? Do you see there is a dreadful God to meet? Do you see there is a dreadful but a righteous Judge to meet? And do you tremble at it? Are you made honest, and do you confess that the lowest damnation would

be the due reward of your deeds? And have you got a little further, can you see that Jesus Christ, the Holy One, has died for sinners, that the Savior put himself into the place of the sinner; that he was made under the law, and fulfilled the law, worked to the end of the law? If you are got thus far, that is another sign of conversion. But presently something else comes. Why, said the thief, not only is this an innocent man, but he is God as well as man; he is one of the Eternal Three; he is Jehovah. Why, it is my Maker by my side! It is my Maker bleeding, groaning, dying! It is my Maker that makes the very globe tremble, that darkens the skies, rends the rocks. I can pray to him, and I will pray to him. "Lord" the Greek word there translated "Lord" conveys the idea of self-existence, a Divine Person, "I am a poor sinner." Ah, my hearer, do you feel that you need a Person that is divine as well as human, that you need this complex Person? If so, by-and-bye you will be able to say with Mr. Hart, that:

"Christ is God I can avouch,  
And for his people cares.  
For I have prayed to him as such,  
And he has heard my prayer."

The dying thief also recognized him as a king. Why, he is a king; he has a kingdom. This is the very king Daniel speaks of. Daniel says that his dominion is an everlasting dominion, that his kingdom shall not be destroyed. Isaiah said that he made intercession for transgressors, and that he was numbered with the transgressors, and I am a transgressor. "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He knew that he was God. First, he had done nothing amiss; secondly, he was God; thirdly, he was king; fourthly, he would come into his kingdom. He saw that he should come into his kingdom, and he also saw that he was going there to intercede for them that had not a word to say in their own favor, going there to intercede for poor sinners. What a wonderful revelation is here. Can you thus see Christ in his purity, Christ in his dignity, Christ in his kingdom, Christ in the stability of his kingdom, Christ in his success, and Christ as the Intercessor? Mark the language, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Not like the butler, you see. Joseph desired the butler to remember him, but the butler forgot him for two years, and would have forgotten him altogether if God himself had not brought Joseph by his providence to the remembrance of the butler. Not so with Jesus Christ; he remembered the dying thief. "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Lord, if you will speak a word for me, it will be settled. I cannot say a word for myself. Lord, I am a poor sinful, wretched creature. Remember me. What a sweet answer; "Today shall you be with me in paradise." We do not read that the thief said a word after this. Why not? Why should not the thief speak after this? My opinion is that he was too happy to speak. There are two opposite states of mind in which the Christian is dumb; the one is when he suffers too much anguish of spirit to speak, and the other is when he is so full of joy by the presence and goodness of the Lord that he cannot utter his feelings.