

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Between Now and Then?

And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise. (Luke 23:39-43, KJV 1900)

God has a marvelous way of teaching some of the Bible's most profound truths in the simplest of ways. Sadly often, preachers and Bible teachers work to complicate their explanations of Bible truths, while Jesus gives us one example after another that urges us to simplify our teachings. Not only did Jesus direct Peter to feed His sheep, but He also commanded him to feed His lambs. (John 21:15)

We should know the story well of Jesus' time on the cross. Early in the day, Scripture indicates that both thieves railed against Jesus, but our study passage unfolds the miracle of tender mercy. One of the two thieves quite abruptly changes his words from railing on Jesus to praying to Him. How do we account for this change? How does this thief know that Jesus did "...nothing amiss"? Why did he call Jesus "Lord"? How did he come to think that Jesus was a king, and more than a king? Any explanation that stops short of a miracle of merciful grace fails to make any sense of the sudden reversal in this man's words. Jesus told the disciples that their belief in Him as "...the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:17) was the result of God's revelation, not of their wisdom or insight. We live in an age when many sincere Christian folk have all but forgotten the Bible accounts and teachings of God's involvement in the lives of His people, particularly His revelations of Himself and His work to them. It is sadly common for people to proclaim quite loudly that God simply cannot reveal Himself to anyone apart from the gospel, the gospel preached by man. In their minds, the only way that God can reach people who have never heard the gospel is for preachers to take the news to them. God intended that His people publish the good news of the gospel far and wide, but He has not reduced Himself to a wooden statue in the preacher's hands. He revealed to Peter and the other disciples that He was "...the Christ, the Son of the living God." He revealed Himself to this thief, even as He hung on the cross in unimaginable pain from the torture of crucifixion. And He taught the disciples, and us, that He regularly reveals Himself to His people. (Matthew 11:25-27) As a foundational truth of the new covenant, God in

prophecy proclaimed that men would not teach other men to "...know the Lord," because God's provisions in the covenant would result in "...they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them." (Jeremiah 31:33-34)

Let's put ourselves as much as possible into this scene. The two prisoners were probably taken out of a jail cell and marched summarily to the hill where their crosses, the Roman instrument of capital punishment, were awaiting them. On their arrival, they realize that a third man was facing the same torturous execution as they. By the time we read the words of our passage, all three men have been suspended on their crosses for some time. From Luke 23:44, we learn that the exchange between Jesus and the thief occurred around mid-day, the sixth hour of the day. When the Romans put someone on a cross, they weren't kept there for a few hours and released. They would only be taken off the cross after their death. Only intense pain and the certain knowledge that more pain remained in their lives until death gave them merciful relief.

Given this setting, our passage becomes all the more enlightening. The man who spoke these words to Jesus was not a Jewish scholar who knew the Old Testament. He was a criminal. Earlier he had been as loud in his railing against Jesus as the other thief.

"And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." Not only does the thief believe that Jesus is a king, but he also believes that Jesus intends to conquer death itself. Look around. There were no trained armies waiting for the word to rescue Jesus from the Jews and the Romans. The thief has some sense of life after death, along with a sense that Jesus shall be in a position to do gracious things after the day's cruel charade has ended.

"And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." People who choose their own private ideas over Scripture have worked long and hard to twist Jesus' words in this verse. Those who reject the Biblical truth that we go from death immediately and consciously into the glorious presence of the Lord must twist these

words so as to leave the impression that Jesus didn't at all say what He so clearly and simply said. Consider one bizarre explanation from a major group that teaches the unbiblical idea of "Soul sleep." According to their explanation, Jesus didn't tell the thief anything about what they would experience after death that day. The explanation of this aberrant movement interprets Jesus as saying, "Verily I say unto thee today, thou shalt be with me in paradise." Notice the relocated comma. When Jesus spoke the words, "Verily I say unto thee," there was no need to add "today." He wouldn't say, "I say unto thee tomorrow," or "I say unto thee yesterday." The present tense verb suffices. Jesus told the thief about something that they both would experience together on that same day. Both of them would "...be in paradise." Jesus never used confusing or superfluous words.

Scripture consistently describes our experience between death and the Second Coming in terms of consciousness, either in glory with the Lord or in hell and righteous punishment. Sincere studious believers differ in their interpretation of the lesson of Lazarus and the rich man. (Luke 16:19-31) Some view it as a parable, while others view it as a literal narrative about two men who lived and died. While I definitely hold the literal view of the lesson, for purposes of this study, the question is immaterial. Why? Jesus never built His parables on myths. He always built them on literal, everyday reality, a farmer with his crops, a shepherd with his sheep, etc. Thus, even if we view this lesson as a parable, we must acknowledge the underlying literal reality of the lesson, and that reality strongly affirms continued consciousness after death for both the saved and the unsaved. And this truth Jesus affirmed to the thief in our study passage.

When Paul, at the time under house arrest, wrote the Philippians, he described a personal dilemma. (Philippians 1:23-24) The Romans might decide to execute him; he would then depart and "...be with Christ." Or they might tire of guarding him and choose to release him. Then he could "...abide in the flesh," an option that Paul described as more needful for the Philippians. In his assessment, Paul effectively weighs two choices, 1) depart and be with Christ, 2) remain in this world and be with the Philippians. There is no implication that Paul intended to equate unconscious nothingness with active spiritual interaction with the Philippians.

In 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, Paul deals with our "Intermediate state," what we experience between death and the Second Coming. He does not teach us that God shall give us a temporary physical body to inhabit until the resurrection. However, he does clearly describe consciousness from now till then. How are we then "clothed" during this intervening time? Paul answers the question beautifully and comfortingly, "...that mortality might be swallowed up of life." (2 Corinthians 5:4b)

If the idea of soul-sleep were true, we must deal with a major problem. To hold the view consistently, we must not only prove by Scripture that every person who dies—or has died—slips into this unconscious nothingness, but we must also come to grips with the obvious dilemma. During the three days from death to resurrection, did Jesus' soul sleep? Or was He actively engaged with the Father in dealing with the glorious results of His sufferings and death for our sins, typified in vivid details in the Old Testament Levitical priesthood, and confirmed in the New Testament Book of Hebrews? Nothing in the Levitical order and priestly processes allowed for the priest to "Sleep on the job." During every moment of his annual work on the Day of Atonement, each act of a busy schedule was scripted and commanded by God.

We cannot imagine the experience of the thief who prayed to Jesus on the cross. Shortly after Jesus' death, the Roman soldiers broke his leg bones, accelerating his death. Thus, he arrives in Paradise very shortly after Jesus, an early witness who experienced the benefits in Paradise that Jesus accomplished in His sinless, atoning death. In a moment, this thief went from jail cell to glory as an eyewitness of Jesus in His crowning glory with the Father. No, we cannot even approach getting our minds around this glorious reality.

Serious Bible students will hopefully not take offense that I raise the senseless and unbiblical idea that, upon death, children of God become angels in heaven. I shall never forget my surprise years ago when I heard a preacher's widow (He already knew the truth, for he had gone to glory) say, "Oh, everyone knows that, when we die, we become an angel." Based on Scripture, God created angels. They are different created beings from us. And we should not forget that we who have been blessed with the gospel and therein "...rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory" experience something that "...angels desire to look into." (1 Peter 1:8, 12) If we become angels when we die, why would we forget the most fundamental truth of Scripture's good news about our salvation?

What does this lesson give to us? It reminds us in simple and understandable words what we also should anticipate and rejoice to experience. As the thief did not suffer a detour to an in-between abyss or simply slip into unconsciousness at his death, even so we have the same conscious, joyful experience to anticipate when we leave this world. If the gospel now, fully embraced in faith, gives us "...joy unspeakable and full of glory," what shall we experience when we arrive in glory, in "Paradise," and see our risen and now glorified Lord?

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor