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**“Jesus and one of the thieves went to Paradise (Luke 23:43). What do we know of Paradise?”**

The word ‘paradise’ has been borrowed by Hebrew and Greek from the old Persian, where it signified a royal pleasure-park, enclosed by walls and liberally planted with trees. It was also well stocked with game. The gardens of Babylonian houses, unlike ours, were also planted with trees, and not with flowers and vegetables. So we learn at the outset that in its original usage ‘paradise’ referred to a place on earth.

### **The Earthly Paradise**

This is referred to in English as the ‘Garden of Eden’ (Gen. 2:8). This Garden, similarly planted with trees, like the gardens of the Babylonian houses, had been planted by Yahveh Elohim ‘eastward’ in the land of Eden, and Adam, the first man, had to tend it and to keep trespassers out (Gen. 2:8-15).

There has been great controversy as to where the Garden of Eden was situated. It has been placed by different people in Armenia, in the region of Damascus, in Southern Arabia, India, among other places, but detailed study by scholars of Cuneiform inscriptions have settled it, in their own minds anyway, in Babylonia. It seems that the early dwellers of Babylonia referred to that region as ‘Edin’, which literally means ‘the plain’. It is said that the tides flowed up the mouths of the Tigris and Euphrates and other rivers, and so inundated the plain with water, hence its fertility; not unnaturally these waterings were known as ‘inundations’ (This would explain the ‘mist’ of Gen. 2:6). Further interesting data could be uncovered relative to this, but for our purposes for now, suffice it to say that the word ‘paradise’ has been used to describe an earthly region, and that this region is known as the ‘Garden of Eden’. (The reader may wish to explore the use of the word ‘garden’ in the O.T. in the following scriptures, Eccl.2:5; S. of Sol. 4:13; Isa. 1:30; Jer. 29:5; Ezek. 31:8-9.)

### **The N.T. Paradise**

I suppose the statement most remembered in this context is that made by one of the malefactors crucified with Jesus and as recorded by Luke. You will recall, of course, that John makes no mention of the ones crucified with Jesus, and Matthew and Mark both record that the thieves reviled the Lord, as did some of the people and the Jewish rulers. Nevertheless, Luke *does* record a dialogue which reads like this, “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in

paradise" (Luke 23:39-43). Therefore, taking the words quite literally, we notice the following facts; (i) the thief would go to paradise, (ii) it would be on the day of the crucifixion, and (iii) Jesus would be with him. We now need to look for scriptural evidence as to where Jesus went, because where Jesus went is referred to as paradise, and this is the subject of our question.

### Where did Jesus go?

In order to be truly objective we must bring into view all the events and facts as we know them. In the first place it is quite evident that after the crucifixion the *body* of Jesus was placed in the tomb. The length of time that His body was in the tomb seems to be governed by His words as recorded by Matthew, "For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:40).

As regards the *soul* of Jesus, we have to look at Acts of Apostles. In his speech on the Day of Pentecost, Peter quotes freely from David the Patriarch, "Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne; he seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his *soul* was not left in hell (Hades), neither his flesh did see corruption" (Acts 2:30,31). Hades literally signifies 'the all-receiving'; it is generally looked upon as the region of the departed lost, but up to the time of the Ascension of Christ it seemed to include the souls of the blessed dead. So we are now able to state two points quite clearly, (i) the *soul* of Jesus was not left in Hades, and (ii) His body was not to see corruption. It seems to me that whatever else Jesus may have divested Himself of when He left heaven, He *did not* divest Himself of His Divine nature; He was Son of God and Son of man. If we hold, as I do, that the spiritual life, emanating from the life-source of the Eternal Spirit, is indestructible, then at the death of Jesus that part of Him *must* have returned to the Father.

When we consider the resurrection of Jesus we are thinking of a unique event. He was the first-born from among the dead, i.e., He lived *never to die again*. So we cannot press too closely the similarity between Christ and ourselves. Evidently, the resurrection of Jesus, and His appearances subsequently, were in order to work out the determinate counsel of God.

### The Heavens

We must now turn our attention to the Ascension of Christ. The writer to the Hebrews says, "Seeing then that we have a great high priest that is passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession" (Heb. 4:14). The same writer says, "He was made higher than the heavens" (7:26). Paul says, "He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things" (Eph. 4:10). So here we have a word picture of Jesus ascending *through* the heavens and according to Paul ascending to a place *far above all heavens*. These aerial heavens are the ones mentioned in Acts of Apostles, "Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from *heaven*, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17). These, I believe, are the heavens mentioned in Heb. 1:10,11, where the writer says, "And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands: They shall perish; but thou remainest; and they shall wax old as doth a garment". Taking up this theme Peter tells us, "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are

therein shall be burned up" (2 Peter 3:10). These are *not* the heavens to which Jesus ascended. These are the aerial heavens.

The heaven to which Jesus ascended is the uncreated, eternal sphere of God's abode. Because it is God's *eternal* abode, it follows that it cannot suffer the same fate as the *heavens* in the Peter passage. This is the place where Jesus came from, and to which He has returned, and from whence He ministers for the saints. We must not be confused by the gradation of heaven in some of the Rabbinical teaching. Some held that there were two heavens, some three, some seven. We are not to suppose that Paul is giving credence to the Rabbinical teaching when he gives his experience in being caught up to the third heaven (2 Cor. 12). In this passage the word 'third' is used as an adjective and is *descriptive*, not *nominative*, of the heaven to which he refers. What Paul means is that he was caught up - seized by force, literally - into the *highest* heaven that he could envisage, i.e., the dwelling place of God. It is interesting to note, and very specific to our question, that he refers to this place as paradise (v4).

What do we know of paradise? Well all the evidence seems to suggest that it is the eternal dwelling place of God. It is heaven 'itself'. It is Abraham's Bosom. It is the place from which the light shone on Paul on the Damascus road. It will be the home of the saints in glory. It will excel every brilliant descriptive phrase used of it in Revelation. There we shall be enfolded in the everlasting arms.