

Appendix III

The Conventional, Mistaken Interpretation of Equating Paradise with Heaven

A REVIEW OF EVANGELICAL commentary on Luke 23:43 finds that **many leading evangelicals interpret “Paradise” as synonymous with the presence of God (Heaven).** Notable examples include John MacArthur, John Piper, Wayne Grudem, and others, who explicitly argue that the thief’s promise of Paradise with Jesus is entry into God’s heavenly abode. These authors typically appeal to parallel New Testament texts (e.g. 2 Corinthians 12:4, Revelation 2:7, 22:2) and the immediate context (“today...Paradise”) to support the identification of Paradise with Heaven.

For example, MacArthur notes that the “parallelism” of Luke’s phrasing requires “Paradise [to] be equated with heaven”. John Piper likewise concludes “Paradise is the heavenly abode of God” by citing 2 Cor. 12 and Revelation contexts. These primary sources (sermons, commentaries, official statements) demonstrate that Paradise, in the conventional view, is equated with heaven.

Notable Evangelical Voices Equating Paradise with Heaven

John MacArthur

MacArthur explicitly teaches that Luke 23:43’s “Paradise” is heavenly. In *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (2 Corinthians)*, he writes: “the parallelism of the two phrases demands that Paradise be equated with heaven (see Luke 23:43...Rev. 2:7)”.¹ He grounds this on the fact that Revelation 2:7 places the tree of life in Paradise, and Revelation 22 places that tree in the New Jerusalem (heaven). MacArthur’s hermeneutic is literal-historical; he views Luke’s grammar (“Truly...today...Paradise”) as meaning an immediate transition to the heavenly abode.²

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1. John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (2 Corinthians)*, (Moody Publishers, 1987).
 2. John MacArthur, “Caught Up to the Third Heaven.” *Grace to You*. <https://shop.gty.org/library/bibleqnas-library/QA0088/caught-up-to-the-third-heaven/>.

John Piper

In a Good Friday sermon “Today You Will Be with Me in Paradise,” Piper likewise identifies Paradise as heaven. He reasons from cross-references: 2 Corinthians 12 (Paradise = “third heaven”) and Revelation 2:7–22 (tree of life in Paradise/Heaven) to conclude “Paradise is the heavenly abode of God”. Piper emphasizes that when Jesus said “Today...Paradise,” the thief’s soul would immediately join Christ in God’s presence (infinite joy awaiting believers).³

Billy Graham Evangelistic Association

In an official Q&A, Billy Graham’s team plainly states: “In the New Testament, ‘paradise’ is simply another word for heaven, the dwelling place of God”. The article (BGEA Answers, updated 2025) uses simple language to explain Luke 23:43: the penitent thief’s destination was heaven (“paradise”). This denominational statement is a primary source for the Graham ministry’s view. It cites no detailed exegesis but relies on the traditional evangelical understanding that heaven alone meets the “perfect beauty and happiness” of paradise.⁴

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3. John Piper, “Today You Will Be with Me in Paradise.” *Desiring God*, Desiring God Ministries. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/today-you-will-be-with-me-in-paradise/>.
 4. Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. “Is Paradise the Same Thing as Heaven?” *Billy Graham Evangelistic Association of Canada*. <https://www.billygraham.ca/answer/jesus-told-the-thief-on-the-cross-he-would-be-with-him-in-paradise-is-paradise-the-same-thing-as-heaven/>

Wayne Grudem

Grudem explicitly equates Paradise with heaven in a *Zondervan Academic* blog. Discussing whether Christ “descended into Hell,” he notes: “‘Today you will be with me in Paradise’ ... implies that... Jesus’ soul...went immediately to the presence of the Father in heaven”. He adds: “Some people deny this by arguing that ‘Paradise’ is a place distinct from heaven, but in both of the other NT uses the word clearly means ‘heaven’.” He then cites 2 Cor 12:4 and Rev 2:7/22 to show Paradise = heaven. Grudem’s hermeneutic is biblical-theological (cross-references) and creedal (affirming Christ’s conscious presence with God at death). This is primary content (his own writing) on Zondervan’s platform.⁵

David Jeremiah

In a blog article “9 Insider Secrets About Heaven,” Jeremiah summarizes the heavenly hope of believers. On the intermediate state he states: “The Bible teaches... every believer...went to an intermediate heaven called Paradise, also called Abraham’s bosom... But when Jesus ascended...He took all...Old Testament saints...with Him to the third heaven (Eph 4:8–10). This means... Paradise is no longer an intermediate place; Paradise is now with God.”. In particular: “*Paradise is no longer an intermediate place; Paradise is now with God (2 Corin-*

5. Grudem, Wayne. “Did Jesus Really Descend into Hell?” *Zondervan Academic*, Zondervan. <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/did-jesus-really-descend-into-hell/>.

thians 12:2-4).” Here Jeremiah teaches that today “Paradise” essentially means Christ’s heavenly home.⁶

Study Bibles

Herewith a sample of the widespread literature teaching that we go to heaven upon death as disembodied souls to carry on life there.

The NIV Study Bible

In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT) the word ‘paradise’ designated a garden (Ge 2:8–10) or forest (Ne 2:8), but in the NT (used only here [Luke 23:43] and in 2 Co 12:4; Rev 2:7) [the word ‘paradise’] refers to the place of bliss and rest between death and resurrection (cf. Lk 16:22; 2 Co 12:2).

Note: The NIV’s commentary is certainly correct in the sense that the word “paradise” *has come to mean* a place of bliss between death and resurrection. And in that context the use of the word “paradise” always means “heaven.” Because we interpret the words that Jesus spoke to the criminal about “paradise” as meaning “heaven,” this text (Luke 23:43) has become the key Bible verse that has misled millions of Christians

6. Jeremiah, David. “9 Insider Secrets About Heaven.” *Turning Point Ministries*. <https://davidjeremiah.blog/9-insider-secrets-about-heaven/>.

to believe that heaven is their disembodied destination immediately upon death. To avoid misunderstanding let me state at the outset that the Bible does teach that upon death believers *go to be with Christ*. But that is a more complex issue we will discuss in another article or possibly a book. The biblical teachings about “going to be with Christ” is a thousand times more glorious than going to heaven. In heaven we will supposedly lead a disembodied existence living a life about which we know nothing.

The New RSV Study Bible:

Paradise, originally a royal garden, the Garden of Eden in the Septuagint, and later as here, is a synonym for heaven.

Note: I hope this book will have convinced the reader that in Scripture, the use of the word “paradise” has nothing to do with heaven. The Bible carefully distinguishes between heaven and earth and paradise. The meaning of Paradise is best understood based on what Scripture teaches about Paradise beginning in Genesis. Paradise is always of the earth. It is the home and the place where Adam, in perfect fellowship with God, was to execute his cultural mandate. And earth is the place we will inhabit at the resurrection.

The New Century Version Study Bible informs the reader that “paradise” is another word for heaven.

The *NIV Study Bible* on 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 teaches that the term “paradise” is synonymous with the third heaven, where those believers who have died are even now “at home with the Lord.”

Note: Is there a resurrection of sorts without a body prior to the great resurrection at the end of time? The apostle Paul makes it perfectly clear that we must put on immortality. And does this **begin** to happen in some mysterious way when the believer is informed in Colossians 3:3 that when he dies, his **life** is now *hidden* with Christ in God?

It is a wonderful biblical truth that believers go to be with Christ upon their death, but in a much more exhilarating manner than in mistaking Paradise for heaven. As we will see.

The authoritative **Dutch Staten Bijbel** of 1586 also asserts that “paradise” is synonymous with heaven.

The Ryrie Study Bible, NAS edition, teaches that in the LXX (Septuagint) in Genesis 2:8, the word “paradise” suggests a garden, but in the three New Testament uses the word “paradise” speaks of heaven.

The *MacArthur Study Bible* notes the following: The word paradise suggests a garden (it is the word used of Eden in the LXX), but in all three New Testament uses it is speaking of heaven.

The first edition of the NET **Bible** states that in Luke 23:43 the use of the word “paradise” refers to the abode of the righteous dead. This is understood to be heaven.

T. Robertson’s *Word Pictures in the New Testament* states:

However crude may have been the robber’s Messianic ideas Jesus clears the path for him. He promises him immediate and conscious fellowship after death with Christ in Paradise which is a Persian word and is used here not for any supposed intermediate state; but the very bliss of heaven itself... The word occurs in two other passages in the N.T. (2 Co 12:4; Rev 2:7), in both of which the reference is plainly to heaven.

Furthermore, the *Fourfold Gospel Study Bible* explains that:

To-day shalt thou be with me in Paradise... Jesus answered the robber’s prayer by a solemn promise that they would, that day, be together in that portion of the invisible world where those who are accepted of God await the resurrection.

Consider also the commentary on Luke 23:43 in the *ESV Study Bible*, which states:

Paradise is another name for heaven, the dwelling place of God and the eternal home of the righteous (cf. 2 Cor. 12:3; Rev. 2:7). The Septuagint uses the same Greek word to refer to the “garden of Eden” (cf. note on Gen. 2:8–9). Jesus’ words therefore may hint at a restoration of the intimate, personal fellowship with God that existed in Eden before the fall.

Note: This “hint” which in truth should be a blast from a trumpet, sends the reader in a biblical direction. As we will see.

Commentaries

The widely respected Dutch commentary, the *Korte Verklaring*, also falls in line designating *paradise* as heaven. According to Dr. S. Greijdanus, the criminal went to heaven with Jesus within hours of the time that they had their conversation on the cross.

John Wesley, in his *Explanatory Notes* writes that paradise is “the place where the souls of the righteous remain from death till the resurrection. As if he had said, I will not only remember thee then, but this very day.”

John Darby, in his *Synopsis of the New Testament*, ex-

plains that:

The thief had asked Jesus to remember him when He returned in His kingdom. The Lord replies that he should not wait for that day of manifested glory which would be visible to the world, but that this very day he should be with Him in Paradise (that is, heaven, JH).

And Dr. Cornelis P. Venema in his book, *The Promise of the Future*, asserts that “Read in its context (Luke 23:43), Jesus is affirming the criminal’s fellowship with him immediately upon death in ‘paradise’ which we are told is heaven.” Note: We are told no such thing.

Consider also *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary Vol. IX: Luke-John*, which states about Luke 23:43 that “...the criminal would feast with Jesus that day in Paradise.”

In his commentary on Luke 23:43, **D. L. Moody** writes: “In the morning he (the criminal) is condemned by men as not fit to live on earth; in the evening he is reckoned good enough for heaven.”

John W. Cooper, in his book *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, on page 104 asks the question: “What happens when we die?” The answer he offers on page 105 is the

following:

Most traditional Christians would affirm something like Answer 57 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*:

Not only my soul will be taken immediately after this life to Christ its head, but even my flesh, raised by the power of Christ, will be reunited with my soul and made like Christ's glorious body.

This confession implies a period of time – an interim or intermediate state – between death and the resurrection during which the soul will exist with Christ apart from the body.

Sermons

The **Rev. Matt Carter of Austin Stone Community Church**, in his sermon entitled: “Today You will be with Me in Paradise,” commented that this text means to convey that “the joy of heaven will be knowing Jesus forever.”⁷

Rev. Peter Slofstra of the Christian Reformed Church, in a sermon of the same title, comments that “Paradise is

7. Rev. Matt Carter, “Today You will be with Me in Paradise,” *Austin Community Church* (2014). <https://austinstone.org/resources/sermons/481--today-you-will-be-with-me-in-paradise/>.

the word Jesus used on the cross to describe heaven...”⁸

There is yet another equivocation in what **Rev. Rob-in Koshy** says in his sermon “An Encounter with the Crucified King”, where he states “...it was more than immortality that Jesus promised the penitent thief. He promised him the honored place of a companion of the garden in the courts of heaven.”

And **Rev. Jeff Arthur of Elizabeth Baptist Church**, when expositing the same words of Jesus in Luke 23:43, says that “when Jesus said he went to Paradise, he went to heaven... straight to heaven, the moment that he died. And I’m telling you that Paradise according to 2 Corinthians 12 is actually heaven.”

In his sermon entitled: “The Dying Thief in a New Light,” **Charles Spurgeon** writes: “Still, I think he has the best of it who is converted, and enters heaven the same night... Why is it that our Lord does not emparadise us all?” (**Note:** I love Spurgeon’s sermons. My contrarian point in this article is that on the cross Christ *did* emparadise us all—both the living and the dead!)

8. Rev. Peter Slofstra, “Today You will be with Me in Paradise,” *Christian Reformed Church* (2012). <https://www.crcna.org/resources/church-resources/reading-sermons/today-you-will-be-me-paradise-0/>.

Books

In the book *Home* by **Elyse Fitzpatrick**, a popular Christian author, we read on page 91 that:

Although we don't have as many details as we might want, the Bible clearly teaches that at our death we go from earth to Paradise, and then come back to the renewed earth in our resurrected bodies as citizens of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21).

On page 47 of *Home*, Fitzpatrick had earlier informed her readers that: "Perhaps it would be better to refer to the place we are longing for, the place where we go immediately after death, as 'Paradise' rather than 'heaven'..." This hopeless confusion between "earth," "paradise," and "heaven" is confirmed on page 57 of *Home* where we read: "...this is where we're headed: to Paradise, to heaven..."

Consider another popular Christian author. In his classic treatment of the subject, **Randy Alcorn**, in no fewer than 530 pages, introduces a novel understanding of the relationship between "Earth," "Heaven," and "Paradise" in his book entitled *Heaven*. In the book's Preface, Alcorn writes:

"Examining the table of contents will give you a good feel for this book. In part I, 'A Theology of Heaven,' I

will explain the difference between the present Heaven (where Christians go when they die) and the ultimate, eternal Heaven (where God will dwell with his people on the New Earth)."

Note: The New Earth according to Alcorn becomes Heaven. All of this confusion would disappear if proper distinctions were made between heaven, earth, and paradise.

The relationship of Heaven to Paradise is explained on page 55 of Alcorn's book. There he writes: "During the Crucifixion, when Jesus said to the thief on the cross, 'Today you will be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43), he was referring to the present Heaven."

Note: Once again, in an exhaustive and best-selling study (530 pages), the reader is taught that when Jesus referred to Paradise on the cross, He was actually referring to heaven. Again, in all those pages, the reader is deprived of the biblical dynamic of the torn curtain and the opened graves. Acts performed by the Father immediately upon His Son's death emphasizing the paradisaical nature of Christ's sacrifice. What did the Father have to do to be heard? What Jesus achieved on the cross was not a disembodied passage to a heaven that was slated to pass away but entrance into Paradise. Entrance into unencumbered fellowship with God and the gift of eternal

life. My God: The curtain and the graves.

Derek Prince, in his book *War in Heaven*, writes in line with what others have been saying that:

Paradeisos (paradise) is the Greek word for a “garden.” It describes God’s garden in heaven. Paradise is the ultimate destination of all sinners who have truly repented and who have persevered in the life of faith. On the cross, Jesus promised the penitent thief that the two of them would be together that day in Paradise: “And Jesus said to him, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in *Paradise*’” (Luke 23:43).⁹

Note: Again, paradise describes God’s garden in heaven.

Erwin W. Lutzer, the senior pastor of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago at the time also writes in his book, *The Serpent of Paradise*, that:

Christ’s death opened heaven to those who are His children. To the thief on the cross He could say, “Today you shall be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). There is now a direct route to heaven, opened by One who Himself has entered.¹⁰

9. Derek Prince, *War in Heaven: God’s Epic Battle with Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 2003), 13.

10. Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Serpent of Paradise: The Incredible Story of How Satan’s Rebellion Serves God’s Purposes* (Chicago, IL:

And in the book, *Answering the Toughest Questions about Heaven and Hell*, by Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz, we read:

This question [Can My Loved Ones in Heaven See Me?] also goes to the discussion about the “intermediate state” – that period between the time a Christian dies and when Jesus returns (we talked about this in chapter 2). We would like to think that our departed loved ones are not in some kind of suspended animation . . . but are experiencing a conscious, active life with Jesus and perhaps enjoying relationships with other believers, including those they knew during their time on earth. . . . This is not an unreasonable conclusion, although there’s not a lot in Scripture that speaks to the intermediate state. The strongest description is given by Jesus himself, when he says to the repentant thief hanging on a cross next to him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).¹¹

We see this repeatedly in the disciples, who struggled to grasp even the plain teaching of Christ. May the Spirit of God illumine our minds to behold what is truly revealed in His Word, and grant us the clarity to cast off unbiblical, Greek-influenced (Platonistic) notions—

Moody Press, 1996), 96–97.

11. Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz, *Answering the Toughest Questions about Heaven and Hell* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2017), 161–62.

particularly the assumption that the believer's ultimate hope is a disembodied ascent to heaven at death. Paradise was lost in the first Adam, it has been regained in the second Adam, as of 3 p.m. on Golgotha, and it will be fully realized upon Christ's return.