

# Today, You Will Be With Me

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

The Second of the Seven Last Words

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*Luke 15:1–7 (NIV)*

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. <sup>2</sup>But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

<sup>3</sup>Then Jesus told them this parable: <sup>4</sup>“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? <sup>5</sup>And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders <sup>6</sup>and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ <sup>7</sup>I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

*Luke 23:35–43 (NIV)*

<sup>35</sup>The people stood watching [Jesus hang on the cross], and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.”

<sup>36</sup>The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar <sup>37</sup>and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”

<sup>38</sup>There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

<sup>39</sup>One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

<sup>40</sup>But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? <sup>41</sup>We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

<sup>42</sup>Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

<sup>43</sup>Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

*Jesus’ first word is a word of forgiveness. His second is a promise. It is a promise made to an outcast and sinner. It is a promise made to the condemned.*

*It is a promise made to you and to me – if only we will trust.*

Beaten and battered, Jesus hangs on a Roman cross just outside the northwestern wall of Jerusalem. Naked, his clothes have been divided up among his tormentors. Yet, he has forgiven them. His first words as he swiftly approaches his death are words of forgiveness.

Now, his humiliation continues. The crowds gape; local leaders sneer. He is mocked – *The Chosen One? Ha! He can’t even save himself.* Even the Roman soldiers join in. For any Jew, the public humiliation would, perhaps, be the worst of it all.

Contemptuously, the soldiers toast Jesus with sour wine – *Would the “King of the Jews” like a little drink?* They hang a sign above Jesus that reads “King of the Jews.” What a joke, they think. This man a king? We’ve shown him.

Finally, this scornful circus is joined even by one of the two condemned rebels hanging next to Jesus on crosses of their own. *C’m on man. Some Messiah you are. How about saving yourself. And us too!*

But then, in the midst of all this sneering darkness, a small but very bright line shines. The second rebel speaks up, but not to mock or scorn or taunt Jesus. Rather, he rebukes the other rebel – *We are getting what we deserve, but this man has done nothing wrong. He is innocent. Can’t you see that? Don’t you fear God?*

Then, in weakness and pain, the man turned to Jesus, saying, *Remember me when you come into your kingdom*, to which Jesus replies, *Today, you will be with me in paradise.*

*Today, YOU will be with me in Paradise*

Who is this man? We don't know. He's on the cross because he was some sort of rebel, perceived as a threat by the Romans. But we don't even know his name. Was he a disciple of Jesus? No reason to think so. What does he know of Jesus? Hard to say; perhaps not much at all. Perhaps he only learned Jesus' name on that day. We do know this about the man: he put his faith and trust in Jesus. And that is all we really need to know, for this is all Jesus asks of any of us. That we will trust him fully and completely, that we will put ourselves in his hands. This would surely offend some. This is a condemned man, a criminal, the very worst sort of person. Surely it is the good and righteous folks who will be ushered into the kingdom. Not this . . . sinner.

But this had always been Jesus' way. All are invited to his banquet. All are welcome. Time and again Jesus demonstrated this by making sure he ate with various collections of sinners, even the hated tax collectors. All are welcome, so long as they will trust Jesus.

*A shocking welcome*

When we talk about welcoming everyone to St. Andrew or to the Lord's table, it is easy to let our minds glide along the surface and miss how shocking the word "everyone" can really be. When Jesus shared a table with tax-collectors or healed the shunned lepers, he enacted a welcome that the average Jew on the street would have found most disturbing. Indeed, with the tax collector sitting next to him and the Pharisees on the outside looking in (Luke 15:1-7), it is as if Jesus said, "Imagine whoever you think just could not be welcome at God's table . . . well, they will be the first in the door."

Jesus turned everything upside down. He demonstrated to everyone that the New Covenant people of God were to be shaped by neither rules-keeping nor exclusion. Rather, by extending welcome in the way that he did, Jesus demonstrated the concrete reality of God's forgiveness, a forgiveness that was to be the central characteristic of God's people. Simply put, Jesus called the Jews to a new understanding and a new way of being God's covenant people.

And there is still more to Jesus' welcome. Jesus' fellow Jews knew that though they lived in the land of Israel, for all practical purposes, they still lived in exile under the thumb of foreign rulers. In their minds, they had labored under this exile for centuries as punishment for their sins. Now, they fervently awaited the end of this exile and the arrival of God's kingdom. Jesus' bold enactment of God's forgiveness and welcome was a claim that God's kingdom was indeed arriving and that, of course, Israel's sins were being forgiven. The exile was ending. The banquet doors were thrown wide open!

There is nothing that we can do to place ourselves beyond the reach of God's love and forgiveness. In turn, the welcome we extend to others must bear true forgiveness and inclusion. When we welcome others into God's house and God's family, we are welcoming them home.

And so . . . Jesus welcomed this condemned man hanging on the cross next to him. It is as simple and as profound as that.

*TODAY, you will be WITH ME in Paradise*

Surprisingly, the Bible has very little to say about what happens to us immediately after our death. The Bible has much to say about the time when the cosmos will be remade and we will all be resurrected just as Jesus was resurrected. But right after our death? Nope. The New Testament has only two passages that speak to the question. The first is our passage for this week. "Today," Jesus tells the man. *Today . . . with me.* I take Jesus at his word. Paul echoes this in a letter to the Christians in Philippi. Paul knows the executioner could come for him at any time and he tells the believers that he is ready to "be with Christ, which is far better [than his present life]" (Philippians 1:23). This is the second passage that is on point.

Jesus tells the man that he will "be with" Jesus. Paul expects to "be with Christ." What exactly does this mean? I don't know and the Bible doesn't tell me. I suppose that here too we are to trust Jesus, to know that nothing could really be better than to be with the One who gave his life for us. I generally just pack this with as much goodness as I can, always

remembering that even this *with-Christness* has a sense of waiting for something even bigger, even more wonderful.

*Today, you will be with me IN PARADISE*

Hanging on the cross, Jesus tells the criminal hanging next to him that they will be together in Paradise on that day. What are we to make of this? Are we too headed for “Paradise?” Is that to be our hoped-for final destination, the place where we will be with God forever? In both ancient Jewish and Greek literature, *paradeisos* connotes an enclosed space, such as a garden. We can think of it as a place where we will be with God, but it could just as easily refer to a place of waiting as to any sort of permanent home. The *NIV Study Bible (2011)* says the word “paradise” refers to “the place of bliss and rest between death and resurrection.” And that is just what Jesus promises the rebel who has placed in trust in Jesus.

For too many Christians, our post-death existence consists simply of our soul heading off to be with God while our remains turn slowly to dust. End of story. In this view, Jesus’ resurrection is little more than an example; he has shown us that we will head off somewhere ourselves one day.

However, what Jesus had in mind when he spoke to the criminal was certainly not a promise of some sort of eternal disembodied bliss, either for himself or for the criminal – or for you and me. Yes, most Christians rightly believe that upon our death we enter into a joyful fellowship with God, a paradise as it were, but our immediate life-after-death is only a waiting station, still anticipating God’s promised future, a most material future. There is a *life after life-after-death* that awaits us – and about that life, the Bible has much more to say, though not nearly so much as we’d like.

*Jesus’ resurrection and our own*

The place to begin to grasp all this is with Jesus’ resurrection. Christianity stands or falls on the truthfulness of our claim that Jesus was bodily resurrected after his crucifixion. This was no “mere” resuscitation, as if Jesus was yanked back from death on the operating table. Lazarus was resuscitated; he still went on to age and to die. But Jesus was resurrected, passing through death to life-after-death and on to “life after life-after-death.” One day, we shall be bodily resurrected just as Jesus was. We too will pass from life-after-death to our own, very physical, life after life-after-death. Paul writes that we will receive the same sort of resurrected body that Jesus received. After his resurrection, Jesus walked and talked and ate. So shall we. Physical bodies need nourishment, shelter, even gravity. For millennia, God’s prophets spoke of the day when God would, in a gigantic burst of new creation, remake and transform all of creation, making it ready for the bodily resurrection of his faithful people. Isaiah spoke of this remade cosmos as “a new heaven and a new earth.”

*“A new heaven and a new earth”*

How would you possibly describe a world that has been renewed and transformed by God? The prophets and biblical writers used very imaginative and poetic word-pictures to convey the beauty and goodness of God’s new heaven and new earth. The writer of Revelation helps to fill out this picture using phrases that are all from the Old Testament: “. . . he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more . . . nothing accursed will be found there.’

The prophet Micah spoke of the world’s people streaming to God’s mountain, where they would sit under trees, beating swords into plowshares. To people often living on subsistence diets, Jesus told stories about great banquets. He healed the lame and brought sight to the blind, for in God’s new creation there will be no lame and no blind. Our Christian hope is grounded in the concrete reality of these promises and images. God created a physical world and God has redeemed a physical world. The redemption is not complete but it has begun – and it cannot fail. Our Creator God, our loving Father, created us as unified beings, body and soul, and he will resurrect us as unified beings, body and spirit. Together, we shall one day live in love and harmony.

All of this is carried in the promise that Jesus makes to the condemned man and to each of us – if only we will place our faith in him.

## Where is this Paradise?

For the ancients, including the biblical writers, this was an easy question to answer: (1) heaven is where God is and (2) God is up there.

The ancient world's cosmology worked like this. We stand upon the earth. Underneath the ground there is some sort of shadowy, unpleasant underworld. The gods are "up there." Go straight up and the further you go, the closer you will get to the gods, or God. Thus, the Jews spoke of God as the "Most High." As far as his disciples were concerned, when Jesus returned to the Father after his resurrection, he had to go upwards, to ascend.

Our understanding of the universe is quite different. Persons standing in Dallas and in Beijing, both going upwards, would be headed in opposite directions (except for that curvature of spacetime thing!?).

So where is Jesus now? Where is this Paradise of which he spoke? Rather than thinking of someplace tucked into a distant corner of the galaxy, it is probably best to think of "paradise" as another dimension within God's creation. Perhaps we can think of the arrival of the new heaven and the new earth as the time when this heavenly dimension completely remakes the earthly dimension, when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. The biblical story is much more about this "merger" of heaven and earth than it is about our going off to "heaven."

Paul speaks of Christians as citizens of heaven. He doesn't mean that we are here for seven or eight decades waiting for the day when we can escape to go to our true home – up there somewhere. No, we are citizens of heaven here so that we might build for the heavenly kingdom in this world. Think of yourself as manning an outpost here, a colony of heaven. As God's colonists, our mission is to do all we can to see that God's will is done here as it is in heaven until such time as God's transformation of this world is consummated.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. It is difficult for us to grasp the shocking nature of Jesus' welcome of all the "wrong sorts of folks." Perhaps Jesus felt that he needed shock-value in order to penetrate the self-assured, self-righteous exclusion practiced by the Pharisees, the Essenes, and so many of Jesus' fellow Jews (and the rest of humanity, then and now!). It follows that the question we need to be asking ourselves is this: Where do we practice exclusion? Who, in your view, would not be welcome at St. Andrew? This is a time to be honest!
2. It may seem a bit odd that we talking about Jesus' resurrection when the questions around Jesus' words are usually about "heaven." Though we stand during worship each week and affirm our belief in "the resurrection of the body," many of us do not realize that we speaking of our own bodies, not Jesus'. Once we really grasp the truth that after our deaths we are headed for a quite physical resurrection of our own, then we can begin to reorient our thinking about "heaven" and, even better, our thinking about "the new heaven and new earth." Thus, you might begin by talking about the "resurrection of the body." Have you understood this affirmation? Don't be surprised if many people in your group have not; a majority of newcomers to my classes had always thought they were referring to Jesus. What does this affirmation say about your own existence after your death and after Jesus' return? Why do you think this particular affirmation has been one of the least argued over affirmations of the Christian faith for 2,000 years?
3. If we are to one day have physical bodies in a renewed and transformed physical world, how does this reshape your understanding of "heaven." You might spend some time using your imagination to describe the most wonderful, peaceful, joyful place you can imagine. How might it be most different from our own world? How might it be most similar to our world today? What do you think will be the place of family in the new heaven and new earth? Pets? Work? What we can imagine, not matter how wonderful and good, is only a foretaste of what is possible with God and what is promised by God.

## Daily Bible Readings

(“word-pictures” of God’s new heaven and new earth)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Isaiah 65:17-25; 66:22-23</b> Isaiah speaks of the new heaven and new earth</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Micah 4:1-5</b> A message about the “days to come”</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, 1 Corinthians 15:1-28</b> Jesus’ resurrection and our own; the destruction of death (v.26)</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Philippians 3:12-4:1</b> Pressing toward the goal. See v.20 – we are citizens of heaven; not someday, but now.</p>
<p><b>Friday, Revelation 21:9-27</b> The New Jerusalem. It is too literal to imagine an actual golden cube descending from the skies. See the promise of a glorious city in whose light “all the nations walk” (v. 24).</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

