**YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE**

Paradise.

What does that word mean to you?

Shangri-la? Hawaii? Caribbean tropical island? Your dream man-cave? Anywhere for 24 hours without screaming kids? A weight-watchers diet at an all-you-can-eat buffet?

Any and all concepts of paradise in this world will all one day go up in smoke (see 2 Pet. 3:10-13). And even before then what we believe is paradise on earth will soon be gone. As Joni Mitchell sings, “They paved paradise, put up a parking lot.” Here today, gone tomorrow. Adam’s Garden of Eden… gone. Israel’s promise land of milk and honey… gone. Solomon’s golden kingdom… gone. Nebuchadnezzar’s Hanging Gardens of Babylon… gone. Rome’s Imperial City on Seven Hills… gone.

While Americans have their concept of paradise located at an Orlando theme park or a Honolulu beach, disciples of Jesus Christ think and dream on a higher level. Our paradise is truly (and literally) out of this world. Our dream-come-true Fantasy Island is “up there” – not down here. This world is not my home, I’m just a passin’ through, my treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue.

To mention the word Paradise to the child of God drives our hearts back to the Garden from which the word came. It is said that the Persians used the word **PARDES** to refer to a walled city that offered security and peace to the King and his subjects. It was a garden, a place of trees and flowers with a serene setting that quieted the mind and heart. It was a king and his court’s get-away to find peace. Nebuchadnezzar’s *Hanging Gardens* was one of The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. But God’s Garden is one of The Seven Wonders of the Future World**.\***

* I just made that up, but my imagination can count at least 7 wonders we will yet see… 1. God 2. Jesus 3. Spirit 4. Angels 5. Redeemed 6. Heaven 7. Me (the most startling wonder of all, thanks to the grace of God).

We read of God’s *Garden* in places like Genesis 3:8 “*And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.”* Adam hears God’s walking, then hears God’s talking. “*I heard Your voice in the garden*…” (Genesis 3:10). Forget for a moment that this was a difficult experience for Adam, instead focus on the fact that this seemed to be a regular experience for him. He recognized God’s walk, and talk. He had been used to intimate contact with God. Can you imagine that? Can you? Wow!

But Adam’s Paradise was soon lost. He was removed from this intimate setting with his Creator. His sinless, curseless, sickless, deathless world was yanked away and replaced with a sin-cursed, sick and dying world. God paved paradise and put up a parking lot. From intimate walks and talks with God, suddenly they were thrust out to a life of blood, sweat and tears, to a world of birth pains and thorns-and-thistle farming.

Staring at the forbidding fiery swords of the Cherubim I can just hear Adam say to Eve, “What have we done?” John Milton pictured their emotions:

“They, looking back, all the eastern side beheld, Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,
Waved over by that flaming brand, the gate, With dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms:
Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon.” ― John Milton**,**[*Paradise Lost*](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/1031493)

Perhaps four to six millenniums later a nameless son of Adam was dying next to the second Adam – Jesus (Lk. 23:40-43). Knowing he faced certain death as he hung on a crucifix he rebuked his fellow thief for reviling Christ, then choked out his hopeful request, “*Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom*.” This suffering man, who likely had been despised and rejected all his lawless life, forsaken by all and having no one to mourn his death (Jesus had John, his mother, and other women), was stunned beyond words when he heard the reply, “*Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in paradise*.” Could he have heard right? “Could you say that again Lord? Do you mean ‘today?’ Do you mean before the sun sets You and I will walk in Your Garden?”

William Barclay writes in his commentary on Luke’s gospel,
“The word Paradise is a Persian word meaning a walled garden. When a Persian king wished to do one of his subjects a very special honor he made him a companion of the garden which meant he was chosen to walk in the garden with the king. 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.”

I will not here argue the controversial point of whether Jesus took him to Abraham’s bosom of comfort in Hades (Lk. 16:22), or God’s presence in the third heaven where Paul heard “*inexpressible things*,” and John wrote we will “*eat from the tree of life”* (2 Cor. 12:3; Rev. 2:7). Both are called paradise. Right now I’ll take either one.

We can speculate from now until the Lord’s return about what Paradise is like. To wrap our finite pea-brains around the “*inexpressible things*” of heaven is impossible from this present vale of tears. Reading such moving scriptures as 2 Corinthians 4:16 – 5:8; or I Corinthians 15; or Revelation 4-5, 20-22 leaves my head spinning. Read them yourself.

Hearing Jesus say to the apostles, then to me, these promising words: “*In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself;* ***that where I am, there you may be also***” (John 14:2-3). Just as He told the thief, so He tells me, “*Today you will be with Me in paradise… Where I am, there you may be also*!” I’m going to walk and talk with King Jesus in His garden!

You can keep Hawaii. Been there, done that. Same with Disneyland and Disney World. I’ve felt the breezes in old Shanghai. I’ve seen an eagle fly and experienced a Rocky Mountain high. I’ve driven the country roads to almost heaven, West Virginia, Blue Ridge mountains, Shenandoah river. But what I’ve never done is walk in the Garden of God, being led on a tour of Paradise by my savior Jesus. But I’m going to. And I’m going to enjoy learning the name of my neighbor, that thief who became a saint.

Abraham Lincoln told the story of a preacher who asked the assembled audience if they wanted to go to heaven. All but honest Abe raised their hands. The preacher looked at the tall gangly man and said, “Mr. Lincoln, don’t you wanna go to heaven?” He dryly replied, “Yes sir, I sure do, but I thought you were getting up a wagon load right now.”

The thief met Jesus in Paradise “*Today*.” Unlike Lincoln, I’m ready to get in that wagon today! I hope you will join me. It will sure be a wonderful trip to paradise!

Until tomorrow… I sing, “swing low, sweet chariot, comin’ for to carry me home.”

I love you.

Rick