

Appendix 2

A Look at Luke 23:43

In publishing this Appendix I know that I am playing with fire. For some, it will, once and for all, prove that my works should be avoided. I am a dangerous man, not to say verging on being a heretic. This Appendix will be the last straw.¹

On the other hand, for a few – almost certainly, only a *very* few – it might be that reading these pages might prove to be a blessing, an eye-opener, something which might, for them, shed new light on a well-known and frequently-preached passage. It might remind them how many evangelicals have allowed one of the great truths of the new covenant to slip through their fingers. Furthermore, it might help them to see how Christ was magnificently glorified from a most unexpected quarter at what seemed to be his lowest point. (Do not miss my deliberate, repeated use of ‘might’ in all that!). Anyway, the writing of this book (this Appendix in particular) has done all that for me.

What’s in a comma?

Commas can be troublesome things, very troublesome things.

A woman had recently been bereaved. Writing to a friend, she said: ‘My husband died last week, what awful weather we’ve been having’. Think of the weight that poor comma had to carry!

Oscar Wilde, wishing (I strongly suspect) to deflate a pompous enquirer who had asked how he’d spent his day, replied to the effect that for half of it he’d been toying with inserting a comma in a poem, and for the other half taking it out.

¹ To add another cliché: it will put the tin hat on it.

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And what about Sir Roger Casement – the man who ‘was hanged on a comma’? Well... no, actually, he wasn’t; it would be more accurate to say he was hanged on the absence of a comma – or, at least, on the doubt as to whether a smudge on an old manuscript was – or was not – a comma. What a difference that made!

This is how it came about.

During the First World War I, Casement was charged with violating the Treason Act of 1351 by trying to raise German support for the Easter Rising in Ireland.² Casement’s counsel, not denying the facts, argued that because of the punctuation – or lack of it – in the original (medieval) legal document, his client was not technically guilty of treason. After detailed scrutiny of the ancient manuscript by learned legal men, Casement was found guilty and hanged; hence, hanged on a comma (or its absence).

Yes, commas can be troublesome things.

Consider this:

Bill rode on his horse sweating profusely.

Should we understand that Bill needed a shower:

Bill rode on his horse, sweating profusely?

Or that Bill’s nag needed a good rub down:

Bill rode on, his horse sweating profusely?

² The Easter Rising, also known as the Easter Rebellion, was an armed insurrection in Ireland in April 1916. Some Irish nationalists proclaimed an Irish Republic and, along with some 1,600 followers, seized prominent buildings in Dublin, thereby coming into conflict with British troops. Within a week, the insurrection had been quashed, with more than 2,000 dead or injured. The leaders of the rebellion were executed, but, with the passage of time, they came to be regarded as martyrs. In 1921, a treaty was signed, establishing the Irish Free State in 1922. Hence, the modern-day Republic of Ireland.

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All very interesting no doubt – perhaps amusing – but why am I spending time on a comma? A comma, I ask you! Talk about a storm in a teacup! It won't be long before I'll be arguing about angels and pinheads.

Not so fast!

A comma may be a very small mark on a page, but, as we have seen, it can carry a very heavy weight and have far-reaching consequences.

Moreover, I am concerned about a certain comma we find in the Bible. Specifically, I want to take another look³ at the comma in Luke's record of the interchange between Christ and one of the two criminals at the crucifixion. Here are the key words:

[Jesus] said to [the thief] : 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise' (Luke 23:43).

Or... and here comes the crunch... should it be:

[Jesus] said to [the thief] : 'Truly, I say to you today, you will be with me in paradise' (Luke 23:43)?

Oh no! What a fuss about nothing! 'Tis only a comma after all. But, as the section heading says, what's in a comma? Read on!

But before you do, let me point out that this is not an isolated incident. Consider Isaiah 40:1. Is it a command to the prophet:

Comfort my people.

Or an encouragement to Israel:

Comfort [that is, take comfort], my people?

It's all in the comma!

The placing of the comma

I can imagine it: 'What's all the fuss about? Why the doubt? My Bible has the comma after "say"; so does virtually every other

³ Many people have thought about the issue and produced much on it.

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version. That's good enough for me. Jesus was assuring the thief that he would – on that very day – be with him in paradise. Done and dusted!'

So most might confidently say. End of story!

But we have to be more mature than that! Big – and I mean big – questions are involved.

The fact is, Luke put no comma at all. Indeed, the original New Testament was written in continuous text, with no gaps between words, and all in small or upper case! Something like this – but in Greek, of course:

ISAYTOYOUTODAYYOUWILLBEWITHMEIN
PARADISE

Or:

isaytoyoutodayyouwillbewithmeinparadise

All punctuation marks in Scripture are simply translators' suggestions to aid our understanding. They might be right; they might be wrong. It is the same with the division of the Bible into chapters and verses; none of the sacred writers did anything of the sort. Centuries after the canon of Scripture was complete, some well-meaning men thought it would be a good idea to break the text into chapters and then into verses – with the aim of making it easier to navigate one's way round the Bible.⁴ Sadly, these imposed divisions often cloud the meaning of the text. So much so, I digress to strongly advise all Bible readers, whatever version they use, to use a paragraph Bible. While this does not get rid of all the difficulties – the translators and printers still have to decide on paragraph breaks – at least the difficulties are reduced.

What should we do? What can we do? Should we just accept the translators' opinion – the translators know best? Or should we

⁴ Stephen Langton introduced chapters in the 13th century, and Robert Estienne (Stephanas) introduced verses in the 16th century. Rome uses a slightly different arrangement.

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trust Mother – Mother, being, as the Church Father, Cyprian (and, following him, Rome and most of the Reformed from Calvin on), would tell us – being the Church: the Church tells us! But... which Church?

In any case, if we go down that route it signals the end of all argument – and more: it signals the end of all thought! Indeed, we have stepped right back into the medieval – the Dark Ages, in fact – when the Church told the faithful – the gullible – what to believe.

Who wants to go there?

Let's get back to the nub of the question, and look at the interchange between Christ and the two criminals at the crucifixion. Here is the full account:

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with [Christ]. And when they came to the place that is called 'The Skull', there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'. And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying: 'He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!'. The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying: 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' There was also an inscription over him: 'This is the King of the Jews'.

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying: 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong'. And he said: 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom'. And he said to him: 'Truly, I say to you today, you will be with me in paradise' (Luke 23:32-43).

Leaving out the questionable punctuation, the key words are:

Truly, I say to you today you will be with me in paradise.

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As for ‘paradise’, I believe it is a reference to heaven (2 Cor. 12:2-3; Rev. 2:7) (or, in the context, bliss in the kingdom), but that is not the issue I wish to deal with. It is the placing of that comma that is all important in this present discussion.

Clearly:

I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise...

...is very different to:

I say to you today, you will be with me in paradise.

Now, as for that comma in Luke 23:43, unless we are going to blindly accept the translators’ opinion, or Mother Church and her theologians’ opinions, we have to decide on other grounds. Ah! But what grounds? Principally, context and biblical usage.

I assert that on both grounds – context and biblical usage – there is good reason to argue that the comma should be placed thus:

I say to you today, you will be with me in paradise.

In saying this, I admit that I am running counter to the traditional rendering of the verse in almost all versions and accepted evangelical-theology, and, as a result, as I have said, I will almost certainly be marked as a heretic.⁵

As for the traditional view, take John Gill who, in his *Commentary*, left nobody in any doubt where he stood; he certainly showed he was no fan of putting the comma after ‘today’:

Besides it being senseless, and impertinent, and only contrived to serve an hypothesis, is not agreeable to Christ’s usual way of speaking, and contrary to all copies and versions.

Phew! Indeed, Gill dismissed what I might call ‘my’ placing of the comma and ‘my’ reasons for it as ‘this silly criticism’.

⁵ I also acknowledge that it is the version favoured by the Jehovah Witnesses with their New World Translation, but that does not of necessity mean that it is wrong. Not a few evangelical scholars – not least, E.W.Bullinger – have favoured it.

So now you know! Hence my health warning.

My point at this stage is simple: since Luke used no punctuation, then at the very least – at the very least, I say – we should be cautious about inserting punctuation. *Tradition must not be our guide! Nor must fear – fear of being ostracised for daring to take a non-traditional line!* The same goes for basing one's view on a theological system, however revered, however hoary. Such systems, such Confessions, are all man-made, drawn up to deal with contemporary problems troubling believers often centuries ago, and can be riddled with Christendom-political overtones.⁶ We must be guided by scriptural context and scriptural usage.

A vital negative

Before I plunge myself even more deeply into even hotter water, let me state it as clearly as I can that I am not calling into question the traditional view of the believer's blessed state after death.⁷ I cautiously – note the word, since there is a huge amount of speculation foisted upon Scripture on this issue – I cautiously believe that the believer at death is taken to be with Christ, and nothing that I say here inflicts the slightest damage

⁶ *The Westminster Confession of Faith* and its Catechisms are no exception. One of Parliament's main concerns was to eliminate what they considered to be antinomianism. Hence the legal tone of the Confession with its heavy emphasis on the law, following Calvin. See, for instance, my 'The Law and The Confessions'.

⁷ I frankly admit that this section must give the impression that I want it both ways. Not really. I am convinced the balance should come down on the last day, and the coming of the kingdom. As Calvin said – see above – 'To pry curiously into their intermediate state is neither lawful nor expedient... It is foolish and rash to inquire into hidden things, farther than God permits us to know'. John Piper: 'Our judgment will be after we die... Heb. 9:27 makes it explicit... We don't need to be more specific than that this morning. We need only say that before we enter the final state of glory with our resurrection bodies on the new earth, we will stand before Christ as Judge' (John Piper: 'What Happens When You Die? All Appear Before the Judgment Seat of Christ', a sermon preached 1st Aug. 1993).

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on that. The believer, after death, is with Christ; death does not, in any way, interrupt his communion with his Saviour; indeed, death actually enhances it:

I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:38-39).

We know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened – not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:1-8).⁸

If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living (Rom. 14:8-9).

My eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honoured in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better (Phil. 1:20-23).

God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether

⁸ The believer gets his resurrected body – obviously – at the resurrection, at Christ's return (John 5:25,28; 11:24; 1 Cor. 15:22-23; Phil. 3:20-21). See, in the main text, the relevant note on this point.

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we are awake or asleep [that is, live or die] we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing (1 Thess. 5:9-11).

You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Heb. 12:22-24).

I will never leave you nor forsake you (Heb. 13:5).

These passages, in my view, teach that death in no way interrupts the believer's communion with Christ. I know that some believers take a different view about these verses, but I stick (as I say, cautiously) with what might be called the traditional or orthodox view. Consequently, I am not going to argue the case for the blessed condition of the believing dead; this is not the point at issue here. *But neither is it the point in Luke 23:43. And that IS my point!*

So... if this caveat is understood and accepted – even though I am questioning the placing of a comma in Luke 23:43, I am not calling into question the blessed condition of the believing dead – let us go on.

Problems for the traditional view

Those who take the traditional view of Luke 23:43 – that the verse teaches that Christ was telling the thief that he would that very day be in paradise with Christ – have one or two problems they need to face up to.

Take Hebrews 9:27:

It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.

Was the thief judged immediately following death, and then immediately entered paradise with Christ? This surely presents a problem for the traditional view – which theologians and

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commentators who hold that view seem often either to avoid or feel able to ‘solve’. Take Gill:

There is a particular judgment which is immediately after death; by virtue of which, the souls of men are condemned to their proper state of happiness or woe; and there is an universal judgment, which will be after the resurrection of the dead, and is called eternal judgment, and to come; this is appointed by God, though the time when [it is to take place] is unknown to men; yet nothing is more certain, and it will be a righteous one.

As can be seen, Gill has asserted that the believer undergoes two judgments – which he called particular and general – the first immediately following his death, and the second when Christ returns. Very well! But do not miss the complete absence of scriptural evidence for this confident assertion – for that is what it is: a confident assertion of a man’s opinion. You can either take Gill’s pontification, or...?

Albert Barnes was of the same opinion, again entirely without scriptural warrant. Indeed, he frankly admitted his view was nothing more than a ‘supposition’:

The [writer] does not say ‘how long’ after death this [judgment] will be, nor is it possible for us to know... We may suppose, however, that there will be two periods in which there will be an act of judgment passed on those who die.

Let me not be misunderstood. I am not saying Gill or Barnes were wrong.⁹ I just do not know. Nor does anybody else. But Hebrews 9:27 lends no support to the view that believers, at death, are judged, pronounced righteous, and enter into everlasting bliss (only to be subjected to a repeat of the process of judgment, *etc.* at the return of Christ). Let me remind you of the verse:

It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.

⁹ See above for the extract from Calvin where he showed that he accepted that there was a separation between the godly and the ungodly at death.

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After death comes the judgment – immediately or at Christ’s return? That is one problem for the traditional placing of the comma.

Here’s another. If Luke 23:43 does mean that Christ (and the thief) entered paradise that very day, why did Christ say to Mary on the resurrection morning: ‘Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father’ (John 20:17)?

Oh, I know that theologians, commentators and preachers will have their explanations, but such explanations need very strong scriptural justification. Do they get it?

Starting with the Church Fathers, continuing down to the present day, a huge edifice of speculation has been constructed on Luke 23:43 – much of it of the angels-on-a pinhead variety.¹⁰

Let me leave the negative and come to the positive.

* * *

What if the comma is placed thus:

I say to you today, you will be with me in paradise.

Doesn’t this make Christ guilty of a pleonasm¹¹ – as critics suggest? Not at all. In justifying this punctuation, I spoke of context and scriptural usage. The context, as I have shown, overwhelmingly supports the comma after ‘today’. But before I get to that, we need to ask if there is any scriptural warrant for it?

There certainly is! Consider:

¹⁰ Because he held to baptismal regeneration (see my *Infant*), Augustine wavered about whether or not the thief was sprinkled by the bodily fluids flowing from Christ, and the difference – or otherwise – that this made. I do not mention this to excite curiosity, but to serve as a warning to those who want either to speculate or to make biblical text fit a presupposed theology or confession. Theologians can always come up with a convenient ‘solution’ to any problem!

¹¹ That is, a redundancy, using more words than necessary, padding, waffle.

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I call heaven and earth to witness against you *today* (Deut. 4:26).

These words that I command you *today* shall be on your heart (Deut. 6:6).

I solemnly warn you *today* that you shall surely perish (Deut. 8:19).

You shall therefore be careful to do the commandment and the statutes and the rules that I command you *today* (Deut. 7:11).

See, I am setting before you *today* a blessing and a curse (Deut. 11:26).

The LORD will make you the head and not the tail, and you shall only go up and not down, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you *today*, being careful to do them, and if you do not turn aside from any of the words that I command you *today*, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them (Deut. 28:13-14).

See, I have set before you *today* life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you *today*... I declare to you *today*... I call heaven and earth to witness against you *today*, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse (Deut. 30:15-19).

Take to heart all the words by which I am warning you *today* (Deut. 32:46).

Therefore I testify to you *this day* that I am innocent of the blood of all (Acts 20:26).

I am going to make my defence *today* (Acts 26:2).

In all these cases, the ‘today’ could be omitted, and the sense would be unimpaired – except... and this is the point... the use of the ‘today’ gives a powerful sense of urgency, drawing attention to the present circumstances in which the words were uttered.

And that is the cardinal point about Luke 23:43. We are talking about the thief’s confession, and Christ’s endorsement of it, on that day of appalling darkness and seeming defeat.

So I repeat: the criticism levelled against this punctuation – that it makes Christ guilty of a pleonasm – is dealt with at a stroke; there is nothing ‘mere’ about the proper punctuation.

While I freely acknowledge that Spurgeon agreed with the traditional punctuation, and while he certainly thought that when Christ spoke of ‘today’ he meant that the thief would be in heaven with Christ that very day, nevertheless, he also got the point I have been making, and he expressed it in his usual memorable style:

Remember, beloved friends, that our Lord Jesus, at the time he saved this malefactor, was at his lowest. His glory had been ebbing out in Gethsemane, and before Caiaphas, and Herod, and Pilate; but it had now reached the utmost low-water mark. Stripped of his garments, and nailed to the cross, our Lord was mocked by a ribald crowd, and was dying in agony: then was he ‘numbered with the transgressors’, and made as the offscouring of all things. Yet, while in that condition, he achieved this marvellous deed of grace. Behold the wonder wrought by the Saviour when emptied of all his glory, and hanged up a spectacle of shame upon the brink of death! How certain is it that he can do great wonders of mercy now, seeing that he has returned unto his glory, and sits upon the throne of light! ‘He is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever lives to make intercession for them’ [Heb. 7:25]...

It is not only the weakness of our Lord which makes the salvation of the penitent thief memorable; it is the fact that the dying malefactor saw it before his very eyes. Can you put yourself into his place, and suppose yourself to be looking upon one who hangs in agony upon a cross? Could you readily believe him to be the Lord of glory, who would soon come to his kingdom? That was no mean faith which, at such a moment, could believe in Jesus as Lord and King... [Think of the] remarkable faith with [which] this thief, who believed in a crucified, derided and dying Christ, and cried to him as to one whose kingdom would surely come. The thief’s faith was the more remarkable because he was himself in great pain, and bound to die. It is not easy to exercise confidence when you are tortured with deadly anguish. Our own rest of mind has at times been greatly hindered by pain of body. When we are the subjects of acute suffering it is not easy to exhibit that faith

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which we fancy we possess at other times. This man, suffering as he did, and seeing the Saviour in so sad a state, nevertheless believed unto life eternal. Herein was such faith as is seldom seen.

Recollect, also, that he was surrounded by scoffers. It is easy to swim with the current, and hard to go against the stream. This man heard the priests, in their pride, ridicule the Lord, and the great multitude of the common people, with one consent, joined in the scorning; his comrade caught the spirit of the hour, and mocked also, and perhaps he did the same for a while; but through the grace of God he was changed, and believed in the Lord Jesus in the teeth of all the scorn. His faith was not affected by his surroundings; but he, dying thief as he was, made sure his confidence. Like a jutting rock, standing out in the midst of a torrent, he declared the innocence of the Christ whom others blasphemed. His faith is worthy of our imitation in its fruits. He had no member that was free except his tongue, and he used that member wisely to rebuke his brother malefactor, and defend his Lord. His faith brought forth a brave testimony and a bold confession. I am not going to praise the thief, or his faith, but to extol the glory of that grace divine which gave the thief such faith, and then freely saved him by its means. I am anxious to show how glorious is the Saviour – that Saviour to the uttermost, who, at such a time, could save such a man, and give him so great a faith, and so perfectly and speedily prepare him for eternal bliss. Behold the power of that divine Spirit who could produce such faith on soil so unlikely, and in a climate so unpropitious.¹²

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I have not been word spinning. Vital – eternal – issues hang on what I have been writing about. Reader, you are either a believer or an unbeliever; in biblical terms, you are a saint or a sinner.¹³ Whichever you are, Luke's account of the interchange between the dying thief and Christ says things you need to hear. Will you listen?

First, it displays the sovereignty of God: man designs his worst, but God uses that worst to work his best. The Jews clinically

¹² C.H.Spurgeon sermon 2078.

¹³ All men are born sinners; the redeemed are saints. See my *Man*.

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planned the extermination of Christ (Mark 14:1-2,10-11; John 11:46-53; Acts 3:13-15; 7:52), doing the work by Roman hands (Acts 2:23), but God turned their evil machinations gloriously to bring about his eternal purpose. The cross – far from being the ultimate humiliation for Christ, his annihilation, and the end of all he stood for – was made by God, as he had determined before the foundation of the world (Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23; 3:18; 4:27-28; Rom. 16:25; Eph. 1:3-10; 2 Tim. 1:8-10; Tit. 1:1-3; 1 Pet. 1:20) to serve as Christ’s throne, his pulpit and his glory. Surveying the cross, this is what the children of God see, rejoice in, and proclaim to the world (1 Cor. 2:2; Gal. 6:14); such is the wonder of Christ’s crucifixion. The prophets, those who predicted it, ‘searched and enquired carefully’ into it, and even angels ‘long to look’ into it (1 Pet. 1:10-12). What does the cross mean to you?

As to God turning man’s evil design to accomplish his purpose, the psalmist set the tone:

Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying: ‘Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us’. He who sits in the heavens laughs; the LORD holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying: ‘As for me, I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill’ (Ps. 2:1-6)...

...bringing his psalm to this conclusion:

Kiss the Son lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him (Ps. 2:12).

Thus the event recorded in Luke 23:36-43, and the proper response to it, was revealed in prophecy through the psalmist!

Secondly, the thief’s address to Christ points us to the nature of true faith. Under the most appalling circumstances, even on the darkest of all dark days, against all the external evidence, surrounded by a taunting, hostile mob, the thief penetrated the gloom, pierced the darkness, and was persuaded that Christ is

King. And he appealed to Christ to receive him into his kingdom. What about you?

Thirdly, the thief does more than serve as a signpost pointing you to faith; he challenges you. Can you not hear him say: ‘Are you not encouraged to believe, to trust Christ, to submit to him as King – you, with all your advantages? You have far, far more than ever I had: you have the full canon of Scripture; you have an abundance of clear gospel commands, promises, encouragements and warnings; you, almost certainly, have seen and heard abundant personal testimony from believers as to their felt experience of the Lord Jesus Christ. Will this not move you to trust the Saviour for yourself?’

Reader, there is a clear warning here. If I may accommodate the words of Christ¹⁴ in Matthew 12:41-42 to the case in hand:

The dying thief will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for – even in that dire day, at that dreadful time, under those appalling circumstances – he saw Christ as king, one who had a kingdom, confessed it, and wanted to be in it, and yet many, today, even though they have had far greater evidence, think nothing of Christ.

Let me be even more direct, and address every unbeliever reading these words, doing so personally:

The dying thief will rise up at the judgment with you and condemn you, for – even in that dire day, at that dreadful time, under those appalling circumstances – he saw Christ as king, one who had a kingdom, confessed it, and wanted to be in it, and yet you, today, even though you have had far greater evidence, think nothing of Christ.

Fourthly, the thief’s experience exalts God’s sovereign grace, and holds out hope to all, especially those who feel themselves

¹⁴ ‘The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here’.

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to be too far gone. Since God can take a condemned thief – a wretch – and, in the worst of all conditions, at the lowest of all low points, on the darkest of all dark days, and bring that miserable sinner, at such a time and in such a state, to see – and, I am convinced, to trust – the glorious Christ – if God can do that, then there is hope for you!

Fifthly, I hope this look at the punctuation of Luke 23:43 will encourage us believers, when thinking about the hope we have in Christ, to pay less regard to what is often no more than mere, romantic speculation about the intermediate state, and concentrate, rather, on what Scripture clearly sets before us as our solid hope;¹⁵ namely, the coming of Christ, our resurrection, and entrance into everlasting bliss in Christ's kingdom.

¹⁵ Is the lack of confirming testimony from any resurrected people not an issue for those who stress the glories of the intermediate state?