

Paradise

The word, paradise, has its origins in Persia, what is now known as Iran. A paradise was an enclosed garden, walled off from the outside world, and it contained fruit trees, vegetable gardens and beautiful landscaped lawns and flower beds. The most beautiful Persian garden (paradise) was built by Cyrus, king of Persia. Persia has conquered Babylon (during the time of Daniel), and under Cyrus the Jewish exiles were allowed to return home. Cyrus, mentioned often in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah but also much earlier in the prophecy of Isaiah, was considered to be a friend of the Jews.

Cyrus, historians say, had a huge garden which was known throughout the world. Many modelled their gardens after it, and although it was destroyed by Alexander the Great (a Greek), it continued to be an inspiration for architects through the centuries. Cyrus' garden contained orchards, palaces, water features, pathways, and beautifully kept shrubs and flower beds. In the Persian language it was called a paradise.

When the Jews began to translate the Hebrew Bible into Greek (this Greek translation is known as the Septuagint) about 200 years before Jesus was born (300+ years after Cyrus), they had to find appropriate Greek words for the Hebrew words. One of the words that they used to describe the Garden of Eden was the Persian word, paradise. Because Cyrus' accomplishments were still remembered, his paradise would give people a picture of what the Garden of Eden was meant to be. Like Cyrus' paradise, the Garden of Eden was a place of beauty, tranquility, and provision, but it was much better than Cyrus' paradise.

The word, paradise, does not appear in the English Old Testament, for translators from Hebrew to English have chosen to use the word, garden, probably because that word gives us a better image of what Eden was like. But "paradise" is used three times in the New Testament, once by Jesus, once by Paul, and once by John the apostle.

Jesus tells the thief who is being crucified with him, the thief who asked Jesus to remember him, that "Today you will be with me in paradise." The Septuagint tended to be the Bible that most people used at that time, and the words and phrases in it were familiar to people of that time. When the thief heard the word, "paradise," he would immediately have thought of the paradise of the Old Testament, the Garden of Eden. But by that time in history, paradise referred not only to the Garden of Eden but also eternal life with God. The thief who, no doubt, was a Jew would have understood that Jesus was promising him that in the next few hours, before the day was over, they would be together in the new Garden of Eden, eternal life.

Paul uses the word, "paradise," in 2 Corinthians 12:4 when he says that a man he knew (most likely himself) was caught up to paradise and "heard inexpressible things, things which no one is permitted to tell." While it is uncertain what this man's experience was, Paul is indicating that in a vision this man had experienced a taste of heaven.

And finally, in Revelation 2:7, in the letter to the church in Ephesus, John writes that those who are victorious will be given the right to each from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. Again, the words of the Greek Old Testament are invoked to give the readers a sense of what is awaiting them. Those who belong to Jesus Christ will experience eternal life in a kind of garden which will be like the paradise that Cyrus built, only much better.

There is no word which can describe what is awaiting us beyond the grave. Those who were translating the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek seemed to want to find an appropriate word, and the best word they could think of was “paradise.” Of course, none of them had seen Cyrus’ garden, for it has been destroyed at least a century before the Septuagint was written. Still the memory remained and that memory evoked images of a place where life could be very good. No one has seen the Garden of Eden, and no one has been able to tell us what the new paradise will be like, but the very word should capture our imaginations. What has God prepared for us? What do those who believe in Jesus have to look forward to? No one can tell us exactly what it is, but “paradise” is a good place for us to start thinking about what it is that awaits. Paradise, of course, in an inadequate word to describe the beauty, tranquility and blessedness of eternal life, but it is a good place to start. What we will receive is beyond our imagination.

One day, we will have experience paradise because Jesus came first to this earth to open the gates to that place. They are closed no longer, and there are no cherubim with flaming swords keeping us out because Jesus gave his life for our sins. It is because of that that we can look forward to experiencing paradise, new life forever in the presence of Jesus Christ.

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