

WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?

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Invariably in the discussion of the essentiality of baptism for or unto the remission of alien sins someone will raise the question: "What about the thief on the cross?" The account of the thief is found in Luke 23:39-43. Further, no doubt, this is one of the objections that is most offered to the necessity of baptism.

The objection argument can be summarized like this:

- 1)The thief on the cross was not baptized,
- 2)The thief was saved,
- 3)Therefore, baptism is not essential to salvation!

Is such reasoning correct? Could it be that objectors have failed to take into consideration Biblical facts that render the thief on the cross irrelevant to the issue?

In pursuing this study let us consider some necessary background material from the New Testament. Let us realize that the thief was saved. No doubt Jesus certainly had the power to save him. For while our Lord was on earth, He had the authority to forgive sins. Indeed, Jesus exercised this authority on several occasions, such as the accounts of the paralytic and the sinful woman (Luke 5:18-26; 7:36-50).

Obviously, Jesus offered the thief salvation. The thief "...said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:42, 43).

A fact that must be closely considered is that the thief was saved before Great Commission baptism was commanded by Jesus Christ. Please take note that the baptism of the Great Commission was commanded following Jesus' death and resurrection (Mat. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16). Also, it was a baptism into Jesus' death (Rom. 6:3-4). The thief could not have been baptized into Jesus' death, since Jesus was alive on the cross.

Great Commission baptism was commanded following Jesus' death! We would do well to remember that Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, et. al., were not baptized, but they were saved by Jesus Christ's death on the cross because they were faithful to God's law under which they lived. Thus, the thief could appeal to Christ for salvation as he did.

Of course, there was the baptism of John, a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. It was preached to the Jews to get them ready for Jesus (Mark 1:4-5). It was certainly possible that the thief had obeyed John's baptism, for he had to hear about Christ's kingdom and its importance from somewhere. John, Jesus, and his disciples had preached the coming Messiah and His kingdom all over the land of Israel (Mat. 3:5, 6; Luke 7:29). However, it must be understood that John's baptism was designed to be replaced by Great Commission baptism into Christ and His death for the remission of sins (cf. Acts 19:4-5; Mat. 28:18-20; Acts 2:38).

Since we live after Jesus commanded Great Commission baptism, and with all that is said in the New Testament about baptism, how can we use the case of the thief to say baptism is not necessary to one's salvation?

But there is more to be emphasized, namely that the thief was saved before the New Testament began. Most denominational people do not recognize that there are two different Testaments comprising the Bible. There was a covenant between God and Israel (Deu. 5:2-3). That covenant governed all Israelites, such as Moses, David, Isaiah, Daniel, et al.—the thief on the cross included. That covenant never commanded people to be baptized! The Law of Moses ended when Jesus died on the cross (cf. Eph. 2:14-16; Col 2:14). We are under the authority of the New Testament, the testament that has been in force for almost 2,000 years, is presently in force, and will be till the end of time (cf. Heb. 8:6-7; Gal. 5:4; John 12:48). In fact, Jesus spoke of the New Testament when He instituted the Lord's Supper (Mat. 26:28). The New Testament of Christ came into force after our Lord died (Heb. 9:15-17).

Today we live under the authority of Christ revealed only in the words of the New Testament (Mat. 17:5; 28:18; John 14:6; Col. 3:17; Jam. 1:25). All men must submit to the authority of Christ revealed only on the pages of the New Testament. This authority our Lord delegated to His apostles through their undergoing the baptism of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem on the first Pentecost following

Jesus' death (Mat.28:18-20; John 13:20; Acts 2:1ff; 2 Pet. 3:2). The New Testament, in no uncertain terms, commands baptism to those outside of Christ in order for them to have the salvation only Jesus offers (cf. Ac 2:38; 10:48; 22:16).

How can anyone correctly appeal to the case of the thief on the cross, who lived under the Old Testament, to be an example or pattern of how one is saved today? One may as well appeal to the Old Testament accounts of David, or to the example of Isaiah as examples of how God saves people today? Therefore, we should not look to the thief on the cross as an example of how men are saved from sin today. The thief lived and died before the New Testament became the authority in all things pertaining to Christ. That, of course, includes how, where, and when one is saved from one's sins.

Indeed, the thief was saved on the cross without baptism. But the case of the thief is irrelevant to whether one must be baptized in order to become a Christian. Thus, the case of the thief on the cross is not an example for us to follow in learning how God saves men from sin today. The thief died before Christ ever commanded anyone to be baptized into His death. Also, as we have seen in our study of the Bible, the thief lived and died under the Old Testament, and it did not require baptism into Christ for the remission of sin!

We do not live under the authority of the Old Testament nor in the days of Jesus' earthly ministry. We are under the authority of Christ as expressed in the words of the New Testament that has been once for all delivered (Jude 3). And, in our Lord's last Will and Testament, He makes baptism the place where men contact the saving blood of Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:3, 4). Jesus, through His apostles via the Holy Spirit, has commanded ALL people who are accountable to Him for their conduct on earth to be baptized (Mat. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:38; 10:48; 22:16; Gal. 3:26, 27; 1 Pet. 3:21; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12). For the believer in Christ who has repented of his sins and confessed his faith in Christ, baptism is the final step to take for one to enter into Christ where our Lord has located "all spiritual blessings in heavenly places" —forgiveness of sin being one of those blessings (Rom. 10:17; Acts 17:30; Rom. 10:10; Gal. 3:27).~