

“What about the thief on the cross?”

“*He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved*” (Mark 16:16).

“*Repent, and be baptized . . . for the remission of sins*” (Acts 2:38).

“*...arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins*” (Acts 22:16).

These and many other passages tell us that for one to be saved—to have his sins remitted, washed away—he must be baptized. Many have no problem with submitting to God's will in baptism. They know and believe God when He says in His word that Christ is “*the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him*” (Hebrews 5:9). They realize that such obedience, far from being an act of “earning salvation” is a true act of love, for Christ said, “*If ye love me, keep my commandments*” (John 14:15). But there are those who object. Among the arguments they offer to try and minimize the commands of God concerning baptism, they appeal to the thief on the cross to whom Jesus said, “*Today shalt thou be with me in paradise*” (Luke 23:43). The argument of those who appeal to this as proving baptism as non-essential to salvation can be summarized as follows:

- ✓ The thief on the cross was not baptized.
- ✓ The thief was saved.
- ✓ Therefore, baptism is not essential to salvation.

Let us begin by examining this argument by asking, “Can it be shown as fact that *The thief on the cross was not baptized?*” No.

We have no record of the life of this man prior to his hanging on the cross beside our Lord. We do though know that baptism was practiced of John in his ministry (Matthew 3:1-7). Jesus Himself submitted to such at John's hand (Matthew 3:13-17). In fact, the baptism which John taught and performed was so widely obeyed that we read that “all the land of Judea, and they of Jerusalem” submitted to such (Mark 1:5). Clearly then, to assume the thief was not baptized is quite an assumption!

Second, “*The thief was saved.*” We readily agree with such, for the text plainly teaches such. **But the circumstances surrounding the salvation of the thief are far from those anyone today will experience.** The thief was in the physical presence of Jesus Himself. But the apostle Paul stated clearly that “last of all He was seen of me” (1 Corinthians 15:8). Thus, no one today can expect to see Christ until all men stand before Him in judgment (2 Corinthians 5:10). Jesus Himself stated that “*the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins*” (Matthew 9:6). It is clear though that after His ascension to heaven to the right hand of the Father that matters were different. Christ confronted the sinful Saul in the road to Damascus. When Saul, stricken with the grief of his sin, cried out, “*Lord, what wilt thou have me do?*” he was not told he was saved, as was the thief. Rather he was told to “*go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do*” (Acts 9:6). [And by the way, Saul (Paul) himself tells us that he was told to “*arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins*” (Acts 22:16).] Thus we see that yes, the thief was saved, but not in a manner in which we today can expect to occur. Things

are different now. All one proves by looking to the thief on the cross is that Jesus, while on this earth, chose to save the penitent man in accordance with the will of God the Father.

We need to ask then, “*Between the account of the thief on the cross (who was saved directly by Christ) and the accounts of salvation recorded in Acts in which baptism was clearly commanded — what had changed?*” When we answer this we can answer the “riddle” some see in the account of the thief on the cross. What happened between them? **The Death Of Christ.** Many, in seeking to negate the accounts of salvation in Acts forget that Christ, by His death, brought about a sweeping change. Notice the following passages as to what occurred at that time:

Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to His cross. (Colossians 2:14).

He taketh away the first, that He may establish the second (Hebrews 10:9).

What happened when Christ died? He fulfilled the Old Testament law and thus it passed away. In its place was given the New Testament. How wonderful it is that God has made such provisions for mankind! Under the Old Testament, in the system of sacrificial offerings, there was a “remembrance of sins ... for it is not possible that blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins” (Hebrews 10:1-4). But in the New Covenant we are blessed in that God has said “*their sins and iniquities I will remember no more*” (Hebrews 10:16-18).

Now let us ask a few questions that will help us once and for all settle the matter of the thief on the cross.

“Under which covenant did the thief live?”

It is clear that the events concerning the thief occurred during the time of the Old Testament law, for Jesus was yet living and talking with Him. Surely none today wish to return to that system, which was meant only as a “shadow” of the good things to come in the new (Hebrews 10:1). Paul even said that for one to seek justification under that law was to incur certain loss of salvation (Galatians 5:4).

“Under which covenant do you and I live?”

Clearly it cannot be the old, for it was taken away (Colossians 2:14). It is the New Testament law which Christ said is applicable to “all nations” (Matthew 28:19) — to “all the world” (Mark 16:15). Thus it is the New Testament by which our actions must be guided. We must be humble enough to “do all in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Colossians 3:17) if we are to be saved (Hebrews 5:8-9).

It is clear then that to appeal to the events surrounding the thief on the cross is vain.

- It is an appeal to a situation in which none of us can ever find ourselves—in the physical presence of Christ on earth.
- It is an appeal to be under a law by which we cannot be saved.
- It is an appeal to a law which Christ took away by His death.

“What about the thief on the cross?” I thank God that he repented and turned to the Lord in the way in which he was able and

thus was saved. But a more important question is ***“What about ME?”*** You and I live under the New Testament. In this New Testament we find clearly that salvation was given to those who humbly submitted to God's will. Note a few things God tells us in that New Testament about salvation:

- It is not by faith only (James 2:24, 26).
- It is by obedience to Christ (Hebrews 5:8-9; 1 John 5:3).
- It is by having faith (Hebrews 11:6).
- It is by repenting of our sins (Acts 2:38).
- It is by confessing Christ (Acts 8:36-38).
- It is by obeying Christ in baptism (1 Peter 3:21; Acts 2:38).

Christ died for us that such wonderful salvation can be possible.

What will we do for Him?

- Love Him and obey His Word?
- Or reject Him and His Word?

The choice is ours.

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