

The Thief on the Cross: Exposing the Erroneous Example

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When it comes to the question “What must I do to be saved?,” some people object to the Biblical teaching of the essentiality of baptism for salvation. Quite often the person who objects to this requirement of God will say, “What about the thief on the cross? He was not baptized...” Please notice the following points regarding the forgiven thief on the cross:

Can one be so sure that the thief was never baptized? Multitudes had come to John from all surrounding areas to be baptized of him: “*Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan, And were baptized of him in Jordan...*” (Matthew 3:5, 6). John obviously had baptized a great number of people, but Jesus’ disciples had baptized even more people than John! (John 4:1, 2). Is it not possible that the thief could have been among these great numbers of people who were baptized? From the very words of the thief we infer that he had been taught about the coming kingdom (Luke 23:42), and the kingdom is exactly what John, Jesus, and the disciples had been preaching during the time of these baptisms (Matthew 3:2; 4:17; 10:7). It is quite possible to sin again after one has been baptized for the remission of sins (Acts 8:18-24; 1 John 1:8). This thief could have committed a theft after his baptism. Because of these Biblical facts, one should not confidently affirm that this thief had never been baptized – it is quite possible that he was.

Can one be so sure that the thief was not born into a covenant relationship with God? This thief apparently lived and died in Palestine, which is strong evidence that this man was a Jew. The Romans did not crucify their own citizens, so we know that he was not a Roman. If the thief was a Jew, then he was born into a covenant relationship with God, and had been a child of God all his life. If so, this was not an alien sinner who became a child of God on the cross! He would have been an erring child of God seeking forgiveness, which would mean that this account cannot be used today as an example of how a worldly person can become a child of God.

The thief was forgiven while living under a different covenant. We live under the New Testament, which was not established until after the death of Christ: “*For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth*” (Hebrews 9:16, 17). With the aforementioned Scriptures in mind, please consider the example of someone’s “last will and testament” – a person’s will is not put into effect until the death of that person. After death, the

will becomes effective, and one must meet the conditions of the will to receive any inheritance. Christ's "will" was not in effect when the thief was forgiven, because Christ had not died yet - the New Testament had not been established. The thief was forgiven while living under a different covenant; thus this account does not apply to us today! One of God's requirements for men today is to "*believe in thine heart that God hath raised him [Jesus] from the dead*" (Romans 10:9), but the thief could not have believed such, because it had not yet happened.

Jesus often forgave sins at His discretion while on Earth. While Jesus was on Earth, He personally told people their sins were forgiven (Luke 5:20), but Jesus does not appear to us in person today and tell us that our sins are forgiven. Remember that before the Testator died He would do with His estate as He pleased (forgive sins at His discretion), but after His death the Will became effective (Hebrews 9:17), and one must now do what is specified in the Will to receive the inheritance. The New Testament Will says that we must now believe and obey the Gospel to purify our souls, avoid eternal punishment, and receive the inheritance (1 Peter 1:22; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Peter 1:4).

The thief on the cross cannot be used as an example of how someone can become a child of God today. No person alive today is living under the same conditions as this thief was. When one studies how people were converted after the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, it is clear that those who wished to become children of God were never instructed to pray, or to merely "invite Jesus into their hearts," as many would have us do today. In the book of Acts the consistent recording of water baptism in conversion accounts is overwhelming, and the results which follow baptism reveal its divine purpose. Obviously baptism is a vital part of God's Plan for saving man, and is necessary "*for the remission of sins*" (Acts 2:38; cf. 22:16; 1 Peter 3:20-21).