



Was The Thief On The Cross Saved Without Being Baptized?

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Was the thief who was crucified on the cross next to Jesus saved without being baptized? This question is often asked in connection with questions about the necessity of baptism today for salvation. Much of the religious world claims that because “the thief on the cross was not baptized in order to be saved,” baptism is not necessary for salvation today. Yet, the Bible is clear on this often misapplied subject. Let’s observe how the Bible answers this question.

The Thief On The Cross Was Saved

There can be no doubt that the thief on the cross was saved. Consider the text in Luke 23:39-43: “Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, ‘If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.’ But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.’”

In this text, Jesus was being crucified between two thieves. One of the two thieves (apparently) had a change of heart while he was on the cross (dying for his own sins). This thief said to Jesus, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom” (vs. 42). Clearly, Jesus accepts this thief when He tells Him, “Assuredly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise” (vs. 43).

Based on this passage, there is no reason to doubt the salvation of this thief who was hanging on the cross beside Jesus. However, does this passage prove that we do not have to be baptized in order to be saved today?

The Thief *May* Have Been Baptized

It is most commonly claimed that this thief was not baptized. However, this cannot be known for certain. In fact, it is highly possible that this man had been baptized at some point in time.

The first time we read of the thief on the cross is when he is on the cross! We know nothing about him besides what is discussed in the accounts of the four gospels – when he is hanging on the cross beside of Jesus! Therefore, anyone who objects to baptism on the basis that “the thief was not baptized” should take heed because their objection is based on something that simply cannot be proven!

Consider that the thief could have been baptized by John. Matthew 3:1-6 and Mark 1:4-5 demonstrate that all of Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to John to be baptized of him. So, could the thief on the cross have been baptized with John’s baptism? No one can say for certain. But, it is certainly a possibility!

Rather than assuming that the thief was one who had never been a disciple of Jesus, why not view him as one who had fallen away and was now being restored? Notice what the thief seemed to know (look back at the text in Luke 23:39-43).

1. He knew there was a God (v. 40).
2. He knew God was to be feared (v. 40).
3. He knew that there was something to answer for beyond death (v. 40).
4. He recognized a principle of right and wrong (v. 40-41).
5. He knew Christ was innocent – perhaps sinless (v. 41).
6. He knew the one who was dying next to him was Lord (v. 42).
7. He knew that Jesus was going to possess a kingdom (v. 42).

Therefore, this individual knew a great deal about Jesus! Perhaps He was either learning all of this at the time of his death – or, perhaps, he had known all of this before and was coming back to Christ. We simply cannot know!

So, it simply cannot be proven that the thief on the cross either was or was not baptized. However, this point is not important to the commandment of baptism today (as we will see over the next few moments).

The Thief Lived Under The Old Testament Law

While Jesus lived, He lived under the Old Testament Law (Law of Moses). In Matthew 5:17-18, Jesus said, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.” Since the thief lived during this same time, this same fact is also true about him.

Consider that whenever Jesus had told the thief that he would join Christ in Paradise, Christ had not yet died. While Christ did die before the thief, we do not read of the church being established and folks being saved under the New Covenant until Acts 2 (around 50 days from the time the thief died)!

Therefore, we can conclude that the thief lived (and died) under the Old Law. Passages like Colossians 2:13-14 and Hebrews 9:15-18 make it very clear that Christ had to die in order for His new law to take effect.

Since the thief lived and died under the Old Testament Law, why would we expect him to have obeyed a law (regarding baptism) that was not in effect when he died? Suppose you always pay your taxes (hopefully this is the case). You pay the taxes you owe under the laws that are now in effect. However, suppose the tax laws are changed after you die. Are you now guilty of tax evasion because you did not pay these new taxes? Of course not! You did not live under that law! So, making a case against the necessity of baptism based upon the thief on the cross would be the same as making a case against baptism based on Abraham, Moses, or David not being baptized! They all lived under a different law than we live under today! Quite simply, then, you must understand that you cannot be saved in the same way as the thief – because he lived under a different law (though we are all still saved by Jesus Christ)!

The Baptism Of The Great Commission Had Not Yet Been Instituted Or Commanded

This is, really, a continuation of the last point. The baptism that is necessary today was first commanded in Matthew 28:18-20 and Mark 16:15-16. For instance, Mark 16:15-16 says, “And He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.’”

This is the baptism of the Great Commission. According to Romans 6:3-4, this baptism is compared to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The passage says, “Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”

You should notice that this command to be baptized (the command in Matthew 28 and Mark 16) was issued *after* Jesus rose from the dead. Again, can you really expect a man to abide by a law that was not yet in effect when he died and obey a command that had not yet been given – that represents something that had not yet happened (i.e. Jesus had not yet rose from the dead)? However, you and I do live under this new law and the command to be baptized has been given (and Jesus has risen from the dead). Therefore, we are obligated to be obedient to the commandment to be baptized.

Jesus Had The Power On Earth To Forgive Sins

Even if none of these other points I have made are applicable, we must remember that Jesus Christ had the power on earth to forgive sins! In Luke 5:20, Jesus told a man, “Man, your sins are forgiven you.” Again, in Luke 7:48, Jesus simply told a woman, “Your sins are forgiven.”

Jesus, while He lived on this earth, had the power to forgive whomever He chose. This, apparently, included the thief on the cross! However, Jesus does not live on earth any more to forgive in this same way! Instead, He has given us certain commands we must obey in order to be forgiven of our sins!

One of these commands is baptism. Look again at Jesus’ command in Mark 16:16: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” Also, consider what Peter told individuals they must do in order to be forgiven of their sins in Acts 2:38: “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Being obedient to Jesus’ commandments is the only way to have our sins forgiven today!

Conclusion

The thief on the cross may or may not have been baptized (both are possibilities – and neither can be proven). However, the thief on the cross lived and died under a law that is no longer in effect – and prior to Jesus’ command to be baptized in order to be saved. Therefore, even *if* the thief on the cross was saved without being baptized, we live under the new law of Christ that includes the command to be baptized – and we must be obedient to this commandment if we want to be saved!

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