

Thief On the Cross

Once in a while you will be discussing religion with someone and the subject of baptism comes up and they reply something like this, “I am still a little confused about what I need to actually do. I heard about baptism, but they say that the thief on the cross wasn’t baptized. Isn’t he in heaven?” This is a good question that deserves an answer, so for the next few minutes I want us to look at scripture and discuss the thief on the cross.

Often confusion over scripture occurs because the teaching of the Bible doesn’t match what you have always heard which I think is true in this case. Let’s begin by recreating the scene where we are introduced to the thief and then we will narrow our discussion down to the matter of his salvation. *Matthew 27:37-39 And set up over his head his accusation written, THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS. (38) Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left. (39) And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads.*

We have pictured before us the crucifixion of Jesus. We learn that he was crucified between two thieves and as he was suspended between heaven and earth, people passed by and “reviled” him. That word reviled means a verbal attack against someone in a hateful and abusive way. They were making fun of Jesus and said *Matthew 27:40-44 Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.* Those passing by were mocking him as he was dying on public display. They were sarcastically saying if you were the son of God then come down from the cross and you know Jesus could have. It was within his power to have done so, but that was not his Father’s will.

Then the chief priest got into the act. *(41) Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said, (42) He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. (43) He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God.* Now the point I want you to see is that the thieves also got into the mocking. *(44) The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth.*

Luke’s account gives us a bit more information about this mocking. *Luke 23:39-43 And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.* Apparently one of the two thieves was not as intense with this verbal attack as the other as we see him rebuking the abusing thief. *(40) But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? (41) And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.*

After rebuking the thief, this man speaks to Jesus. Let us now focus our attention on what he says along with Jesus’ reply. *(42) And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. (43) And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.*

First, let us note that we know little of the background of the thief. We know that he believed that his punishment was just. In verse 41 he reminds the other thief that *we receive the due reward of our deeds.* He knew he was a thief and he was willing to acknowledge that it was wrong. We also know that this thief knew of Jesus’ teachings by what he said to the other thief. He said *this man hath done nothing amiss.* He knew that Jesus had done no wrong. He could not have said that about a rank stranger. He had to have known something about Jesus’ life to have made such a statement.

Now think about what the man said to Jesus, *Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.* Jesus was dying on a cross right beside him! First note that the thief addressed Jesus as Lord. You would not address someone you know nothing about as Lord. In addition, the thief understood that Jesus would be receiving a kingdom and apparently he understood that it was a spiritual kingdom because Jesus was about to die. He asked Jesus to remember him. This is certainly an odd request to a man that was about to die. It’s unreasonable to think he would make such a request of a person he knew nothing about. Just from the few

words he said to Jesus, we conclude that he knew who Jesus was and something about his teaching on the kingdom.

Just a few hours earlier as Jesus was being interrogated by Pilate, he told Pilate that he did not come to establish an earthly kingdom. ***John 18:36 Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.*** Somehow this thief knew about this kingdom and let me suggest that he didn't gained this depth of knowledge during the short time he was hanging on the cross with the Lord. Both John and Jesus preached that the kingdom was near. ***Matthew 3:1-2 In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, (2) And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*** Just one chapter later we learn that Jesus was preaching the same message. ***Matthew 4:17 From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.***

Hence, we arrive at the second notable item. The Scripture does not record for us a lot about the thief. For instance, was he married? We don't know. Did he live in Jerusalem? We don't know. Was he a young man? We don't know as scripture doesn't say. Was he baptized? We don't know. Whether you say he was or not is mere speculation. We know that John had been baptizing in Judea for several years but Jesus and his disciples were also baptizing. ***John 4:1-2 When therefore the Lord knew how the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John, (2) (Though Jesus himself baptized not, but his disciples)*** A large number of people were baptized during this time, so we cannot state with certainty that the thief was not baptized. Since he knew something about who Jesus was and he knew something about the coming kingdom, he very well could have been baptized. However, given that he was an admitted thief, if he was baptized he fell back into the ways of the world.

We must also acknowledge that Jesus is the Lord. As the Son of God, he had the authority to forgive sins. ***Matthew 9:6 But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house.*** Now the background to this passage was that a paralytic man was brought by his friends and placed before Jesus. Jesus looks at the man and says, ***Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee. (Matthew 9:2)*** When the scribes heard this, the thought they had was this was blasphemy because only God could forgive sin. ***(4) And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts? (5) For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk?*** It is here that Jesus said, ***“But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house.*** For you see, Jesus had all power. On another occasion while talking with his disciples Jesus would say, ***Matthew 28:18 All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.***

Finally, we must understand the time of the thief's salvation. This is probably the most significant point of all that's been made. The thief lived under the Law of Moses and the rules of salvation were different under that old law than the new. Baptism into Christ was not a reality or command until after Christ death and resurrection. During the time of the crucifixion and the death of the thief, the new covenant had not been established. ***Hebrews 9:15 And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.(16)For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator.***

How the thief gained salvation prior to the death of Jesus and before the beginning of the new covenant does not impact how people are saved now. Since the thief was promised paradise, it is logical to conclude that his sins were forgiven; but he was not the first to receive forgiveness by Jesus. There was that man mentioned earlier in Matthew 10 (also Mark 2). Then there was the sinful woman in Luke 7 who washed Jesus feet. On this occasion the Pharisees wanted Jesus to eat with them so he obliged. While there a woman of the city

described as a sinner eased up behind him and weeping she washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. When the Pharisee of the house saw it, he thought to himself how if Jesus was really a prophet as he claimed, then he would know what kind of woman she was and would have nothing to do with her. Perceiving his thoughts, Jesus turned to Simon and said, ***Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head. (45) Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet. (46) My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment. (47) Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.*** Simon the Pharisee did not extend the common courtesy of the day of washing the feet of their guest, greeting them with a welcome kiss on the cheek and offering them oil for anointment, but this woman in some degree did all of these things.

And he turned to the woman ***(48) And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven. (49) And they that sat at meat with him began to say within themselves, Who is this that forgiveth sins also?*** Like with the paralytic, they were amazed that Jesus could forgive sin. But notice now verse ***(50) And he said to the woman, Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.*** Jesus said this woman was saved and no indication of baptism here. Why then do we not wash his feet with tears and dry them with our hair in order to be saved? For the same reasons we are not saved like the thief on the cross. The rules for salvation changed when Jesus died on the cross.

If the thief on the cross and the paralytic and sinful woman lived today, what do you think the Lord would tell them to do to have their sins forgiven? He would tell them to do exactly what he tells us to do, which is to be baptized for the forgiveness of sin. We need to understand that salvation is through Jesus. This is what we learn in Acts 12. ***Acts 4:12 Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.*** Later the apostle Paul would write, ***2 Timothy 2:10 Therefore I endure all things for the elect's sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.***

Salvation is in Christ because that's where forgiveness of sin is. In speaking of Jesus Paul would write ***Ephesians 1:7 In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.*** In writing to the church of Colossae, Paul would say, ***Colossians 1:13-14 Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: (14) In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins:***

Since God is no respecter of persons, what He expected of those in the early church he expects of you and me and that is that forgiveness and salvation is in Christ. A study of scripture will teach you that a person is baptized into Christ. The same baptism that is for remission of sin also puts one into Christ. Baptism washes away sin. Saul of Tarsus was told to ***Acts 22:16 And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.*** With your sins removed, you are in a saved relationship with the Lord and he adds you to the church which is the same as being put into Christ. ***Acts 2:47 Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.***

This is what the thief on the cross would be told today. This is what we call obeying the gospel.

Invitation Have you been added to the church?