

The Harvester



Preparing Souls

To Serve The Lord



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Does the “Thief on the Cross” Prove Baptism Unnecessary?

By Brian R. Kenyon

Luke records this intriguing dialog between the two criminals crucified alongside Jesus.

And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. ⁴⁰But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. ⁴²And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. ⁴³And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise. (Lk. 23:39-43)

These verses have caused much controversy in the religious world, especially as it concerns obeying the Gospel. Some in denominationalism will use this passage and say, “The thief was saved without baptism and so can we!” Is this true? Does the “thief on the cross” prove baptism unnecessary?

The Setting

There were two “malefactors [criminals, NKJ]” crucified with Christ, “on either side one, and Jesus in the midst” (Jn. 19:18). As Jesus hung on the cross, the chief priest, along with the scribes and elders, mocked Jesus, saying,

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. ⁴³He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God. (Mt. 27:42-43)

Then, Matthew added, “The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth” (Mt. 27:44). Mark also acknowledged, “And they that were crucified with him reviled him” (Mk. 15:32b). Thus, both criminals partook in mocking and blaspheming Jesus prior to the dialog recorded by Luke. The word translated “railed” (Lk. 23:39) is the word “blasphemed” (NKJ) and means to speak against.

However, one of the criminals changed his mind. His statement, “Dost not thou fear God?,” may possibly be a recognition of Jesus’ deity. The Bible does not reveal any prior knowledge these criminals may have had of Jesus nor how close in proximity they were to Jesus during His mockery of a trial, but it would certainly be reasonable to think that they witnessed at least part of the proceedings. Something in those proceedings, coupled with some possible prior knowledge, may have caused the one criminal to recognize Jesus as deity.

However, whether or not the criminal recognized Jesus’ deity, the penitent criminal clearly recognized two truths. First, he recognized that he and the other criminal were justly receiving the death penalty—“we receive the due reward of our deeds” (Lk. 23:41a).

Do You Understand Sin?

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The death penalty existed then as it does now in civil states. Governments have God-given authority to inflict such if they so choose (Rom. 13:1-7, especially in verse 4, “for he [civil government] beareth not the sword in vain”). Even Paul said from Caesar’s judgment seat, “For if I be an offender, or have committed any thing worthy of death, I refuse not to die (Acts 25:11). The penitent criminal knew that he and the other were receiving just punishment.

Second, the penitent criminal recognized the innocence of Jesus—“this man hath done nothing amiss” (Lk. 23:41b). Again, the Bible does not say how close in proximity these two criminals were to Jesus during His so-called “trial,” but it would not take much to properly read the situation. Even Pilate concluded three times, “I find no fault in him” (Jn. 18:38; 19:4, 6). Any unbiased person would also have concluded the same. Add to that the irrational, frenzied insistence by the Jewish mob to “Crucify him,” no matter the evidence (Mk. 15:13-14), the innocence of Jesus would have been apparent to the honest heart. The penitent criminal had the heart to acknowledge that truth!

As his life was slowly draining, the penitent criminal petitioned Jesus, “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom” (Lk. 23:42). “When you come into your kingdom” may very well indicate that this man was a Jew who was once taught about the coming Messianic kingdom and realized that the innocent man being crucified with him was indeed the Christ. If he was a Jew, then he could very well have been baptized under John’s baptism (Lk. 3:1-18). Even if he

were a Gentile, however, he could have reached the conclusion about Jesus’ kingdom by observing the legal proceedings. Jesus did respond to Pilate,

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. ³⁷Pilate therefore said unto him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice. (Jn. 18:36-37)

Regardless of how he learned of the Messiah’s kingdom, the penitent criminal knew that physical death was not the end of existence. Although his understanding was likely limited, he knew he wanted to be a part of Jesus’ kingdom.

Jesus assured the penitent thief, “Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Lk. 23:43). “To day” indicates that very day. The penitent criminal would not have to wait long. “Paradise” would ensue following his death. The word “paradise” (from *paradeisos*, παράδεισος) is from a Persian word that had been incorporated into Koine Greek. It literally meant “park” or “garden” (Gen. 2:8; Isa. 51:3, LXX). It is used elsewhere in the New Testament two other times. First Paul said,

I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. ³And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) ⁴How that he was caught up

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into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. (2 Cor. 12:2-4)

Paul paralleled “paradise” with “the third heaven,” which seems to be a Hebrew superlative indicating the highest heaven, where God is (cf. “heaven and heaven of heavens,” 1 Kgs. 8:27).

Second, Jesus promised the church at Ephesus, “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7). These passages indicate that paradise is a place of fellowship with God. One cannot have fellowship with God without his or her sins being forgiven. Thus, being in paradise with Jesus would be equivalent to being saved.

The paradise Jesus promised the penitent criminal would enjoy with Him must be a reference to “Abraham’s bosom” in the place of departed human spirits, known as Hades (Lk. 16:19-31). All human spirits go to the Hadean realm at death, either to Abraham’s bosom (like the beggar, Lk. 16:22) or to the place of torment (like the rich man, Lk. 16:23).

Jesus was no different. At death, His human spirit went to the Hadean realm. On Pentecost, Peter referred to the words of David, that God would “not leave my soul in hell [Hades, ASV], neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption,” and then declared that David, “seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell [Hades, ASV], neither his flesh did see corruption” (Acts 2:25-31). Since Jesus had no sin, His soul went to Abraham’s bosom. Thus, the paradise that Jesus promised the penitent criminal was Abraham’s bosom. After the final judgment, when “death and hell [Hades]” will have “delivered up the dead which were in them” (Rev. 20:11-15), the souls in Abraham’s bosom will be in eternity with God in that realm called heaven (cf. Mt. 7:21; 25:31-46).

The Solution

Does this account prove that one can be saved today without baptism? In answer to this question, consider the following. First, the *chronology* does not negate the necessity of baptism today. Jesus promised to be with this man in paradise before the New Testament went into effect. While it is true that Jesus was dying on the cross, He was not yet dead. The New Testament could not go into effect until after Christ’s death:

For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. ¹⁷For a testament


is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth. (Heb. 9:16-17)

“Great Commission” baptism did not go into effect until *after* Jesus died, evidenced by His not requiring it until just prior to His ascension back to the Father (Mt. 28:18-20; Mk. 16:15-16 cf. Acts 1:1-3).

Second, the *criminal* does not negate the necessity of baptism today. As mentioned earlier, this man could have been a disciple of John the Baptist, and thus would have been baptized (cf. Lk. 7:30). It is possible for children of God to suffer for crimes they commit (1 Pet. 4:15). However, whether or not he was a disciple of John, he definitely repented, and repentance has always been required for salvation (cf. 1 Sam. 7:3; Lk. 13:3, 5). Perhaps Isaiah best summarized, “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon” (Isa. 55:7).

Third, the *Christ* does not negate the necessity of baptism today. Jesus *did not* act arbitrarily by unconditionally forgiving this criminal just because He felt like it. Jesus cannot act independently of the Father’s will (Jn. 5:19; 7:16; 8:28; 12:49 cf. Mt. 20:23). Again, repentance has always been a condition of forgiveness! When people truly repent under the covenant to which they were accountable, like the “thief on the cross,” they will always be forgiven (cf. Jonah 3:4-10; Ezk. 18:21; Ps. 34:18)!

The Salvation

The “thief on the cross” is not the pattern for salvation today any more than the Jews who were legitimately baptized under John’s baptism are (Mt. 3:1-6). There came a time when John’s baptism was no longer valid, and those who obeyed it when it was invalid had to be baptized correctly in order to be saved (Acts 19:1-5). Whether this criminal crucified with Jesus was a former disciple of John, it does not matter. He showed repentance either way, and that penitent attitude is needed by all who will be saved today (Mt. 5:4; Jas. 4:8-10). Authority for being saved must come from this side of the cross, from the new covenant established by Jesus’ death. That authority still says, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). Biblical repentance includes baptism! The “thief on the cross” does not disprove its necessity! Can one truly repent without doing what God says? Have you been baptized into Christ? 

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Tuesday	__ 8:30-12:00	Preacher and His Work (107)	Wheeler	3
	__ 1:00-4:15	Computers and Churches (287)	Wheeler	3
Wednesday	__ 8:30-12:00	Romans (261)	Kenyon	3
	__ 1:00-4:15	Christian Evidences (224)	D. Stearsman	3
Thursday	__ 8:30-12:00	Logic (270)	Kenyon	3
	__ 1:00-4:15	English I: Grammar (124)	Patterson	3
Friday	__ 8:30-12:00	Church History: General (241)	Franson	3
	__ 1:00-4:15	Pentateuch (164)	Elledge	3
Extension Classes				
Tuesday	__ 7:00-9:30	Topical Bible Studies (134) (Livingston church of Christ, Livingston, TN)	J. Stearsman	2.5
Thursday	__ 6:00-8:30	Difficult Texts of the New Testament (274) (Orange Street church of Christ, Auburndale)	Bauer	2.5
	__ 7:00-9:30	Revelation (259) (Wesconnett church of Christ, Jacksonville)	Atnip	2.5