

The Thief On The Cross

The question of salvation is aptly answered by the Bible; Faith in Christ saves (John 3:16), so does Confession of His name (Romans 10:10), Repentance (2 Corinthians 7:10) and Baptism for the remission of sins (1 Peter 3:21). None of these acts should be ignored or neglected by an alien sinner coming unto the Lord under the new covenant which was first preached on the day of Pentecost. However, some people neglect water baptism today and claim it is not essential to salvation. To justify such position, they cite the case of the thief on the cross. (Does anyone honestly expect to be saved like that thief today? It is curious these do not prefer the option given to the rich young ruler in Luke 18:18-22.) Such people are either right or wrong, there is no middle ground! If wrong, it is either such are sincerely mistaken or brazenly making excuses for their unwillingness to submit to baptism. We can establish the truth by rightly dividing the word of God. That is the purpose of this study.

The account of the thief is documented in Luke 23

39 *And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.*

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.*

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.*

Clearly, the thief was saved by Jesus. John the fore-runner of Christ baptized people for the remission of sins (Mark 1:4) and *we can not state with CERTAINTY whether this thief had been baptized or not*. One may reason that since that man knew about the fear of God, his guilt and Jesus' innocence, the fact that Jesus is Lord and would reign in His kingdom, that there is life after death, etc. that he might have been baptized by John or Christ's disciples before relapsing into sin. That is probable but is just a speculation because the scriptures have not so stated. Besides, it does not answer the other cases where Jesus FORGAVE people such as:

1. He forgave the sins of a sinful woman in Luke 7:47-50
2. He forgave the sins of a man sick of the palsy in Matthew 9:2-8
3. He forgave an adulterous woman in John 8:1-11

There are at least THREE reasons why such people could be saved by Christ without baptism.

1. The baptism of John was **NO LONGER NECESSARY the moment Jesus was identified as the messiah** -John 1:25-33; Acts 19:1-4. God instructed John to baptize people so that John would be able to recognize and confirm that Jesus is the Christ. Multitudes were being baptized to prepare people for the Lord's ministry and Jesus was so identified when the Spirit descended on Him. Henceforth, John's ministry was to decrease and Christ's own to increase. In other words, people should then begin to believe on and follow Jesus, NOT John.

2. During His earthly ministry, the Son of man '**hath power on earth to forgive sins**' (Matthew 9:6) and He could do so in any way unto any one as He pleases (Matthew 20:15). Such people need not necessarily be baptized because Christ is God manifest in the flesh with them (Emmanuel). Thus He could forgive anyone because He knew their hearts and circumstances - John 2:24. This is paralleled by the situation described in Matthew 9:14-15. *Then came to him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not? And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast.*

Just as His disciples did not have to fast while He was with them to grant their prayers so also did sinners not have to be baptized while He was personally around to pronounce remission or forgiveness of sins. After all, He had not YET shed His blood for that purpose. In like manner as John, Christ's disciples baptized people during His earthly ministry. The record however suggests that Jesus permitted it, NOT that He expressly commanded it at that time -John 3:26-30; 4:1-3.

3. Christ was born and lived under the law of Moses or Old Testament -Gal 4:4-5. His ministry was to prepare people for the New Covenant which was enacted with His Blood upon His death - Mt 26:28, Heb 9:14-17. The Father has committed all judgment unto the Son. The conditions under which Jesus forgave people BEFORE His death are just a subset of the gospel as it was not yet in effect (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). **Also, a man may distribute his possessions to anyone he wishes in any way he pleases during his lifetime. But after his death, no one has any right to receive anything from his estate except according to the terms of his will or testament.** The will does not come into effect until He dies. Even so with Christ! People today receive forgiveness only by complying with the terms of His will or testament. During Christ's personal ministry before His death, he had stated the necessity that one should 'Believe (John 8:24), Repent (Luke 13:3) and Confess faith in Him (Matthew 10:32-33). It was AFTER His death and upon His resurrection that Jesus commanded "*Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned*" – Mark 16:15-16.

A saving faith is ever willing to please or obey God –Hebrews 11. As such, those who really believe the gospel always follow with the biblical trend of repentance, confession and baptism into Christ's death. That is WHEN a sinner is spiritually washed with the blood shed for the remission of sins (Matthew 26:28, Acts 2:36-38, Revelation 1:5) and by partaking in a form of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus; he is spiritually raised into newness of life as a new creature IN Christ (Romans 6:3-11, Galatians 3:27). That is the way to obey the gospel and those who do **not obey** will be punished in flaming fire at Christ's return -2 Thessalonians 1:7-8. The apostles understood the importance of baptism (Colossians 2:12-13) hence recipients of the gospel were always baptized IMMEDIATELY in the scriptures since the day of Pentecost.

After specifying the terms of salvation under the New Covenant, Christ expects those who have reached the age of accountability (capable of comprehending and making a decision) to respond individually. Each person must choose whether to submit to God's plan of salvation; those who truly believe will "*repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.*" Those who do NOT believe (and consequently will not be baptized) will be damned. The multitude of about three thousand souls obeyed without argument when convicted of their sins and their need for a Savior on the day that the full gospel was first preached. Indeed, that is the pattern ever since. Jesus after His ascension to heaven has not changed His post-resurrection commandment or requirement for mankind's salvation under His Testament. This is easily seen in the case of Saul of Tarsus. After Paul's encounter on the road to Damascus he was simply asked to go and wait for instructions on what to do. Saul had confessed Jesus as Lord, was repentant and demonstrating faith via prayer and fasting. But he was still in his sins because he had not contacted the cleansing blood. That was why Ananias came to him and said "*And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord*" –Acts 22:16.

I hope this study has helped to clarify your understanding of the promulgation and administration of the New Testament of our Lord Jesus. None can enter into or benefit from the new covenant that refuses to accede to Christ's example and command on baptism. Having heard now, you are without excuse. "*But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves... And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized...*" We would be glad to assist you obey the gospel and to grow in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour.