

# “But What About The Thief on the Cross?”

## Bible Answers About Salvation

In our tract, "What Must I Do To Be Saved?" it was pointed out that the gospel of Christ was preached in every case of conversion in order to produce faith. As that faith builds in our hearts it leads us to repent of our sins and that is made known by the confession of our faith in Jesus Christ. That faith finally culminates in what the Bible calls the new birth, baptism. It is from this watery grave that one rises to "walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4).

Those who attempt to refute the teaching of the Word of God regarding conversion often respond to this evidence by stating, "But what about the thief on the cross? He was saved without being baptized!" That the thief on the cross was saved is not questioned by this writer for Jesus said, "Today shall thou be with me in Paradise." (Lk. 23:43) The point in question is, "Does the thief on the cross constitute an example as to the conditions of salvation for men today?" The Bible emphatically denies that it does.

Although God entered into various covenant agreements with different individuals in Old Testament history, the Bible is basically concerned with two great covenants; the covenant God made with the people of Israel through His lawgiver Moses and the covenant applicable to all men through Jesus Christ. (Exodus 20-23; Hebrews 1:1-2) Both Jesus and the thief lived and died during the period that the Law of Moses was still in force. (Galatians 4:4-5; Colossians 2:14) While Jesus lived upon this earth He had the authority to bestow His blessing of forgiveness upon whomever He willed in keeping with the Will of God. (Mark 2:5-12) On at least five different occasions while Christ lived upon the earth He forgave individuals of their sins (the last being the thief on the cross) and on none of these occasions did He ever demand immersion in water for the remission of sins. This is true because men were not yet subject to the Law of Christ. This truth is well illustrated in the account of Jesus' conversation with the rich young ruler. In answering this young man's question, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life," Jesus replied, "Keep the commandments." Upon further inquiry by the young ruler as to the specific commandments to which Jesus was referring, Jesus answered by referring to the Ten Commandments given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. (Matthew 19:16-22) Jesus did not command this young ruler to be immersed in water in order to obtain the remission of sins because the Law of Moses, under which the ruler lived, did not demand it.

Since men today are subject to the law of Christ one cannot find an example as to the details of what he is to do to be saved by appealing to any account of salvation prior to the time Christ's law became effective. The Hebrew writer explained in his epistle that men are now subject to the will of Christ and not the Law of Moses. (Hebrews 1:1-2; 2:1-4; 7:11-14; 8:13) In this epistle the writer tells us at what point the law of Christ became effective:

"And for this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, in order that since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were {committed} under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. For where a covenant is, there must of necessity be the death of the one who made it. For a covenant is valid {only} when men are dead, for it is never in force while the one who made it lives." — Hebrews 9:15-17 NAS

Please notice that the writer emphasized that there must be the death of the will maker before his will becomes operative. While the will maker lives he may dispense of those things in his possession as he chooses; but after his death the only way he can dispense the blessing of his estate is through his will. While the will maker lives he may alter his will. However, after the will maker dies his will then becomes effective and cannot be changed. Furthermore, those who are named as the recipients of his will must meet all the conditions set forth by the will maker in order to receive the promised blessings. Since the will of Christ did not become operative until after His death, the thief on the cross could not have been subject unto New Testament baptism. Thus to argue that the thief on the cross constitutes an example of how men are to be saved today is just as unreliable as arguing that Moses, David, Joshua or any other Old Testament figure constitutes an example for us to follow in order to be forgiven of past sins! The appropriate question to be asked then is not "What about the thief," but "What about the 3,000 on the day of Pentecost, the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul" or any other example of salvation after the will of Christ became binding upon all men on the day of Pentecost. (Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:49; 2:1-4) Only those who are willing to meet the conditions set forth in the will of Christ will receive the promised blessing of salvation. Furthermore, those who would attempt to alter the conditions set forth in His will rest under the condemnation of God (Galatians 1:6-9; Revelation 22:18-19).

After all has been said the Lord still says, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned" (Mark 16:15-16 NAS).

We encourage you to do only what the Lord requires of you in becoming a Christian. You will never be required to do more than the people in the first century.

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