**Can We Be Saved Like The Thief On The Cross?**

Prepared by Nathan L Morrison for Sunday November 5th, 2023

Text: Luke 23:39-43 Scripture Reading: Mark 16:15-16

### Intro

1. The Scriptures make clear the conditions for salvation: Belief & Baptism for the forgiveness of sins!
   1. Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; I Peter 3:21
2. ***Is there an exception to this rule?***
   1. Many people attempt to dismiss all these passages with one question: “But what about the thief on the cross?”
3. A post about the thief on the cross is making rounds on social media, in another attempt to show Faith Alone saves. The version some of my friends and family shared went like this:
   1. How does the thief on the cross fit into your theology? No baptism, no communion, no confirmation, no speaking in tongues, no mission trip, no volunteerism, no financial gifts, and no church clothes. He couldn't even bend his knees to pray. He didn't say the sinner's prayer and among other things, he was a thief. Jesus didn't take way his pain, heal his body, or smite his scoffers. Yet, it was a thief who walked into paradise the same hour as Jesus simply by BELIEVING.
   2. He had nothing more to offer other than his belief that Jesus was who He said He was. No spin from brilliant theologians. No ego or arrogance. No shiny lights, skinny jeans, or crafty words. No fog machine, donuts, or coffee in the lobby. Just a naked dying man on a cross unable to even fold his hands to pray. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son so that whoever BELIEVES in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16) That is the good news of the Gospel!
4. The thief on the cross is thought by some to be the ***EXCEPTION*** that would justify salvation at the point of confession of Christ as Lord alone today *(Romans 3:28: Luther added “alone”).*
   1. The religious world has elevated the thief to a position to steal the truth of the gospel from the hearts of many men.
5. There is no doubt that the remorseful thief on the cross was saved, but the question is, “Can people today be saved in the same manner?”

#### At Calvary

* 1. All four gospels record that Jesus Christ was crucified with two thieves on either side of Him – Matthew 27:38; Mark 15:27; Luke 23:33; John 19:18
     1. At one point, both thieves insulted Jesus (Matthew 27:44) as the people did (Matthew 27:39-43)
     2. One of them hurled insults like the masses below and is recorded in Luke 23:39.
     3. One of them rebuked the other, admitted guilt, confessed Jesus as innocent, and asked to be remembered in Christ’s kingdom (Luke 23:39-43), to which plea for mercy Jesus responded, “Today, you will be with Me in Paradise.”
  2. We can be overwhelmed with joy at the thought of God's grace and forgiveness bestowed upon that thief.
     1. It is a testament to God's goodness and mercy, a great reminder that His love knows no bounds for those who turn to Him, even as Jesus suffered on the cross.
     2. It is within God's divine right to forgive and set the terms of that forgiveness.
  3. The thief was saved because only Jesus has the power to forgive and save and He did promise the thief that he would be with Him in Paradise! *(With Jesus)*
  4. The question is: “Can We Be Saved Like The Thief On The Cross?”

#### How is Our Salvation Similar?

* 1. There is a sense in which the thief on the cross was saved exactly as anyone is now – or has ever been – saved.
  2. He was saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). The thief’s faith is evident:
     1. He rebuked the other thief for mocking Jesus Christ, saying, “Do you not fear God?” (Luke 23:40).
     2. He acknowledged Jesus’ innocence (Luke 23:41).
     3. He acknowledged his own guilt (Luke 23:41).
     4. He acknowledged Jesus’ Kingship (Luke 23:42).
     5. He had faith in Jesus’ resurrection, as well as his own, because he asked Christ to remember him when He came into His kingdom (Luke 23:42).
  3. We must, like this thief, put our faith in Jesus.
     1. We must acknowledge our own guiltiness and trust in His power to save.
     2. Like the thief, if we are forgiven, it is not because we have earned forgiveness by doing great deeds for God, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).
  4. The gospel of Jesus Christ commands believers to be baptized into the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins!

#### Why Do WE Have to be Baptized and He Didn’t?

* 1. When we preach obedience to the gospel through faith and baptism, we often hear the question, “But what about the thief on the cross?”
     1. The quick answer is it was under the Old Law so doesn’t apply today!
  2. **First,** Jesus forgave the sins of this man before the New Covenant had been established, meaning the Old Law, the Law of Moses, was still in effect!
     1. Hebrews 9:15-17: A testament (will) is made while one is alive. Jesus died to fulfill the Old Covenant.
     2. As the writer of Hebrews said, “For a will takes effect only at death” (Hebrews 9:17). The New Covenant was not in effect yet. People were, at that moment, still under the Law of Moses.
     3. The thief on the cross was forgiven in exactly the same way that the paralytic was forgiven in Matthew 9: on his faith in Jesus, as well as all the heroes of faith from Hebrews 11!
        1. It would be like an American now saying, “Thomas Jefferson didn’t pay Federal Income Taxes, so why should I?” Jefferson died in 1826 and Federal Income Tax was made law in 1913. Different time period. Jefferson lived and died before Income Tax!
        2. It would be like the Jews in Jesus’ day saying, “Abraham, Isaac and Jacob never kept the Law of Moses, so why should we?” They lived well before the deliverance of the Jews from Egypt and Moses giving the Law at Mt. Sinai. It is a different time and different law.
     4. Jesus, after His resurrection said He came to fulfill the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets (Luke 24:44-47).
     5. Hebrews 7:22; 8:6, 13: Jesus rose from the dead and became the “mediator” of a new covenant, making the old one obsolete, or fulfilled (Luke 24:44-47).
     6. The New Covenant began *after* His death *and* resurrection.
     7. His words in Mark 16:16 on baptism were *after* His resurrection, and fully carried out on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, under the New Covenant.
  3. **Second,** the Christian gospel had not yet been preached.
     1. After His resurrection, Jesus told the apostles that “forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47).
     2. Forgiveness of sins had not yet even begun to be preached, but it was on the Day of Pentecost, when Peter said, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38)
  4. **Third,** on this side of the cross, Christian baptism is about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.
     1. None of those things had happened yet when the thief on the cross was forgiven.
     2. Romans 6:3-7: Try to understand why it would be absurd to think the thief on the cross would be under the same command to be baptized as people today:
        1. “Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin.”

#### What does the word of God teach about salvation this side of the cross?

* + 1. Luke 24:46-47: Jesus, after His death, burial and resurrection, said the New Covenant of “repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”
       1. The thief on the cross never heard Jesus say one must believe and be baptized to be saved because Jesus hadn’t said it yet.
    2. Mark 16:15-16: Jesus commanded baptism to be saved of all disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16) and the apostles taught that very thing (Acts 2:38; 22:16; Romans 6:3-7; I Peter 3:21).
       1. Acts 22:16: Those who believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God are to confess Him as Lord and be baptized into His name *(Acts 8:37-38; 10:47-48)* for the forgiveness of sins!
    3. On the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, the Jews, the first converts under the New Covenant, were convicted of Jesus’ murder and asked what they needed to do about it. Peter and the apostles’ answer was: “Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins” (Acts 2:37-38, 41).
    4. We live under a different covenant *(a better covenant with better promises – Hebrews 8:6)* than those who lived during Jesus’ time on earth.
    5. *Hebrews 9:15-17:* A new covenant that became effective at the death of Christ and after His resurrection; He is the Will Testator.
    6. *Jesus and the apostles teach one must believe and be baptized to be saved!*
  1. Salvation today is gloriously different than it was for the thief on the cross, because salvation today is based on a more complete picture of what God has done for mankind and it is part of a new and better covenant with God (Hebrews 7:22).
  2. If you want to enter into this new and better covenant, you must be baptized!

#### Crucified with Christ

* 1. Another similarity we share with the thief on the cross is that we must be crucified with Jesus!
     1. The thief was physically crucified with Jesus, an event that cannot be repeated.
     2. Saints are to be spiritually crucified with Jesus!
  2. The neat thing about baptism is in a way, we are saved exactly like the thief on the cross; Not that he was baptized, but that we, too, must be crucified with Christ:
     1. Paul says in Galatians 2:20: I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.
     2. This wasn’t just something for Paul. We all must do the same.
     3. Galatians 5:24: And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.
     4. How can we be crucified with Christ?
     5. Romans 6:3-7: Saints are “baptized into His death” and in so doing we “know that our old self was crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.”
     6. When we decide to follow Jesus, we crucify our old self.
        1. We put him to death; Bury him in baptism, and raise to walk in a new life.
     7. So in that sense, we are crucified together with Jesus like the thief on the cross!
  3. Baptism is now required as an act of obedient faith for salvation! *(I Peter 3:21)*

## Conclusion

1. The thief on the cross is a great example of God’s forgiveness and grace!
   1. It shows us that it is never too late to come to the Lord in this life.
   2. However, the thief on the cross is not an example of what one must do to be saved today as his salvation was based upon a different covenant, different circumstances, and a different relationship to Jesus.
2. Instead of the question, “What about the thief on the cross?” it should be asked, “How am I saved today?”
3. If you trust Jesus, as the thief did, you will do what Jesus said to do!
   1. After Jesus died on that cross, was buried in a tomb, and rose from the dead, He told His apostles to go out and spread the Good News about what He had done. He told them, “He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned” (Mark 16:16).
   2. Faith is about trusting God. The thief on the cross trusted Him. Do you?
   3. Jesus said, “Whoever believes AND is baptized will be saved.” The thief on the cross wasn’t told that, **but you are!** Do you trust Jesus? Will your trust be evidenced by your actions?
   4. Baptism is us saying to the Lord, “I believe you and I trust you. Please save me.” That’s why when you are baptized, you are “calling on His name” (Acts 22:16).
   5. So let’s stop making excuses. Let’s stop arguing. Let’s just trust Jesus enough to do what Jesus said to do, believing the inspired words of Scripture, “Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (I Peter 3:21).
4. Those who attempt to find an exception to baptism in the experience of the thief on the cross do so to try to justify that baptism isn’t required of men today!
5. Those who teach such doctrines ignore the Scriptures and allow the thief on the cross to remain a thief by stealing the truth from the hearts of individuals who are seeking salvation!
6. When you see posts like this making the rounds on social media by your friends and family, maybe they are seeking forgiveness from sin and need the grace of God. Show them how to obey the gospel in the way Jesus taught in order to receive His grace & forgiveness!
7. To those with a heart for truth who live on this side of the cross, seeking forgiveness means embracing the teachings begun at Pentecost, where a New Covenant was forged for us to embrace, and the Kingdom established.
8. Heaven is too wonderful and Hell is too terrible for us to risk being misled by false beliefs concerning the thief on the cross!
9. Obey the gospel today the way Jesus taught His apostles to teach it! *(Mark 16:15-16)*
10. If you are not a Christian, you need to be. Repent and be baptized into His name!
11. If a Christian in error, don’t wait till it’s eternally too late. Repent and be renewed!
12. Whatever your requests, let them be made known ***NOW*** while we stand & sing!