

“The Thief on the Cross and the necessity of baptism”

By Tim Bench, Abilene, TX, 10-10-2014.

Many today in various denominations seem compelled to argue that baptism is not “mandatory” as a matter of salvation (or was simply “cultural” in nature in the first century, those who cling to salvation as a command are “legalistic”, etc.).

Those who argue that baptism for the remission of sin is NOT a necessity for salvation will often cite the example of the “Thief on the Cross”. The purpose of this brief lesson will be to clearly demonstrate that such logic is inherently flawed for a plethora of reasons (three of which we will discuss) and that the New Testament clearly states, infers, and dictates that baptism is indeed a prerequisite for the eternal salvation of a Christian. In short, the example of the Thief on the Cross in no way negates the absolute necessity of baptism, as we will see.

This famous story appears in Matthew 27:38-39 and 27: 44, as well as Luke 23:39-43. The Luke version seems to be the source of modern anti-baptism sentiment...

“Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, “If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.” But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, “Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said to Jesus, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” And Jesus said to him, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”

Thus, many today argue, is revealed the PROOF that baptism is NOT a necessity despite....

Acts 22:16...“And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name...”

John 3:5, which reads “Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God”....

John 3:22-23 and “After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptized. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptized—“....

Acts 2:38 and the famous “Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins....”

And most famously, Mark 16:16 with “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned...”

The thief was not baptized (the argument goes) and yet was told by Jesus he would be saved, correct?

Let us look briefly at 3 reasons that this argument is inaccurate....

1) The thief died under the old covenant, not the covenant of the New Testament. Christ himself lived under the Mosaic Law (see Matthew 5:17-18) and likewise instructed His disciples to observe it (see Matthew 23:1-3.) The old covenant was abolished with the death of Jesus Christ (see Colossians 2:12-17), which was after the thief's repentance and forgiveness by Jesus. Baptism symbolizes our selfish desires having "died with Christ" (Romans 6:1-10). So, how could the thief have possibly been baptized into Christ's death when Christ had not even died yet?

“In any consideration of the thief, one must keep in mind that the thief lived under the Old Testament. The writer of the book of Hebrews argues that a change of

law was made. "For the Priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law" (Heb. 7:12). Hebrews 9:16, 17 tell us when this change of law was effected. "For where a testament is, there must of necessity be the death of him that made it. For a testament is of force where there hath been death: for it doth never avail while he that made it liveth." Paul, in Rom. 7:4, said: "Wherefore, my brethren, ye also were made dead to the law through the body of Christ."

Prior to the death of Christ, the Old Testament was in force. After his death, the New Testament became effective.

It is obvious, therefore, that we live in the New Testament era. It is equally obvious that when Jesus said "Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise" the thief was yet under the Old Testament, since this remark was made prior to the death of Christ. Whatever might be shown to be true concerning the salvation of the thief is of no relevance to our salvation, since he lived under a different law from that under which people today live."

From "But What About the Thief on the Cross?" by Cecil Willis, Truth Magazine, July, 1968.

Baptism in Jesus' name was not a commandment until after His death on the cross. It first appears as a command in Jesus' great commission, which occurred after the death and resurrection (see Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16). Thus, the thief's baptism example is

irrelevant to Christians today because he was saved under a different law (the “old” law) wherein baptism had not yet even been commanded.

2) We know almost nothing about this “thief”we do not know his history, his hometown, his occupation, his family genealogy, whether he had children or a family, his supposed “crime”, nor do we even know his name.

With such scant information, how can we possibly presume to know if he had been baptized or not?? Is it not equally (or even more) likely that he HAD been baptized? Why is his baptism not being mentioned proof for many that he had not been baptized?

We do know that many came to hear John the Baptist preaching (see Matthew 3:5-6) and we likewise know from scripture that many were thus baptized....

5 Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, 6 And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.

“On the day of Pentecost, the community of Jewish believers consisted of a minimum of three thousand persons (Acts 2:41). If this figure embraced only those immersed that day, then the total number of disciples—including those prepared by John the Baptist (Matthew

3:5-6) and those immersed by the Lord's disciples (John 4:1-2)—must have been significantly larger”, from “The establishment of the Church of Christ” by Wayne Jackson, Christian Courier.

It is indeed possible that this unnamed thief MAY have been a part of the throng that heard and received John the Baptizer's message. He may have been baptized or he may not have been.....we simply do not know, but decrees based on this scenario that baptism is “optional” when we have no idea if this man had been baptized or not seems to be a wild reach. Considering the remainder of the New Testament dictates on baptism, it seems equally, if not more valid, to presume he HAD been baptized.

From “What about the Thief on the Cross?” from www.granbychurchofchrist.org....

“This man hanging beside our Lord had a lot of information. It is highly unlikely that this man received this amount of instruction while hanging on the cross. It is entirely possible and even probable, that this man had been exposed to some earlier teaching concerning Jesus Christ.

Let's consider this scenario. Is it not possible that this man could have been a disciple of John the Baptist, or of Jesus Christ Himself, or of one of Christ's disciples as they went forth teaching (Matthew 10:5; Luke 10:1)? If such were the case, the man might well have been baptized

for the forgiveness of his sins on some past occasion
(Mark 1:4; John 4:1-2). While we can never be certain
this side of eternity, there is sufficient evidence to draw
the conclusion that it is possible. At the very least, given
the amount of information this man possessed
concerning Christ, no one can rightfully make the
dogmatic statement: “The thief had never been
baptized.” That is an unknown factor. He might well have
been an “erring child of God” at this point.

The Bible never tells us for sure whether or not the thief was baptized. The Bible never says the thief was baptized. It also never says he wasn't. Anyone using the thief on the cross to support the doctrine of salvation by faith alone is basing their beliefs on something that 1) does not in any way support their position and 2) is improvable. What we need to take from this is that if someone is going to make a decision that is going to have eternal consequences, then they need to make those decisions based on facts and not on assumptions. We need to make decisions that effect our eternal souls on fact and not on guesses or feelings.”

3) While on earth, Jesus Christ had the power and authority to forgive sin, on the spot, and as He saw fit (see Mark 2:5 and “When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven you”, Mark 2:9-10 with “Whether is it easier to say to the sick of the palsy, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and take

up thy bed, and walk?” and also Luke 7:37-50). Thus, whether the thief had been baptized or not again becomes irrelevant, in that Jesus possessed the authority to tell the man he would soon join him in paradise.

Repeatedly throughout the New Testament, the absolute and paramount importance of baptism is emphasized (perhaps most directly in Mark 16:16). Why would a command which is seen and read over and over suddenly and inexplicably be tossed aside with the Thief on the Cross story?? And would such a sudden shift in the importance of baptism not, by definition, make both the Apostles and Jesus Christ Himself liars??

My hope is that people who seriously desire to study the Bible and the inspired message of salvation contained therein will, with an open heart and mind, see that baptism is NOT “optional”, but is one of the five “steps” to salvation (i.e. hear, believe, repent, confess, baptism) for each of us.