

## Can We Be Saved Like The Thief on the Cross?

**Intro:** I remember hearing the story of a preaching who came to town for a meeting and he reported that he would be speaking on a certain night on the most famous thief in town. All the crowds gathered to hear who this person was! The preacher turned their attention to Luke 23 and spoke about “the thief on the cross”. He is perhaps one of the most popular thieves to have ever lived; actually there were two!

*And one of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, “Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!” But the other answered, and rebuking him said, “Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? “And we indeed justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong. And he was saying, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” And He said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:39-43)*

**Why has this particular thief been some prominent in religious discussions? Many religious people for centuries have used the thief as “proof” that one can be saved today without baptism in water in spite of Jesus’ plain statements in the gospel requiring it. Can we be saved like the thief on the cross?**

### **The thief in context**

*Presumably, the thief, as a descendant of Abraham, was heir to salvation through keeping the covenant God made with the Jews through Moses.*

**The Law revealed God’s righteous standards.**

**The Jews were obligated to keep the covenant with God by obeying all the Laws of Moses.**

**However, it is clear that the thief was a sinner who had violated the covenant command, “you shall not steal”.**

**According to the Law, forgiveness for such transgressions was available through repentance and the offering the appropriate animal sacrifices.**

*However, a new way of forgiveness was already dawning. The conditions of pardon of the old covenant were to give way to a new and living way of salvation through Jesus Christ.*

**John the Baptist had pointed to Jesus with these words:**

*The next day he \*saw Jesus coming to him, and \*said, “Behold, the **Lamb of God** who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29)*

**John came preaching a baptism of repentance to prepare the way for the Lord (Mt. 3:5). He urged them to “repent, for the kingdom was at hand”.**

*And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” (Acts 19:4)*

**The appeal of John's teaching to the masses is indicated by Matthew in his description of John's ministry.**

*Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan; (Matthew 3:5)*

**All Jerusalem and Jordan are said to have gone out to John. Was the thief among them? The text does not explicitly answer this question.**

**But notice these things that the thief knew that we can glean from his remarks to the other thief.**

*Knew there was a God (v. 40).*

*Knew God was to be feared (v. 40).*

*Knew Jesus was associated with God (v. 39)*

*Recognized a principle of right and wrong (v. 40-41)*

*Knew he had something to answer for beyond death (v. 40)*

*Knew Christ was innocent (v. 41)*

*Knew the one dying next to him was Lord (v. 42 )*

*Knew that although about to die, Jesus could help in his circumstance (v. 42).*

*Knew in spite of Jesus dying, that He would still establish His kingdom (v. 42).*

*Where did he get this understanding?*

**I say this then, to suggest the possibility that the thief may very well have been taught either by John or Jesus and baptized by either of them and had fallen away. Such a person could have been forgiven by penitent prayer, just as today baptized people are forgiven in the same way.**

**But let's grant the argument often made without any Scriptural proof that the thief was not baptized! (By the way, this is one of the few times you can ever get a denominationalist to acknowledge the principle of the silence of Scriptures. And in this case, they misuse it. They build their case on what is not said about one person, while ignoring what God has said clearly about others.**

**In this case they contend that Biblical silence means that the thief was not baptized. Such could never be proved!**

**However, does the thief then prove that one today can be saved without baptism?**

**The salvation of the thief does not assure the salvation of the unbaptized today!**

*The crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus marks the beginning of a new age of revelation and a new covenant based on that revelation!*

**That covenant was to be made not only with "the house of Israel and Judah" (Jer. 31:31) but with people of all nations.**

*Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the*

*Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. (Luke 24:44-47)*

*And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20)*

*And He said to them, “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)*

**That new covenant was inaugurated by the shed blood of Jesus and could not be entered until after Jesus’ death.**

*for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins. (Matthew 26:28)*

*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)*

**The thief did not live under the gospel age.**

He did not have access to the blessings of the new covenant, since it had not yet been ratified.

He was not a subject of the terms of the gospel since they had not yet been announced by Jesus!

He could not have obeyed in baptism a likeness of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection; since Jesus had not yet died!

***People today are subject to the terms of the new covenant since it has been ratified!***

In every case of conversion after the inauguration of the new covenant, baptism is mentioned as a part of the process of entering that covenant. I’ve often wondered why people do not say, “I want to be saved like the people of Pentecost (Ac. 2:38) or Samaria (Ac. 8) or Cornelius (Ac. 10) or Saul (Ac. 22)? Instead they say, “I want to be saved like the thief” who lived under the provisions of the old covenant.

Paul taught that baptism is a likeness of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. The thief could not have done that since Jesus had not yet died, been buried or raised!

***Very important point! Those who believe in salvation by faith only appeal to the thief not only to say that those who can't be baptized are saved but also those who can be baptized but won't!***

How could a person who can be baptized be saved like a man who couldn't? Even if the thief had been subject to baptism, it surely begs the question for someone to affirm that he can be saved like the thief when he is perfectly capable of doing what the thief could not do! When someone says, "I want to be saved like the thief, perhaps we should ask him, "Are you on a cross? Are you unable to obey the command the Lord has given?"

What would have been the condition of those who Pentecost who were told to "repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" if they had refused to "gladly receive the word" but instead said, "I want to be saved like the thief on the cross"? I submit that they would have demonstrated a different spirit than that of thief, a spirit of rebellion against God rather than a spirit of submission to Jesus' as Lord.

**The ultimate intention of the argument from the thief is to contend for salvation without baptism for everyone!!!!**

**Conclusion: We should be careful about statements about what may or may not do at the judgment. God has the right to make exception to his terms according to His own principles of love and justice; but no man has the right to promise salvation to those willingly disobedient to God's terms of pardon!**

**Today, it is imperative that we think carefully about our responses to God. A window of grace is available to all of us on terms clearly announced by God. Why neglect such an opportunity in exchange for what the Bible does not ever explicitly promise?**