

## **“THE THIEF ON THE CROSS”**

He cried out to Jesus with a plaintive plea, and Jesus answered with a precious promise. But are people today saved in the same way as the thief on the cross? On our last program, we talked about what is commonly called ‘the sinner’s prayer.’ If you ask the majority of preachers today, “What must I do to be saved,” they’ll nearly all tell you to accept Christ and pray a simple prayer. That prayer typically includes confessing to Christ that you are a sinner and inviting Him to come into your heart and forgive you of your sins. Millions upon millions of very sincere and yearning people are led to believe that such a prayer is taught in the New Testament as the way a sinner is saved. But, as we read the book of Acts and we learn what the apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ preached through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they never instructed any sinner to pray for salvation. In fact, if you begin in Acts 2 and read through Luke’s record of the fulfillment of the great commission, which is what the book of Acts is, you may be surprised that you will not find one example of a sinner being told to say such a prayer. The fact is that preachers such as Billy Sunday popularized the practice in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—not the apostle Peter or any of the other ambassadors of the Lord.

**Matthew 28:19 “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”**

**Mark 16:15 “And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.”**

What did that mean? What were they to preach? *“He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.”* (**Mark 16:16**) Peter was the first apostle to obey the Lord’s commission, and on the day of Pentecost, according to **Acts 2:38**, when he was asked by those to whom he preached, “What shall we do?” this is what he said:

**Acts 2:38 “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”**

**Acts 2:41 “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.”**

Peter didn’t tell them to close their eyes and pray a prayer. He instructed every one of them to repent of their sins and be baptized in order to receive the remission or forgiveness of their sins. We don’t have to speculate or surmise about that because we can read it in black and white in God’s Word. That pattern was repeated again and again throughout the book of Acts as the gospel was taken to the whole world. Nobody was ever told to say ‘the sinner’s prayer,’ as it is called. Rather, they were shown how to obey the gospel in faith by repenting of their sins, and upon their confession of faith in Jesus, by being immersed into Christ for the remission of their sins.

**Galatians 3:27 “For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”**

That brings up the question under consideration today: what about the thief on the cross? Was he saved without baptism? Does he fit the model that we see beginning in **Acts 2**? Didn't the thief cry out to Jesus for salvation, and didn't the Lord answer his plea with the promise of life after death? Let's read the account found in **Luke 23**.

**Luke 23:39-43** "And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise."

That thief that turned to Jesus, we believe, is enjoying the rest of the redeemed at this very moment, until Jesus comes again. But is his "deathbed conversion" a paradigm for penitent sinners today?

The dramatic and graphic scenes of Calvary were pictured hundreds of years before they actually happened. More than 700 years before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah said the following:

**Isaiah 53:12** "...and he was numbered with the transgressors..."

On this day at Calvary, Jesus was crucified and two robbers were nailed to crosses on either side of Him. They were real men who had committed terrible crimes against society. The Greek word means *one who uses violence to rob openly*. They weren't burglars or shoplifters. They likely were guilty of armed robbery that may have included murder. Both were guilty of their crimes and they were getting what they deserved at the hands of the law. Hanging between them, however, was the Son of God, who had done no wrong. He was falsely accused. He was paying, not for crimes which He had committed, but He was paying the penalty for the sins of these two thieves, and for the sins of all of us. Luke tells us the most about these two men, but the other synoptic writers tell us that when they were crucified that morning, both thieves railed on Him, just as did the chief priests, scribes and elders.

**Mark 15:29-32** "And they that passed by railed on him, wagging their heads, and saying, Ah, thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, Save thyself, and come down from the cross. Likewise also the chief priests mocking said among themselves with the scribes, He saved others; himself he cannot save. Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe. And they that were crucified with him reviled him."

**Matthew 27:44** "The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth."

It was providential that Jesus was crucified between these two sinners. In one respect, they paint a portrait of you and me, who have all been the enemies of Jesus at one time or another. Yet, we all get equal access to the Savior. Both of them initially rejected Jesus, but as the day dragged on, one of the thieves watching and listening to Jesus began to see something different about the Lord. As he stared into the jaws of death, I suppose things became clearer to him. Death has a way of changing how we think about things, and I suspect a lot of people have viewed Christ differently in death than they did in

life, and left this world stepping into eternity with many sad regrets. We have no evidence that this thief ever met Jesus before they were crucified together on Calvary. But he learned enough in these few hours with Jesus to come to understand that Jesus was not a criminal, and that He wasn't just a man. He was a King and a Savior. That plaque above Jesus' head declared Him to be so, and this thief watched Jesus suffer quietly and graciously for his sins and the sins of the world. And in the nick of time, this thief cried out to Jesus. As the other robber brazenly and callously made fun of Christ, this thief feared the punishment of God.

**Luke 23:42 "And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom."**

He acknowledged his sins and humbly confessed the deity of Jesus. He would not get an 11<sup>th</sup> hour pardon from Pilate, telling the soldiers to stop the crucifixion and take him down, but he heard something far better. In fact, I'd imagine he heard the sweetest words he'd ever heard in his entire life.

**Luke 23:43 "And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise."**

*Paradise*, according to **Luke 16**, is *the bosom of Abraham*. In other words, while the other thief would pay for his crimes even in death and pay for his sins in hell, this thief would close his eyes on the cross and open them in glory. It's a wonderful story amid the horrible scenes of the cross. But is it an example for us today, of how to be saved? Can I be saved like the thief on the cross?

You know, what happened to that thief at Calvary is very different from what happened in the book of Acts when people were saved. Without exception, those who believed on Christ at Pentecost and forward (**Acts 2 and on**), were told in response to the question *what must I do to be saved* that they were to be baptized. So, why didn't the thief have to be baptized? That's a good question.

First of all, we don't know that the thief wasn't baptized. Obviously he wasn't baptized after crying out to Jesus, we know that. He died there on the cross. But he was a Jew and John the Baptist had preached all through Judea that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, and he baptized multitudes of people in those days preceding the ministry of Jesus. It's very possible that this thief could've heard John preach and been immersed by him, but later fell back into sin. Perhaps that's where he learned that the Messiah would establish a kingdom. Then, on the cross, as he hears and sees Jesus and the inscription over His head, maybe all of the pieces start to fit together and he suddenly comes to the realization that this man is the one of whom John had preached. Now, we don't know that and I can't prove that, but it's possible. And it's just as plausible for me to suggest that the thief may have been baptized as it is for someone else to say that he wasn't.

But let's lay that aside. For the sake of argument, let's assume that this man is, for the first time in his life, coming to the knowledge of Christ and cries out for salvation—never having been baptized and never being baptized. Is that proof that a sinner can be saved in the same way today, merely by praying to Jesus? Why can't a sinner today just cry out to Jesus and ask Him to save him, and be saved? The answer is actually found in the book of Hebrews. The writer there talks about the importance of blood in redemption, and he is showing that just as the Old Testament law was dedicated or sealed with the

blood of animals, so is the New Testament sealed with the blood of Christ. In other words, Jesus had to die in order for the New Testament to have any effect. He illustrates it like this:

**Hebrews 9:15-17 “And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance. For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth.”**

The word *testament* (v.17) is that same thing as a will. What the writer is saying is that for forgiveness of sins to become a reality, the one appointing the inheritance had to die. It is analogous to what we recognize in most civilized nations today. A last will and testament doesn't go into effect until the testator is dead. I can draw up a will while I am alive, and I can allot or promise my earthly possessions to certain people. I can set the conditions of that will, and when I die, the people who are named in that will and who meet the conditions specified in my will, will then inherit the said portion of my estate. What about before I die? While I'm still alive, the fact is that I can give my belongings to whomever I wish in whatever way I wish. I am far from a wealthy man, but if I were, I could take pity on someone along the way and give them a sizable sum of money and I would certainly be allowed to do that. That's my money and I could do that, were I a rich man. But when I die, you see, my will goes into effect and only those who meet the conditions stated in my will can inherit my belongings.

Our salvation is the result of a promise. In other words, all of us who are saved are written into the will of Christ. The Bible teaches that salvation was appointed, or predestinated, in Jesus Christ (**Ephesians 1**). The will of Christ specifically called for those who would be in Jesus to inherit the blessings of salvation. Now, once Jesus died, His will went into force and salvation was extended to all of those predestinated, which simply refers to those who would come to faith in Jesus Christ and choose to surrender to Him in obedience. Well, how do we get into Christ? How do we have faith in Christ?

**Galatians 3:27 “For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”**

The writer of Hebrews is telling us that before Jesus died at Calvary, another testament was in effect: an old covenant. Jesus lived under that old covenant and so did the thief on the cross. That is key to understand: the thief on the cross lived under that old covenant. Jesus was alive and thus, when He was alive on earth and was preaching His soon-to-come kingdom, He would tell the people who came to Him in demonstration of faith, **“Thy sins be forgiven thee,”** or, as He said to the thief on the cross, **“To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.”** You see, the terms of the gospel had not taken effect and had not yet been announced. It wasn't until the death of Jesus—in this case, the death of the testator—that the gospel plan of salvation was preached. After Jesus died, His will took effect. After Jesus died, he gave the great commission (**Mark 16:15-16**). We are no longer saved, you see, through a personal and direct encounter with Jesus, like the people we read about during His ministry. We are saved by grace through faith, when we obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. We now obtain His blessings through the terms of His will that was revealed by the apostles upon Jesus' return to heaven and assuming His kingly

reign at the right hand of God. It wasn't until the ascension of Jesus and the establishment of His kingdom that the gospel was preached. That gospel—without exception—teaches that men who believe in Christ are to repent of their sins and be baptized for the remission of their sins. Apostles and gospel preachers of the early church not only instructed penitent sinners to be baptized—they even told them why.

**Acts 22:16 “And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”** (Ananias speaking to Saul)

You know, in one respect, Saul was in a similar position to the thief on the cross. Both men had formerly rejected and ridiculed Christ, but both men had a change of heart and wanted to be saved. Both of them even prayed unto the Lord. But, friend, these two men lived under different dispensations of time. One lived before Christ died and he received the promise of forgiveness while Christ was yet here and dispensing His blessings as He saw fit at the time. The other man, Saul, came after Christ died, after the death of the testator, and if he would inherit the salvation that was promised, Ananias had to come to him and preach the gospel to him and he had to comply with the terms of Christ's will. Thus, unlike the thief, Saul was told to be baptized and call on the name of the Lord. You know, the Bible tells us to call on the name of the Lord to be saved.

**Romans 10:13 “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”**

That's very true. But how do we call on the name of the Lord? What was Saul told to do?

**Acts 22:16 “And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”**

That's how the sinner calls upon Jesus.

Speaking of the great flood through which Noah was delivered from a wicked world, the Bible says:

**I Peter 3:20-21 “...when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ:”**

Now, he doesn't mean that we merit or earn salvation in baptism or any other thing. Baptism is not a meritorious mechanism by which we earn God's favor. Not at all. In fact, baptism isn't even a work that we perform. Baptism is a work of God that we submit to, according to **Colossians 2:12:**

**Colossians 2:12 “Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.”**

But when we are baptized, Peter says that we are saved. Not because baptism is a washing of the outer flesh. It's not a physical bath. It's a step of obedience where something inward takes place. Peter says that it is “the *answer of a good conscience toward God.*” That phrase means that it is the interrogative

or the appeal for a good conscience in the sight of the Lord. And when we, like the thief, come to understand that we are sinners, and come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, like the thief, and change our will in regard to sin and repentance, then we, like the thief, desire to be right with God. We desire a clean conscience and the forgiveness of our sins and peace with God. Peter says that baptism is the *answer* to that appeal. Why? Because Christ appointed it as a condition of His will in **Mark 16:16**. Because according to **Romans 6:3**, **Colossians 2:12** and **Galatians 3:27**, when we are baptized into Christ, we are united with Him in His death and His blood that was shed in His death. Thus, when we meet Him in submission to the gospel, His precious blood washes away our sins and we rise to walk in newness of life.

My friend, if you'd be saved today, don't count on an experience like the thief. Obey the gospel of Christ like Saul did, and that is taught in the great commission. Do what every person who has become an heir to the promise of eternal life since the death of the testator has done. Be baptized into Christ today, and you can, like the Ethiopian nobleman of **Acts 8**, go on your way rejoicing in the forgiveness of your sins and the hope of eternal life.