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## Does the Salvation of the Thief on the Cross Make Baptism Unnecessary?

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By Jim Reingrover

The following question is often asked: "If we are required to be baptized in order to be saved, why was the thief on the cross allowed into Paradise? (Luke 23:42-43). There are several reasons why the thief on the cross got to enter Paradise without being baptized. First of all, Jesus had the authority to forgive people of their sins and give them salvation. What He did for the thief (Luke 23:43) corresponds to the theme that is emphasized throughout Luke (5:20, 24; 7:48; 19:9-10), that is, that Jesus has such authority. The story of the thief on the cross was not recorded to show us how to be forgiven, but rather to demonstrate that Jesus had authority on earth to forgive sins (cf. Mark 2:10). Luke's gospel account showed that Jesus could forgive sins. It was only after Jesus was crucified and raised from the dead that Luke records the instruction of Jesus on how forgiveness would be obtained: "And that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47, NASB).

The majority of the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John explain to us why Jesus is good news (i.e., gospel). It is only after Jesus death, burial, and resurrection, that we are told how to respond to the gospel in order to become Christians (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:16). Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, recorded how people responded to the gospel message by repenting of their sins and being baptized for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38). The story of the thief on the cross should not be used as a reason to make baptism unnecessary and of no eternal value.

Second, people who lived before the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus cannot be examples to us on how to respond to the gospel for our salvation. Yes, people like Abraham (Romans 4), Enoch, and Noah (Hebrews 11:5-7) for example, were saved and were never baptized. Yet, they also never had an opportunity to respond in obedient faith to the gospel of Jesus Christ because they all lived before His death, burial, and resurrection. How was it possible, then, that they were saved before Jesus' death? We are told in Romans 3:25 that God "passed over the sins previously committed" (i.e., let them occur without punishment of His eternal wrath, c.f., Acts 17:30). How could He have done this and still be a righteous God? Because God anticipated the death of Christ as a propitiation (i.e., atonement) for sins. The cleansing power of Jesus' blood is essentially "retroactive", applying to those people

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who lived before "the cross of Christ" – people who, in obedient faith, looked to the Messiah (Hebrews 9:15).

The thief on the cross was saved, even before Jesus died for his salvation, because Jesus knew His heart - knew that He had a penitent, believing heart and thus chose to save him, even though he had not been baptized. Jesus saved him because He had the authority on earth to forgive sins. Jesus, in saving the thief, did not establish an exception to the rule of baptism for salvation (a rule to be given later under the New Covenant). Now that the death, burial, and resurrection has taken place, we have no excuse not to meet the conditions that Jesus gave to be saved to become Christians which includes baptism into Christ (Mark 16:16) (even those He gave through His apostles - Acts 2:38; Romans 6:4; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12; 1 Peter 3:21).

Third, when Jesus died on the cross He established a New Testament (i.e., Covenant). When instituting the Lord's Supper, Jesus taught that it would be His blood (i.e., death) that would establish a New Covenant making forgiveness of sins possible (Matthew 26:28). His death on the cross brought the end of the Old Testament (i.e., covenant) (cf. Colossians 2:13-17; Hebrews 8-10). With this in mind, we should recognize that the thief on the cross was under the Old Covenant era, not the New. The New Covenant was not in effect yet, thus he could not respond to the instructions of the New Covenant (or Testament) to be baptized into Christ (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 8:12-13; 35-39; 9:18 / 22:16; 10:48; 16:14-15, 30-33; 18:8; 19:3-5; Romans 6:4; Galatians 3:27; Ephesians 4:5b; Colossians 2:12; 1 Peter 3:21). Therefore, Jesus, with authority on earth to forgive sins, invited him to enter Paradise with Him for his faith and penitent heart.

Fourth, the gospel by which we are saved today is built upon the foundation of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). Thus, no one who lived and died before the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus can be used as an example of what is required to respond to the gospel for salvation. The thief on the cross could not have been baptized into Christ, even if he wanted to because baptism into Christ is based upon Jesus' death, burial and resurrection (cf. Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 2:11-12) which had yet to occur.

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May we also recognize that even if the thief on the cross had received John's baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3), that this would not have qualified as being "baptized into Christ" for salvation. The baptism John gave was only temporary and people baptized by John would still need to be baptized into Christ in order to be saved (cf. Acts 19:3-5). Baptism washes away our sins (Acts 22:16) because of Jesus' death / blood (Revelation 1:5). Baptism saves us due to the power of Jesus' resurrection (1 Peter 3:21). The thief simply could not be baptized into Christ and gain those blessings before the death, burial, and resurrection occurred. Thus, Jesus, with the authority He had, granted him salvation for this faith and penitence.

The Eternal importance of baptism should not be minimized. To be "spiritually reborn" (John 3:3-5) or become a child of God, a person needs to not only believe in Christ, but also be baptized into Christ to "put on Christ" (Galatians 3:26-27). A person does not belong to Christ and enjoy the blessings found "in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3) until baptized into Christ.

To belong to the Lord's church, a person must be baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38, 41, 47). When a person is baptized into Christ, he / she is, at the very same moment, baptized into His body (1 Corinthians 12:13), which represents the church (Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:22-23). Salvation begins at baptism, for only those who belong to the Lord's church have their names "written in heaven" (Hebrews 12:22-23).