

“WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?”

LUKE 23:39-43

“WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?”

- The thief under consideration in this study is one of the two thieves who were nailed to the crosses on either side of the Lord Jesus just over 2,000 years ago. He is arguably the best-known thief of all time.
- Any child of God who has ever had a conversation with denominational friends on the Biblical subject of conversion to Christ, has been asked, “What about the thief on the Cross?”
- Scriptures emphasizing the necessity of baptism for salvation such as Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16 and 1 Peter 3:21 are all swept aside by this one question.

“WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?”

What do the scriptures reveal regarding the thief on the cross?

- Information about the thief is found in three of the four Gospels: Matthew 27:38-44; Mark 15:27-32; Luke 23:33, 39-43.
- The fact that Christ was crucified between thieves was indeed a fulfillment of a 700 year-old prophecy.

“They crucified two robbers with Him, one on His right and one on His left. [And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘And He was numbered with transgressors.’]”
(Mark 15:27-28, quoting Isaiah 53:12)
- Luke’s account relates to us the most information.

“WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?”

- Christ said that all things written concerning Him were to be fulfilled.

“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.’” (Luke 24:44)
- At least 16 well-known prophecies were fulfilled during the last 24 hours of Christ’s life.

“WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?”

- Matthew’s account indicates that at first both the thieves were engaged in mocking and insulting Christ. (Matthew 27:38-44)
- However, from Luke’s account we see that one of the thieves had a change of heart and made a plea to the Lord. (Luke 23:40-42)
- In response to the statement made by the thief, Christ responded:

“And He said to him, ‘Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.’” (Luke 23:43)

“WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?”

Where were Jesus and the thief going on that day?

- The original word that is translated “Paradise” is defined as: “That part of Hades which is thought to be the abode of the souls of the pious until the resurrection.” (Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament).
- In Acts 2:27 and 31, we read of Christ after His death going to Hades, to the spirit World, the place where disembodied spirits go to await Judgment Day.

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Where were Jesus and the thief going on that day?

Let us read what Jesus taught about what happens to souls after death in Luke 16:19-31.

- According to Jesus, “Hades” has three places:
 - (1) A place of comfort. This corresponds to Paradise.
 - (2) A place of torment. This corresponds to “Tartarus” (2 Peter 2:4)
 - (3) A great gulf (there is no passing from either place).

“WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?”

Where were Jesus and the thief going on that day?

- We can confidently conclude that when Christ went to Hades, He went to Paradise.
- On the day of Christ's death, the thief was going to Paradise with Christ and the righteous of the ages.

“WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?”

Let us carefully consider the common argument that is made regarding the thief on the cross:

- The argument that is often made regarding the thief is: “I can be saved without being baptized because the thief was saved without being baptized.”
- There are at least three false assumptions made regarding their argument:
 - 1. They assume that the thief was never baptized.
 - 2. They assume they can be saved exactly like the thief.
 - 3. They assume they are under the same Law as the thief was under.

“WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?”

1. They assume that the thief was never baptized.

Please note the people who came to be baptized.

“Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins.” (Matthew 3:5-6)

“John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.” (Mark 1:4-5)

“WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?”

“Therefore when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were), He left Judea and went away again into Galilee.” (John 4:1-3)

Note the fact that Jesus (His disciples) made and baptized more than John.

- The question is, “Couldn't the thief have been among this number?” We are not affirming that the thief was among them, only that he could have been.
- No one knows for sure whether or not the thief was baptized; but people want to assume that he wasn't.
- What is truly sad is that these are basing their own salvation on a mere assumption.

“WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?”

2. They assume they can be saved exactly like the thief.

- For one to be saved “exactly” as the thief, he must be on a cross along with the dying Savior, and have Jesus say to him, “Today, you will be with Me in Paradise.”

- Of course, Jesus is not here today, and such could never be done.

“WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?”

While Jesus was alive on earth, He had the power to bestow His Spiritual blessings any way He saw fit.

- For example, Jesus often personally forgave sins.
 - The paralytic who was carried by four others and let down through the roof. (Mark 2:1-12)
 - The woman who washed Jesus’ feet. (Luke 7:36-50)
- Consider what Jesus said to the rich young ruler. (Mark 10:17-22)
 - Jesus did not require the rich young ruler to be baptized, at least, not at this time.
 - Why don't people want to be saved like the rich young ruler?

“WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?”

Jesus, during His personal ministry, granted God’s blessings to several individuals upon various conditions, and the thief was one of them.

The miracles performed by Jesus were to prove that He was indeed the Son of God. (John 20:30-31; Acts 2:22) They also proved that He had the power to forgive sin.

What Jesus did for the thief, and various others, has absolutely nothing to do with our salvation.

“WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?”

3. They assume they are under the same Law as the thief.

- Under which Law was the thief while he was on the cross? The Law of Moses.
 - There was a change in the Law (Hebrews 7:12)
 - The Law of Christ went into effect after His death (Hebrews 9:15-17)
 - We have become dead to the Law. (Romans 7:4)
 - We are now under the “eternal covenant.” (Hebrews 13:20)

God will not change the conditions of His “eternal covenant” to suit the doctrines of men.

“WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?”

In the light of the word of God, what does the argument “the thief on the cross was saved without being baptized” prove?

Jesus commanded His apostles to ...

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit ...” (Mathew 28:19)

... about 40 days after the death of the thief on the cross.

Neither Abraham, Moses, David, or any of the Old Testament prophets were baptized. The Law they lived under did not require it.

“WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?”

The Law of Christ, the New Testament that we are now under, teaches that we must be baptized.

- Jesus commanded it (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16)
- We must be baptized in order to receive remission of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16)
- We must be baptized to have the new life (Romans 6:3-4)
- We must be baptized to have a clear conscience. (1 Peter 3:21)

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CONCLUSION

It is very foolish indeed to base one’s entire Salvation on the assumption that one can be saved like the thief.

- Prior to the death of Christ, the Old Law was still in effect, but after His death, the New Law became binding upon all men.
- What we need to do is humbly obey from the heart all that Jesus has commanded us.

“And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation ...” (Hebrews 5:9)

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CONCLUSION

If one can make the argument, “I can be saved without being baptized because the thief was saved without being baptized,” then one could logically argue:

1. “I can be saved without attending worship services, because the thief never attended worship services,” OR
2. “I can be saved without partaking of the Lord’s Supper, because the thief never partook of the Lord’s Supper,” OR
3. “I can be saved without giving on the first day of the week, because the thief never gave on the first day of the week,” OR without obeying any other command of Christ.

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CONCLUSION

In every case of conversion found in the New Testament, one obeyed the command to be baptized in order to become a child of God.

- The question is, will I be like the Pharisees and Lawyers who rejected John’s baptism (Luke 7:30) by rejecting baptism into the body of Christ? (1 Corinthians 12:13)
- Or will I be as the early disciples who obeyed the Lord in baptism?

“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” (Galatians 3:26-27)

GOD’S PLAN OF SALVATION

Hear the word of God (2 Thessalonians 2:14-15; James 1:21)

Believe the gospel message (Hebrews 11:6; John 8:24)

Repent of sins (Luke 13:3; Acts 17:30-31)

Confess Jesus Christ (Romans 10:10; Matthew 10:32-33)

Be Baptized (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Galatians 3:26-27; Romans 6:3-4)

Remain Obedient (Matthew 7:21; Revelation 2:10; Hebrews 3:12)