

# The Thief on the Cross

(by Bob Pulliam)

You may have heard people talk about the thief crucified with Jesus, and how he was saved by simply believing on the Lord. He is commonly used to point out that baptism is not essential to salvation, for, after all, the thief was never baptized.

It's easy to assume a lot about the thief. It is also easy to make him the savior of personal doctrines and preferences. Let's carefully consider this thief on the cross.

## ***He Had Been Baptized...***

What if I told you that the thief had been baptized? What would you say to that? You can deny it all you like, but can you prove otherwise? Just because he stole, doesn't mean he had not been to the river. For all we know he had been outstanding all of his life, but was reduced to stealing to feed starving children. Perhaps the first time he stole, he was caught and made an example by the Romans. If that is impossible, tell me why!

Now I don't know that the thief was baptized, and you do not know that He was not baptized. With that aside, let us now consider what we do know. First we find that he spoke of fearing God (Lk 23:40). Then we find that he realized justice in his condemnation (v41), but more than that, he recognized that Jesus had "done nothing wrong." (V41) I wonder how this vile, wicked, shameless, depraved (those are the descriptions of men who claim he was not baptized), thief knew this. But there's more!... How did he know that Jesus would come into His kingdom? (v42) I must confess, I see more reason to believe the thief had been baptized than to conclude he had not!

## ***The Point Has Been Missed...***

Is this the only time that someone was pronounced saved by Jesus? I remember a woman at the house of a Pharisee to whom Jesus said, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." (Lk 7:50) Why don't I ever hear about her? Jesus told the paralytic, "Man, your sins are forgiven you." (Lk 5:20) I never hear of this man either. I guess the thief provides the better case for proving a particular doctrine (*i.e.* that salvation is by faith only). But he is no different than these other two cases. All three had sinned; all three stood condemned before God; and all three were forgiven their sins. Which of them was baptized and which was not? *It really does not matter!*

You see, these people lived during the personal ministry of Jesus before His death. While He walked this earth, He could forgive anyone of their sins that He cared to. His law was not yet in effect. Our great lawgiver ratified His law with His death on the cross. Before His death, He still exerted His will by personal influence. The author of Hebrews stated, "For a testament is in force after men are dead, since it has no power at all while the testator lives." (Heb 9:17) Jesus inaugurated a "new and living way" for us through His death (Heb 10:20). All of these who were pronounced saved by Jesus received their blessing before His law went into effect. That law lays out the terms of pardon by which we must abide to please God.

## ***Conclusion...***

Yes, the thief was saved so long ago. Whether or not he was baptized, we cannot know. We do know that he lived under a different law (the Old Testament law), before the law of Jesus

became binding. Jesus, being the Son of God, could pronounce the forgiveness of sins, and did so on several occasions. Today He is at the right hand of God, and expect us to abide by the word which He revealed through His apostles and prophets (the New Testament). Rather than wish for some special concession from Him at the judgment (which has not been promised), we should seek His will and follow it with zeal. That would include preaching and practicing baptism for the remission of sins as revealed in the word.