

Introduction

A prominent and widely-published contemporary preacher has recently said: *"With the exception of the thief on the cross, Scripture provides us no example of an unbaptized heaven-bound soul. The thief, however, is a wonderful exception. His conversion forces us to trust the work of Christ and not the work of baptism. Remarkable, isn't it, that the first one to accept the invitation of the crucified Christ has no creed, confirmation, christening or catechism? He never went to church, gave an offering, was never baptized. He said only one prayer."*

The interchange between Jesus and the thief on the cross has been cited repeatedly for many years as an example of salvation through faith apart from baptism, as though it were a precedent for believers in all generations. The preacher mentioned above was restating a common line of reasoning that many who deny the necessity of baptism have presented. However, **almost none of it is true, nor an accurate picture of what happened, or what it meant.**

UNBAPTIZED HEAVEN-BOUND SOULS

The preacher said that "[w]ith the exception of the thief on the cross, Scripture provides us no example of an unbaptized heaven-bound soul." This is not true. **Scripture actually provides multitudes of examples of "unbaptized heaven-bound"**

souls. In Matthew 8:11, Jesus specifically mentions Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in this category. Hebrews 11 lists a number of people considered faithful to God who lived and died with the assurance of an eternal home (Hebrews 11:13-16), but without baptism. In other words, there were many Old Testament figures who were heaven-bound souls, and never received baptism, or any commandment to be baptized. With that in mind, consider the case of "the thief on the cross."

TAKING A CLOSER LOOK

Timing is Everything

The account of Jesus and the thief on the cross is found in Luke 23:39-43. Luke writes that the thief said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom" (vs. 42). To this Jesus replied, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise" (vs. 43). This has been construed by many modern interpreters as an example of New Testament salvation through faith in Christ. However, among the most basic problems with this interpretation is the fact that **the New Testament (New Covenant) was not yet in place when this exchange occurred.** It is *after* Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection that He claimed, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth," and commanded His apostles to go, preach, and baptize (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16). Christian baptism is into Christ, and particularly into *His death* (Romans 6:3). Baptized believers are added to a church that wasn't bought and paid for *until* Christ

died for it (Acts 2:41, 47; Acts 20:28). The thief on the cross is not, therefore, an example--exceptional or otherwise--of New Testament salvation (which is *based on the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus*). The thief's experience reveals nothing about the need for baptism under the New Covenant, a covenant ratified by the blood of Christ (Hebrews 12:24; 10:29).

The contemporary preacher has said that the thief accepted the *"invitation of the crucified Christ."* But **that invitation was proclaimed for the first time seven weeks later** on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), *including* the command to "Repent and...be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 2:38)--not at all by Jesus on the cross.

Myths Within the Myth

The aforementioned preacher referred to the thief's *"conversion,"* but what conversion did the thief experience? There is no suggestion he entered into a new covenant relationship with God, or that he became anything new. Forgiveness is not what we usually mean by conversion. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4). But those baptized by John were Jews bound by the Law of Moses before *and after* baptism. Was the thief bound by any sort of creed or belief system or code of conduct? Yes. Before he was sentenced to death, he was bound by the Covenant of Abraham and the Law of Moses, and he *still was* until he died. Forgiveness didn't change that. True, "[h]e *never*

went to church," but who did? That body did not exist until the events of Acts 2.

Did he truly say *"only one prayer?"* How could we know about his prayers before or after his conversation with Jesus? And his conversation with Jesus can hardly be construed as an example of a saving prayer, certainly not in any way that we ordinarily define prayer as communication with God. Jesus was physically there with him. The thief was hearing Jesus speak, observing His behavior. They spoke to each other. Such conversations are not ordinarily described as prayer. Why should *this* conversation be described that way, unless there is a desire to believe in an *"exception"* that doesn't exist?

"...TO THE LOST SHEEP OF THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL"

During His ministry, Jesus said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). His ministry was to the children of Abraham, the Jewish people. Two men were crucified along with Jesus that day in Jerusalem. Both the criminal who repented, and the one who did not, would have been "lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Three Lost Sheep

On several occasions during His ministry, Jesus proclaimed forgiveness of sins for descendants of Abraham who turned to Him. About a week before He went to the cross, Jesus passed through Jericho on His way to Jerusalem. In Jericho the tax collector, **Zacchaeus**, welcomed Jesus into his home and then proclaimed his own repentance from past wrongs (Luke 19:8). Jesus then said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:9-10). Zacchaeus had an existing covenant relationship with God, as a child of Abraham, and Jesus proclaimed him saved when he professed his repentance. Salvation came to the thief and to Zacchaeus in just the same way, as children of Abraham who repented in the presence of the Lord, before the Old Covenant had been fulfilled by Christ, and the New Covenant empowered by Jesus' death, burial and resurrection.

Earlier in Jesus' ministry, a **paralyzed man** was brought to him for healing. Jesus said to him, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you" (Luke 5:20), and then asserted that "the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins" (Luke 5:24). This incident was in Capernaum, apparently at Peter's home, and again involved a Jewish man.

On another occasion, when Jesus was a guest in a Pharisee's house, he told a **woman known to be a sinner**, "Your sins are forgiven" (Luke 7:48). Again, she was

one of the "lost sheep of the house of Israel."

"There is No Difference"

There is no difference between Jesus forgiving the thief, the tax collector, the paralyzed man and the sinful woman. Each of them had a covenant relationship with God as children of Abraham. None of them was baptized into Christ (which had no meaning yet), none of them was added to a church that had not yet been bought, nor had any responded to a gospel of the risen Savior that had not yet been preached. They are all examples of Jesus fulfilling His ministry "to seek and to save that which was lost," and reach out to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

THE EXCEPTIONAL SAVIOR

What *is* exceptional about the account of Jesus and the thief on the cross has nothing to do with God's commandments for our salvation in coming to Christ. We all must come to terms with what was commanded by Jesus to and through his apostles after His resurrection, when the New Covenant was empowered--and that clearly includes baptism¹ (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16).

What *is* exceptional about the account of the thief's experience on the cross is its profound demonstration of the *character of Jesus*, that He held no grudge. It is incredible that Jesus so impressed a dying

rebel, whose inclination was at first to ridicule Him (Matthew 27:44). It is remarkable that in His own agony, Jesus could empathize with the sufferings and fears of another, and comfort him. Jesus, as He claimed on other occasions, came "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," including paralytics and tax collectors and known sinners and convicted robbers, and had "authority on earth to forgive sins." What is amazing is that He still attended to His calling, His ministry, assisting one more miserable sinner in the midst of His own misery as He accomplished the greatest deed in all of human history. Jesus wasn't distracted then from the needs of a sinner, and we can be assured He won't be distracted now either.

ENDNOTES:

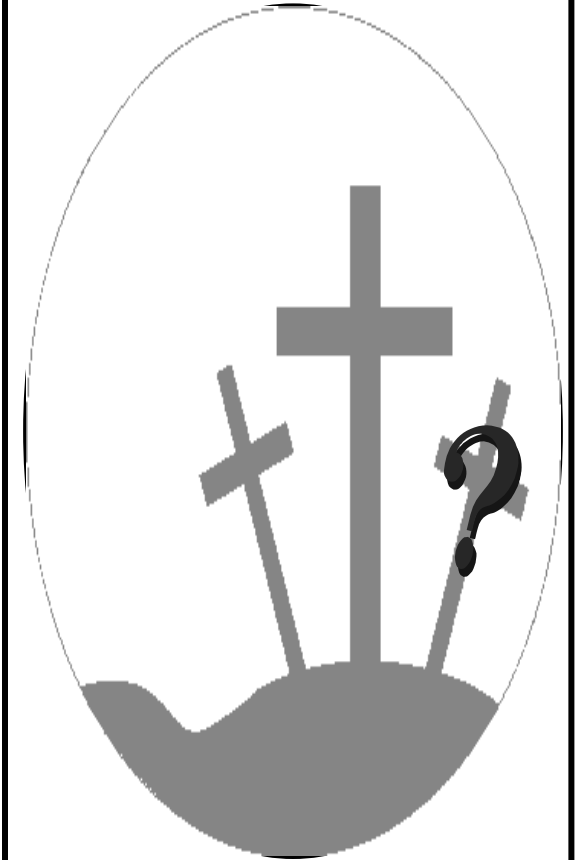
¹ For more information on the role of baptism in conversion, see tract entitled "Saved Through Water?"

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The Myth of the Thief



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