

THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST

SPREADING THE SOUL-SAVING MESSAGE OF JESUS

SOUL-SAVING LESSONS “The Thief on the Cross”

Introduction by narrator accompanied by a cappella singing:

THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST. Spreading the soul-saving message of Jesus. And now, Ben Bailey.

To the thief on the cross Jesus said, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Lk. 23:43). No doubt those were words of comfort to that thief, who had changed how he believed and who no doubt had repented of what he had done. Yet many today, when confronted with the evidence on baptism and how it is essential to salvation, will try to use the thief as an example of how it is possible to be saved without being baptized. The Bible does teach that baptism is essential to salvation. In Mark 16:15, Jesus said, “He that believes and is baptized will be saved.” Peter clearly preached on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2:38, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.” As Saul (who would later become the apostle Paul) was waiting in the city of Damascus, Ananias came to him to tell him what to do to be saved, and said, “Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16). Saul’s sins were washed away in obedience to God when he obeyed the Gospel through baptism. In 1 Peter 3:21, Peter said, “Baptism does also now save us.”

Sometimes when people read and study these passages, they then bring up the example of the thief on the cross. The argument that is offered, based on the thief on the cross, goes something like this. The thief was not baptized. The thief was saved. Therefore I do not have to be baptized. Today, let’s think about the example of the thief on the cross and how it relates to New Testament teaching on baptism. Is this a good example? Some suggest that the thief was not baptized. Is that really true? Should we put our trust in this account as an example of New Testament salvation? In Matthew 27:38-44, Mark 15:27ff., and Luke 23:39-43, we learn about the thief on the cross. Let’s read together the text of Luke 23 as Jesus talks to the thief. In Luke 23:33 we read, “And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left.” In verses 39-43 we are told,

Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, ‘If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.’ But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.’”

No doubt these words comforted the thief. But are they are a proper example of salvation for us today? Let’s examine the argument which suggests that the example of the thief teaches us today that we do not need to be baptized. The assumption must be made, of course, that the thief was never baptized. But that is merely an assumption. And as an assumption, it cannot be trusted. While one cannot prove that the thief was baptized, neither can it be proven that he was not. Would you ever base your salvation on a mere assumption? Christians should not make such assumptions. Think about the words of Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:21, “Test all things; hold fast what is good.” Here we are told that Christians are not to assume, guess, or suppose that something is true. Rather, we have

the responsibility to prove what is true. We do that by searching the Scriptures to see if what we are being told is true to the Word of God (Acts 17:11). Here, then, is the problem. One cannot prove that the thief had never been baptized. It cannot be proved either way. Some evidence seems to suggest that the thief may have been a follower of John or even a follower of Jesus. He appeared to know quite a bit about religious matters. But we simply do not know. As Christians, we should not assume what we cannot prove. We do not “assume” that God exists, do we? We know—based on such evidence as “the heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps. 19:1)—that God exists. We know that design demands a designer. We can see the evidence which establishes the fact that our bodies have been designed. They did not just happen by accident. We believe—based on the evidence—that God exists. We believe in the Word of God as God’s final authority today, not just because we simply “suppose” that it is God’s Word, but because of such things as fulfilled prophecy, scientific foreknowledge, and the Bible’s cohesion and unity. Hebrews 11:1 teaches us that faith is substantial and that it is based on evidence.

Today, therefore, we must not simply assume that the thief on the cross was never baptized and that he is a good example for us today. It is possible to provide some telling evidence which suggests that the thief was a religious person and that the possibility exists that he may have been baptized. For example, the thief’s acknowledgment of God shows that he knew that God existed and that he knew Who He was. In Luke 23:40, the thief asked, “Do you not even fear God?” This thief feared God. He knew that God existed. He had a belief in God and in His power and awesome nature. The thief was not an atheist or an agnostic. He was a man who had a belief in God, which showed that he had some kind of religious background. He also was a man who had a standard of right and wrong. At one point in time, according to the accounts in Matthew and Mark, both thieves had blasphemed Christ. But evidently this man had changed his mind. The other thief began to say to Jesus, “If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.” But the thief said, “Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.” This man knew that when crimes had been committed, there was a standard of right and wrong that demanded that those crimes be punished. This is not something that everyone would admit or that is taught in all religions. This thief possessed a standard of right and wrong than we can know something about.

The thief also believed that Christ was a King—which was something that not everyone accepted. This was something that not everyone believed. In fact, many of the Jews did not even believe this. Do you remember what the thief said to Jesus? “Lord, when You come into Your kingdom, remember me.” He knew that it was Christ’s kingdom, and from that he inferred that Jesus was the King of that kingdom. Some of Christ’s closest followers and disciples did not even understand this clearly. They did not know that Jesus was the King of the kingdom (or at least the details of the kingdom). They often were confused about that. In Acts 1, they asked, “Lord, will you now restore the kingdom to Israel?” But the thief seems to have known more about the King and His kingdom than even some of Christ’s disciples did. This man believed that death would not prevent Christ’s kingdom from becoming a reality. He knew that the kingdom was not a physical kingdom. He said, “**When** You come into Your kingdom, remember me.” Jesus was on a cross. The thieves knew that there was no escape from the cross. They knew that they were all going to die. Yet the thief said, “When You come into Your kingdom, remember me.” He knew that the kingdom of Christ was not a physical kingdom, but that it was a spiritual rule and reign in the hearts and lives of men and women. The thief, then, was a man who appears to have possessed intimate knowledge of Jesus and His teaching. The thief believed that there would be remembrance in eternity. He asked Jesus to remember him when he reached the other side.

Not many people today are sure of what will happen on the other side. They wonder about it. They wonder if we will know each other then. But the thief knew that there would be remembrance on the other side. He seemed to have knowledge of Christ and His kingdom. He knew about the perfection of Christ and how He was sinless. He said, "We receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." He knew about the resurrection of Christ, and how the grave would not cause Him to stop His work or His kingdom. Implied by the thief's comment ("After this...") is the idea that the thief believed in Christ's resurrection and that Christ's kingdom would go on after the cross. Here we find a man who had an intimate knowledge of Christ and His kingdom, and from this we can infer that he possibly had heard John or Jesus teaching, and that he may even have been baptized by John or Jesus. In Matthew 3:5 we read, "Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins." Remember that these men were being crucified in Jerusalem. This man obviously lived in the area around Jerusalem. If all the region around the Jordan went out to be baptized by John, couldn't the thief possibly have been one of those people? We cannot simply assume that he was not baptized because we do not know if he was or not. We do not have the evidence for such an assumption. But here is something we do know. We should not rest our salvation on the assumption that the thief was not baptized. We cannot prove that the thief was not baptized. And the evidence suggests that he was a religious man. He might have been baptized by John or by Christ and His followers.

A second principle that we need to mention is that the thief's conversion is not a proper example of New Testament salvation. Would you use Abraham as an example of how to be saved? Would you use Noah and his construction of the ark as an example of your salvation? Would you choose David, Elijah, or some of the other heroes of the Old Testament as an example of how to be saved? Absolutely not! But why not? It is because we do not live under that law. These men lived thousands of years ago—under a different law system than the one under which we live today. If we can come to understand when the Old Law became null and void, and when the New Law came into effect, then we will know that the thief did not live in New Testament times and is not a good example of New Testament salvation. So let's ask, then, such questions as these. When did the Old Testament become null and void? At what point did people stop living under the Old Law and start living under the New Law. Let's look at Colossians 2:14 and we will see exactly when the Old Testament became of no effect. Paul wrote, "Having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross." When did the Old Law stop becoming the law under which people lived? It was when Jesus nailed the Old Law to the cross at His death. It was at that point that the Old Law became null and void. If we can understand when the Old Testament stopped being the law under which people lived, we then can understand when the New Law went into effect. Hebrews 9:16-18 says, "For where there is a testament, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is in force after men are dead, since it has no power at all while the testator lives. Therefore not even the first covenant was dedicated without blood." The first covenant, which was dedicated with blood, went into effect at a certain time, too. Here we learn that the New Law went into effect after the Lawgiver died. Jesus Christ was the Lawgiver. So if the New Law went into effect after His death, we then have to ask ourselves: Did the thief die before or after Jesus' death on the cross went into effect? We know that he died before the cross. Thus, it is clear that this man is not a proper example of New Testament salvation. He lived and died under the Old Law. We need not look to him as an example of salvation because like Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, and the prophets of old, he lived under a different covenant than the one under which we live today. If we want to see examples of New Testament salvation, we need

to turn to the Book of Acts. We need to find people there who were saved, so that we can see exactly what they did to obtain salvation. First, then, the assumption must be made that the thief was not baptized. And that is an assumption on which you would not want to rest your soul. Second, the thief lived under a different law than we do. Because of that, he is not a good example for salvation.

Third, however, we need to note that while Jesus was on Earth, He had the power to forgive sins. While He was here, He could forgive sins as He chose. The text that teaches us this is found in Mark 2:10-11, which says, “‘But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins,’ Jesus said to the paralytic, ‘I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.’” While Jesus was on Earth, He said to the man who was a paralytic, “Get up, pick up your bed, and go to your house.” The text tells us that He also had the power to forgive sins. What we must understand today is that Jesus is no longer on Earth. Instead, He has given us His revealed will. And He is not going to contradict something that He has said in His Word. He is not going to say something today that is not true. He is not going to say something in the New Testament, and then turn around and contradict that in the New Testament. Jesus is “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8). Thus, today we must realize that the only way we are going to be saved is if we follow the teaching of the New Testament.

In John 16:13, Jesus told the apostles that He would send them the Holy Spirit, who then would give them into “all truth.” The text of 2 Peter 1:3 makes it clear that we have “all truth”—everything we need—in the pages of the Bible. Jesus is no longer on Earth but in Heaven. He has given us His will, and we need to trust it and obey it. Remember that it is by the New Testament that we today can be justified. Jesus said in John 12:48, “He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day.” The point is clear, then. Baptism is essential to salvation. The thief on the cross is not a proper example for us today, and we must trust what the Scriptures say.

Let’s examine once more some of these very clear passages on salvation. In Mark 16:16 Jesus said, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” Jesus gave two requirements, the end result of which was salvation. To use a modern-day analogy, suppose I was to say, “A person who eats and drinks shall be filled, but he who eats or drinks only will not be filled.” You know, then, that only if you eat **and** drink will you be completely satisfied. If you leave out one of those, you will not get the end result. The same principle is true for us today. Someone might ask, “Why didn’t Jesus say, ‘He who believes not and is baptized not will be condemned’?” If a person does not believe, why would he ever contemplate being baptized? It would be redundant and absurd for Christ to say that because if a person does not believe in Christ, then he or she will not consider being baptized. On the other hand, true believe will motivate a person to do what Christ has commanded.

Another passage to consider is Acts 2:38, which is one of the clearest passages in the Bible on the essentiality of baptism. In Act 2:37, the people on the Day of Pentecost had cried out, “Men and brethren, what must we do?” They wanted to know what they could do to get rid of the sin of having killed the Messiah. Did Peter tell them, “Don’t do anything; Jesus has done it all for you”? No. Listen to what Peter said in Acts 2:38. “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Peter did not say that God had already annulled their sins so that all they had to do was to believe. He did not say, “Come down and say the sinner’s prayer and you will be saved.” Peter did not say, “God has elected you for salvation from thousands of year ago.” Instead, Peter said, “Repent, and let every one of

you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.” The word “for” in that sentence literally means “looking forward to.” It is speaking of the purpose or end result of being saved. We are baptized for (in order to receive) the forgiveness of our sins. Some would suggest that the word “for” actually means “because.” But that does not even make good sense. The people who had killed Jesus were saying, in essence, “Peter, we find ourselves in this sin. What can we do to be saved?” Would Peter have told them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ because you have already been forgiven of your sins”? Would Peter have given them something to do because they were **already** saved? No, of course not. There is a similar usage of this type of language in Matthew 26:27-28 that can help us understand what it means. When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper, He said, “Drink from it [the cup], all of you. **For** this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.” Why was Jesus’ blood shed? Was it because people’s sins had **already** been forgiven? Of course not! Yet it is the same Greek phraseology in Matthew 26:28 as we find in Acts 2:38. It means the same in both passages. Jesus shed His blood and died for each one of us so that we could receive the remission of our sins. Baptism is **for** the forgiveness of sins.

In Acts 22:16 we find another text that makes this clear. Saul has been told to go into the city of Damascus where he will be told what he must do. Ananias comes to him and says, “And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” How does a person “call on the name of the Lord”? We hear a lot about that today. “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Acts 2:21 teaches us that principle. But what does it mean, biblically speaking, to “call on the name of the Lord”? When we combine Acts 2:21 with the teaching of Acts 22:16, we see that one cannot call on the name of the Lord without obeying him in the act of baptism. Listen again to Acts 22:16. Saul was told, “Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” Here is a clear principle that we need to understand. It is sin that separates us from God (Is. 59:1-2). If we can know the exact point at which those sins can no longer be held against us and when we are saved, then we can know what we have to do. Saul was told, “Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” This text forever teaches us that baptism is essential to salvation. This is how we call on the Lord’s name today.

Consider, too, 1 Peter 3:21. In the context of 1 Peter 3, Peter is discussing the ark of Noah and how he and his family were saved through water as the water lifted up the ark from the death and destruction that lay beneath. Peter then says, “Baptism does also now save us.” As you think about the Bible’s teaching on baptism, and especially teaching which shows us that it is essential, you will not be able to find any language clearer than 1 Peter 3:21. “Baptism does also now save us.” If God wanted to say this any clearer, how could He? There is not any way to make it any clearer than that. Peter did not say that “baptism **alone** saves us.” He said it “also” saves us. When we hear the Gospel, believe that Jesus is the Son of God, repent of our sins, confess Christ as our Savior, and then are baptized, we are saved from our sins. It is at that point that we have done everything that God has told us to do to receive salvation. Then, we must walk “in newness of life” and continue to follow Christ.

Another text which teaches us very clearly that baptism is essential to salvation is found in John 3:1-5. Nicodemus comes to Christ and says, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him” (vs. 2). Jesus immediately responds by saying, “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus asks, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered by saying, “Unless

one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Here is another clear passage which teaches that if we are going to be a member of Christ’s kingdom—the kingdom Christ will return one day to claim (1 Cor. 15)—then we must be born of water and Spirit. When we are born by the Spirit, it means that we are born by the Word of God (1 Peter 1:21-25). How are we born “of water”? We are born of water when we are baptized. Baptism is the new birth (Tit. 3:5-7). It is the washing of regeneration that we go through. If we are going to enter the kingdom, then absolutely must be baptized.

Galatians 3:27 is yet another passage that teaches us the essentiality of baptism. We need to understand that all spiritual blessings are “in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). We need to know that salvation is found only “in Christ” (2 Tim. 1:10). The question then becomes, “If all spiritual blessings are in Christ, and if salvation is found in Christ, what must a person do to get in Christ?” If I can learn what I must do to get “into Christ,” then I can know what I must do to be saved. Galatians 3:27 teaches us, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Romans 6:1-4 also teaches us that we are baptized “into Christ.” Baptism is essential for salvation. I cannot get into Christ without obeyed God in baptism.

Are you a New Testament Christian? Have you obeyed the Gospel? Or, are you trusting in what others have said? Remember that the thief on the cross is not a good example for us today because we can only assume that he was not baptized. We do not know for sure. Furthermore, he lived under a totally different law than we live under today. He therefore is not a proper example. We need to come to the New Testament and do only what they did in the first century. They heard the Word of God. Romans 10:17 tells us that “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” Once they heard that Word, they then believed in Jesus. In Acts 8, the Ethiopian nobleman and Philip came to water and the nobleman asked, “What hinders me from being baptized?” (vs. 36). Philip responded by saying, “If you believe with all your heart, you may” (vs. 37). Once a person has believed in Jesus, he or she must then be willing to repent of past sins. In Luke 13:3 Jesus said, “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” Having repented of sin and having turned to God, a person then must confess Jesus as the Lord of your life. Romans 10:10 says, “For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” And last, as so many passages teach, one must be baptized to be saved. Acts 18:8 says, “Many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized.” Do not let someone tell you that baptism is not essential to your salvation. God said repeatedly in the New Testament that it is. And do not let someone use the example of the thief on the cross to trick you into thinking that you can be saved like he was. That simply is not the case. We want you to know that we love your soul, and that the things that we have said here have been said out of love to help you get to Heaven. If we can help you in any way, please contact us at www.thegospelofchrist.com. May you always strive to live your life after the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Narrator accompanied by a cappella singing:

THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST is brought to you by loving, caring members of the church of Christ. The McLish Avenue church of Christ in Ardmore, Oklahoma, oversees this evangelistic effort. For a free CD or DVD of today’s broadcast, please write to:

THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST
607 McLish Ave.
Ardmore, OK 73401

You may call **580-223-3289**. Please visit us on the web at www.thegospelofchrist.com. We encourage you to attend the church of Christ, where “the Bible is loved and the Gospel is preached.”

STUDY QUESTIONS FOR “THE THIEF ON THE CROSS”

1. Explain the argument that sometimes is used by those who appeal to the case of the thief on the cross as an example of why a person can be saved without baptism.
2. If someone suggests that the thief on the cross was never baptized, what is wrong with that suggestion?
3. Why is the example of the thief on the cross not a good example to use when discussing what people today need to do to be saved?
4. What is the implication of the thief’s statement to Jesus, “Lord, **when** You come into Your kingdom, remember me”?
5. What can be properly inferred from the thief’s statement to the other thief who was being crucified along with him—“We receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong”?
6. According to Matthew 3:5, who was going to John the Immerser to be baptized?
7. Under which covenant did the thief on the cross live—the Old Covenant or the New Covenant?
8. Explain the significance of your answer to question #7 above.
9. According to Colossians 2:14, when did the Old Covenant pass away?
10. According to Hebrews 9:16-18, what must happen before a testament can take effect?
11. Considering your response to question #10 above, at what point in history did the New Covenant supercede the Old Covenant?
12. What does Mark 2:10-11 tell us that Jesus had the power to do while He lived here on Earth?
13. In light of the teaching of Hebrews 13:8, explain why Jesus would not say one thing while here on Earth and then say something contradictory in His last will and testament—the New Covenant (the Word of God).
14. According to John 16:13, what did Jesus promise to give to His apostles?
15. According to 2 Peter 1:3, did Jesus keep that promise?
16. What did Peter mean when he said in Acts 2:38, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins”?
17. According to Acts 22:16, how does one “call on the name of the Lord”?
18. What important piece of information does Mark 16:15-16 give us about baptism?