

San Juan Church of Christ

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What does God's Word Say About...

Baptism and the Thief on the Cross

Most denominations today teach that water baptism cannot save a repentant believer even though Jesus said, "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned," (Mark 16:16). This verse also teaches us that one who disbelieves is not a candidate for water baptism (Acts 8:35-37). False teachers will say the thief on the cross was saved without being baptized, so therefore water baptism today will not save one. They claim since the thief was not baptized, why would Jesus tell him, "Today you will be with me in Paradise," (Luke 23:43)? Is it really the case that this frequently spoken of thief has the power to undermine everything stipulated in the gospel relative to obedience and water baptism? These false teachers are one hundred and ten percent sure that they have a conversion possible without water baptism. No little boy ever fought having to take a bath more than have denominational preachers fought the waters of baptism. The penitent thief on the cross, they contend, offers them their classic case of sustaining proof.

It is possible that the thief could have been baptized before the cross by John the Baptist. We know that the thief was not a Roman citizen because it was illegal for a citizen of Rome to be crucified on a cross. This would likely make the thief a Jewish citizen. Scripture says, "Then Jerusalem was going out to him [John the Baptist], 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," (Matt. 3:5-6). It is interesting to note that "the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John," (Luke 7:30).

When Jesus was crucified there were two thieves, one on either side of Him. Both thieves were not repentant for their crimes and cast blasphemy towards Jesus (Matt. 27:44). Later, one of them experienced a spiritual reversal by turning to the Lord in a spirit of sincere submission, asking Jesus to remember him when He came into His kingdom. This suggests that the repentant thief had some type of prior knowledge of Christ and His teaching that the kingdom was at hand (Mark 1:15).

Jesus, while on earth, had power to forgive sins. "Seeing their faith, He said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you,'" (Luke 5:20). The scribes and Pharisees began to reason saying, "Who can forgive sins, but God alone?" And Jesus said, "that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," (Luke 5:21,24). This happened before the death of Jesus on the cross. When Jesus died, the New Testament became effective (Heb. 8:13, 9:15-17). Before Jesus ascended into heaven He gave the apostles the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19) and Peter, on the day of Pentecost, preached this Commission and gave the Jews the condition for forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38).

No one can be saved under the New Testament (the will of Christ) as the thief was, for the thief was never under the New Testament and the Great Commission.

Please send any comments, questions, or requests for a Bible study to:
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