

Saved Like the Thief on the Cross

Since my boyhood (Believe me, that was a long time ago!) I have been hearing people say they were saved like the thief on the cross. By that, they were saying they simply called out to the Lord and were saved without baptism. As a kid I always figured they were seeking the easy route, as though submitting to baptism is difficult. I noted that none wanted to follow the instructions Jesus gave the rich young ruler. When he asked what to do to have eternal life, Jesus told him to keep the commandments given to Moses and to sell all he had and give it to the poor. Rather definite instructions! And no mention is made of baptism! So that offers an escape for those who are so determined to avoid baptism as a condition of acceptance of God's grace but, so far, I have known of no one choosing that course of action.

So what about the thief on the cross? You are familiar with the account in Luke 23:32-43. Two thieves/robbers/criminals were being crucified with Jesus. In derision the soldiers had put an inscription above Jesus head: *"This is Jesus the King of the Jews."* The robbers joined in deriding him. But then, one of them, in recognition of Jesus' kingship, addressed him: *"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingly power (RSV, others have 'kingdom')"* Jesus said to *him* *"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."*

Was the robber asking for salvation of his soul? If he was, he had better understanding than the apostles, for even after his resurrection they still expected him to restore the kingdom of Israel (See Acts 1:6). They looked for an earthly kingdom. Jesus had told Nicodemus, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5)."* Did Jesus contradict that in his reply to the thief?

We have no distinct definition of Paradise. It is thought to be the abode of the redeemed between death and the resurrection. Did Jesus enter Paradise that day? Was the penalty of our sins dealt with in Paradise? While Jesus was three days and three nights in the heart of the earth, was he not in Hades (See Acts 24-28)? So this point is not clear.

It is true that all the righteous previous to Jesus' death were saved without baptism. It was after atonement had been made that the gospel promise was effective and the Great Commission sent the message to all the world. Baptism is definitely a condition of acceptance according to Jesus' own charge in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16). The thief, having died before the basis of the gospel was established and before the gospel commission was preached, was bound by it no more than was Abraham or David. It had not been demanded of him. It is a grievous mistake to interpret an incident previous to the announcement of the terms of salvation to be preached to the world so as to invalidate the Great Commission.

Although questions have been raised about interpretation of the exchange between the criminal and Jesus, we will grant for argument's sake that Jesus forgave him. As an aside, were all of those who were crucifying him forgiven when Jesus prayed, "*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.*"? I would assert that all of them were forgiven on Pentecost who repented and were baptized for the remission of their sins and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38) as Peter instructed the penitent ones to do.

At the healing of a paralyzed man (Luke 5:17-26), Jesus explained his actions "*..that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins.*" He exercised that authority in forgiving the paralyzed man because of the faith of those who went to such extremes to bring him to Jesus. They believed Jesus would heal the man; neither they or the man requested forgiveness for him. The thief's request was not for forgiveness but for a place in what he thought was the coming kingdom. But Jesus forgave him. Both of these men were forgiven before the atonement was made. They are hardly recorded as examples for us to follow today. How would you go about being saved like the thief on the cross? Or like the paralytic?

It may be profitable here to question our method of interpretation. Scripture should be interpreted in harmony with the whole body of truth. To choose one text to rule out another is foolhardy and dangerous. One truth does not over-ride another. Let me illustrate what I mean. For sake of brevity, only portions of the passages cited will be used.

In John's introduction he stated, "*But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God*" (John 1:12). He did not indicate that belief itself at some point in time would make a person a child of God, but it would enable one to become a child of God. This was in contrast to their being children of God by physical birth as descendants of Abraham and Israel.

Later, to Nicodemus Jesus explained more that was involved in this faith process. Jesus told him, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*" (3:5). As it was not time to announce his Great Commission, he did not tell him specifically this "new birth" would involve baptism. Again, he is telling Nicodemus that physical birth which had put a person in the kingdom of Israel would not put him in the kingdom of God.

Later in this chapter (3:16) he declared, "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*" Jesus did not say "whoever only believes" indicating belief in some point in time in a "conversion experience" like we hear so commonly today. This belief is a continuing process that rules the life and produces obedience. This passage must not be used to over-ride the need for the new birth accomplished through water and the Spirit in baptism as he had indicated to Nicodemus.

It is faulty interpretation also to conclude that special grace dispensed to the paralytic and to the thief on the cross was meant to cancel out the need for a birth of water and the Spirit as the universal initiation into the spiritual kingdom. It was not until after atonement was made that this baptismal initiation into the spiritual kingdom became effective. But Jesus exercised his authority to forgive sins previously.

After he was raised from the dead and just before his ascension, Jesus charged his disciples to preach the good news to every nation, baptizing them into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, with the promise that he who believes and is baptized shall be saved. Thus, elements of truth are added from the first mention in John 1:12 through the others to which we have pointed. None of these added truths canceled out those previously stated. None of these is to be interpreted singly.

The first proclamation of the good news of salvation in Christ was made on Pentecost after the ascension of Christ. After the witness of the Holy Spirit seen by all the crowd, when convicted believers cried out, Peter told them plainly rather than in veiled language like Jesus used with Nicodemus, *“Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him”* (Acts 2:38-39). Peter was contradicting no passage that teaches salvation by faith, but he was directing that faith into fulfillment by obedience. Unless all elements of truth are brought together, it is deficient. Notice the universal application Peter made of his announcement. This was the good news, the gospel, which is basically the promises based upon Jesus’ death for our sins, his burial, and his being raised from the dead (1Cor. 15:3-4). In baptism one is symbolically united with him in his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-4).

About a generation later, Paul wrote a corrective letter to the Galatians. They were confusing the system of salvation by faith in Christ in thinking they should still keep tenets of the Law of Moses. Paul strongly denounced that, but in doing so, he was not contradicting what Peter preached on Pentecost. He certainly was not canceling the call for works of obedience. He epitomized, *“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love”* (Gal. 5:4). And as for faith empowering one to become a child of God, he told them, *“For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ”* (3:26-27). He wrote of the operation of faith: *“...and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.”* (Col. 2:12). Paul also assures that the obedience in baptism is not a meritorious work, for *“he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit ... so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life”* (Titus 3:5-7). All of Paul’s teachings would indicate that justification by faith includes a continuous and obedient faith.

Still later, Paul wrote the much-quoted Ephesians 2:8: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God -- not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works. . . .”* Here Paul is not revoking any of what we have covered above, but he is emphasizing that the system of faith through which God chose to dispense his grace is not of man’s device, nor is it because of the worthy achievement of humans. It is a gross perversion, however, to declare that Paul ruled out works of obedience as though we might boast through them. He brought us into Christ for the very purpose of doing good works. They are the expression of living faith.

About twenty-five years after Pentecost, Paul wrote to the Romans about justification by faith. In setting forth the system of justification by faith in Christ, is he blithely ignoring and over-riding all the previous teaching which included the “obedience of faith” ? Emphatically not! He invented the term “obedience of faith”! (Rom. 1:6). In writings pointed to above, he denounced ideas that God dispensed his grace through works of the Law of Moses, or due to works of merit or achievement, or in response to the wisdom or device of man, but he always called for obedience of faith.

Question: In this essay, have I picked and segregated elements of truth and made them contradict other elements of truth? Have I not given a glimpse of the overall picture of harmonious truth? Scholarship does not search for truth that cancels other points of truth.

Why do many preachers consistently refuse to mention some truths that I have included in this brief discourse? It would seem that the concept of justification by faith apart from works of obedience is a popular idol, a new golden calf, that promises a shortcut to God’s grace. Conscience does not permit me to hold up to the sinner that glistening icon polished by the applaud of the multitude. I do not stand as your condemning judge; but I cannot cease to warn against what I am convinced is a dangerous misdirection.

(Cecil Hook; March 2003) []