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Teaching Sound Doctrine

Lord Teach Us Pt. 10

“The Most Popular Thief in Town”

Part 1

You hear all the time about thieves in and around your town. Whether its a small time thief or a big corporate thief they are all around. But I am going to tell you about a thief that is really popular in every town you can name. Now I know your thinking what has all this got to do with the Bible? Well this thief was saved but if you try to be saved the same way he was you will end up losing your soul. Yet, many today use this thief as an excuse not to follow God's commands.

You may wonder why a thief would become so popular or significant. After engaging in a few Bible discussions with non-Christians, one will often find nearly every argument he makes to show what one must do in order to be saved countered with one question, "But what about the thief on the cross?" In many passages one reads that one of the conditions of salvation is baptism (See Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; 1 Pet. 3:21).

All of these passages will be swept aside by many non-members by one question, "But what about the thief on the cross?" The thief is supposed to constitute the exception to the gospel plan of salvation. Since the question so often is posed, let us study "What About the Thief on the Cross?"

The Biblical Record

One can read what the Bible tells us about the thief on the cross in Matt. 27:38-44-, Mk. 15:27-32; Luke, 23:33, 39-43. Let us first read these passages.

"Then are there crucified with him two robbers, one on the right hand and one on the left. And they that passed by railed on him, wagging their heads, and saying, thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself: if thou are the Son of God, come down from the cross. In like manner also the chief priests

mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said, He saved others; himself he cannot save. He is the king of Israel; let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe on him. He trusteth on God; let him deliver him now, if he desireth him: for he said, I am the Son of God. And the robbers also that were crucified with him cast upon him the same reproach" (Matt. 27:38-44).

Mk. 15:27-32 is very similar. It reads: "And with him they crucify two robbers; one on his right hand, and one on his left. And they that passed by railed on him, wagging their heads, and saying, Hal thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself, and come down from the cross. In like manner also the chief priests mocking him among themselves with the scribes said, He saved others; himself he cannot save. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, now come down from the cross, that we may see and believe. And they that were crucified with him reproached him."

Luke's account relates a few additional details. It reads: "And when they come unto the place which is called the Skull, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand and the other on the left. . . . And one of the malefactors that were hanged railed on him, saying, Art not thou the Christ? Save thyself and us. But the other answered, and rebuking him said, dost thou not even fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said, Jesus, remember me when thou comest in thy kingdom. And he said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise" (Lk. 23: 33, 39-43).

Fulfillment of Prophecy

The crucifixion of Christ between two robbers fulfilled the Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 53. Seven hundred years before the coming of Christ, Isaiah had predicted that he would be "numbered with the transgressors" (Isa. 53:12). Jesus told his disciples, "all things must needs be fulfilled, which are written in the law of Moses, and the prophets, and the psalms, concerning me" (Lk. 24:44). About sixty Old Testament prophecies concerning Christ were fulfilled on the day of his crucifixion. During the six hours that Jesus hung on the cross, he uttered seven brief statements. Each of these statements constituted the specific fulfillment of a prophecy

concerning him. Thus his death between the two thieves constituted the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that he would be "numbered with the transgressors."

Jesus' Statement to, the Thief

The accounts by Matthew and Mark indicate that at first both of the thieves reproached Christ. But afterward one of the thieves repented. Notice the words of the penitent thief, "Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?" "And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds." "This man hath done nothing amiss." He then said, "Jesus, remember me when thou comest in thy kingdom."

In response to these words of the thief, Jesus said, "Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in Paradise." What did these words of Jesus mean? The original word translated "Paradise" in Luke 23:43 is defined by Arndt and Gingrich as "a place of blessedness above the earth" (A GREEK ENGLISH LEXICON, 1952 edition, p. 619). Henry Thayer defined the word used to mean "that part of Hades which was thought to be the abode of the souls of the pious until the resurrection" (THAYER'S GREEK-ENGLISH LEXICON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT, American Book Company Corrected Edition, p. 480,).

In Acts 2:27, 31, we read that Jesus, after his death, went into "Hades." "Hades" was the spirit world, the place where disembodied spirits went. "Hades" had in it two compartments, "paradise" and "tartarus." "Paradise" was the place where righteous spirits went to await the judgment. "Tartarus" (used in 2 Pet. 2:4) was the place where unrighteous spirits awaited the judgment. We see this illustrated in Luke 16:19-31. After death, but prior to the final judgment, the rich man is in "torment," while Lazarus is "comforted." Lazarus was apparently in "Paradise."

Some have questioned whether Jesus mean the thief would be saved when he said, "Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise." But it seems clear to me that salvation was promised to the thief. To be in "Paradise" seems in this passage equivalent with salvation. So I do not question the salvation of the thief. I believe that the Bible teaches that he was saved.

Was the Thief Baptized?

Those who misuse the thief, to try to avoid obeying the gospel, reason something like this: "What about the thief on the cross? He was not baptized; yet the Lord saved him. Since this is true, then people today can be saved without being baptized." The thief on the cross would never have gotten so much attention if there were not so many people who would like to avoid being baptized.

When one attempts to use the thief on the cross as a lone exception to gospel obedience, he thereby admits that in the New Testament cases of conversion, those who were converted were baptized. In order to verify that baptism was a part of conversion in the New Testament, read the accounts of the conversion of the Jews on Pentecost (Acts 2:38), the Samaritans (Acts 8:12, 13), Saul of Tarsus (Acts 22:16), Cornelius (Acts 10:47, 48), Lydia (Acts 16:15), the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:33), and of those converted in Corinth (Acts 18:8). and Ephesus (Acts 19:3-5).

There were those in the days of John the Baptist who sought to avoid baptism, Of these the Bible says, "But the Pharisees and the Lawyers rejected for themselves the counsel of God, being not baptized of him" (Lk. 7:30). There are many today who reject the counsel of God against themselves by refusing to be baptized. Those who reject baptism as a condition of salvation think they can be saved like the thief was saved, and their chief argument is that the thief was not baptized.

But was the thief baptized? If the thief is the one exception to the gospel plan of salvation, and if one is going to try to be saved without baptism because the thief was saved without baptism, he ought at least to be able to prove that the thief was saved without baptism. We know that every convert about whose conversion we can read in the book of Acts was baptized. And the thief may have been baptized.

John the Baptist had baptized many in the area of Jerusalem. "Then went out unto him Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about the Jordan; they were baptized of him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (Mt. 3:5, 6). Mark adds, "John came, who baptized in the wilderness and preached the baptism of repentance unto remission of sins. And there went out unto him ALL the country of Judea, and ALL they of Jerusalem; and they

were baptized of him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (Mk. 1: 4, 5). Was the thief among those baptized by John? If one is going to use the thief as his only authority to prove that one can be saved without baptism, he must be able to prove that the thief was not baptized by John the Baptist. But this no man can prove!

Furthermore, Jesus nearly had completed his ministry on earth when he told the thief, "Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise." Included in Jesus' preaching was the commandment to be baptized. "When therefore the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself baptized not, but his disciples), he left Judea, and departed again unto Galilee" (John 4: 1-3). Jesus made and baptized many disciples. The Bible says that he "was making AND BAPTIZING MORE DISCIPLES THAN JOHN." Can those who think the thief was unbaptized prove that he was not among these?

Before people stake their salvation without baptism on the thief on the cross, they had better be able to prove the thief was unbaptized. That the thief was unbaptized is merely an unfounded assumption on their part. They assume that his salvation constitutes an exception to the gospel plan of salvation. Furthermore, they assume that they can be saved like they assume the thief on the cross was saved.