

# The Courtland Call

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## What About the Thief on the Cross?

The Bible unabashedly connects baptism to salvation.

Mark 16:16, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved...”

Acts 2:38, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...”

1 Peter 3:21, “There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism...”

Despite the seeming clarity of these verses, believers in *sola fide* or “faith only” salvation deny the necessity of baptism for salvation. They often downgrade baptism calling it merely an “outward sign of an inward grace” (a catchphrase never found in Scripture). One of their most common arguments is the “thief on the cross.” As Jesus was on the cross he said to one of the thieves, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). The denominationalist’s argument is usually: “If the thief did not have to be baptized to go to Paradise we don’t have to be baptized either.”

Consider a few reasons why this proof text proves nothing about the necessity of baptism.

First of all, are you sure the thief on the cross was never baptized? Of course, he could not have been baptized once nailed to a cross. However, Matthew 3:5-6 says, “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.” This was the area where the thief must have lived. Based upon his short conversation with Jesus, he seems to know enough to call Jesus “Lord” and even be aware of His “kingdom” (Luke 23:42). So, be careful of making the argument he was never baptized.

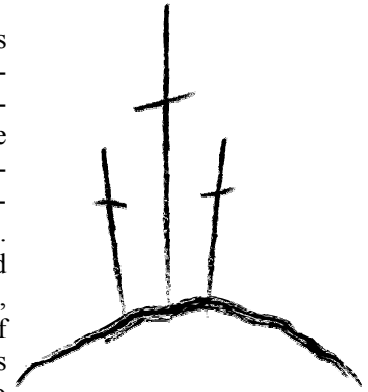
Second, the “thief” argument is irrelevant because the “new covenant” was not yet in effect. The Scriptures teach us the old law was “nailed to the cross” (Colossians 2:14). Hebrews 8-9 more specifically informs the reader the “new covenant” could not be in force until the “shedding of blood” (a term only applied to death in Scripture). With this in mind, the individual who uses the “thief” as a proof text encounters some problems. First, the “law of Christ” was not in force until after the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus

Christ. The law of Moses was still in force. Therefore, the command of Jesus and His apostles to be baptized was not a command for the thief or anyone else prior to the cross. It was stated and applied to those after the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Using the thief as a salvific proof text is no more valid than using Noah—they both lived under a different law.

Finally, we should be careful not to use the thief as a “loophole” text. The fact “belief” or “faith” is mentioned apart from “baptism” in some passages is no indication baptism is unnecessary. To use one example or command of Scripture to the exclusion of others is playing with doctrinal fire. A believer who justifies his beliefs saying the “thief on the cross” wasn’t baptized and ignores the many cases of baptized converts in the post-resurrection book of Acts has either been misled or is being dishonest and imbalanced in their study of the Scriptures.

Have you been baptized into Christ? Why not do what Christ commands without delay?

*Joshua R Welch*



**Join us at  
10:30 on  
Sunday  
mornings  
in March  
for a  
sermon  
series on  
Jonah!**

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