

# Glad Tidings

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

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## Salvation and the Thief on the Cross

(Jerry Fite)

Jesus was crucified between two malefactors who were put to death for their deeds. Before they and Jesus died, one of the thieves said, “*Jesus, remember me when thou comest in thy kingdom.*’ And He said unto him, ‘*Verily I say unto thee, today thou shalt be with me in Paradise.*’” (Luke 23:42-43).

Many look at this poignant scene at Calvary as an example of one being saved by God’s mercy without having to be baptized. We have no record that Jesus told the thief that he must be baptized while they both were dying on the cross. No doubt the opportunity to be baptized was not afforded the man confined to the cross till death. So, what about the thief on the cross? Does this incident prove that one does not have to be baptized in order to be saved?

First, the thief on the cross knew something about Jesus coming in His kingdom. He said, “*...remember me when thou comest in thy kingdom.*” Was he able to glance at the superscription on the cross which read in three languages, “*This is the King of the Jews*”? (Luke 23:38, John 19:19-20); and in desperation, think Jesus would meet the challenge of the soldiers and save Himself from the cross? This

would have indeed been a desperate thought that day with certain death facing both the thief and Jesus.

Or, this thief could have heard the preaching of John the Baptist as he proclaimed the coming of the kingdom. John had preached in the wilderness, “Repent thee; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). John was “preaching the baptism of repentance unto the remission of sins” (Luke 3:3). The thief could have heard John preach about the imminence of the kingdom, and was baptized by John. One cannot prove this man was never baptized. The baptism of repentance was connected with John’s message of the kingdom. Since he knew about the coming Kingdom, he may have responded to the news by being baptized by John. We just do not know.

What we do know is that baptism in the name of the Lord was not commanded until after Jesus’ death and resurrection (Acts 2:38). It was following Jesus’ death and resurrection that God “*highly exalted Him, and gave unto Him the name which is above every name;*” (Philippians 2:9). Without Jesus’ resurrection, man could not be saved from his sins according the Gospel (I Corinthians 15:16-17). So, before Christ’s

death and resurrection, baptism in His name for the remission of sins was impossible.

It is important to stress that not only Jesus’ resurrection was essential, but Jesus’ death and resurrection was not officially communicated as the basis for the new covenant till Pentecost. Peter, fifty-two days after the scene at the cross, commanded baptism in the name of Jesus Christ. This is an important fact because technically speaking, Jesus did die before the thieves on the cross (John 19:32-33). The particulars regarding our “last will and testimony” are not in force till our wills are probated after our death. Likewise, the particulars of Jesus’ “will” were not in effect till Peter proclaimed His gospel in Acts 2.

Because He is God, Jesus had the authority on earth to forgive sin (Matthew 9:6). Now, after His death, a new covenant has come. The new covenant of grace, communicated through the Gospel, is now in place. Repentance and baptism in the name of the Lord for the remission of sins have been commanded for 1984 years. Considering the thief on the cross, what do you think the thief would do if he heard Jesus’ words, “*He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved...*” (Mark 16:16)?