

WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?

When the Roman soldiers crucified Jesus Christ, they also crucified two other men. Those two men were thieves. Jesus was crucified between them. An old prophet had foreseen this situation. "He was numbered with the transgressors," the prophet wrote.

Hello I'm Larry Murdock. I preach for the Gandy church of Christ. Good morning and welcome to this program.

Each of the gospel writers tell us something about those two men who were crucified with Jesus. John tells us only that two men were crucified with him, one on either side. Matthew and Mark tell us that those men were robbers and one was on the left and the other on the right side of Jesus. Matthew and Mark also tell us that they joined the crowd in mocking Jesus. For you see, Pilate had someone write on a sign "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews". The sign was fastened above Jesus' head. Pilate had it written in three languages: Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. He wanted everyone to be able to read it! The Jewish leaders objected to that saying and wanted Pilate to change the wording to read that "He said he was the king of the Jews." But Pilate refused to change it, saying, "what I have written, I have written." The crowd was referring to the sign when they were mocking Jesus. Even the Roman soldiers were having their fun over that sign. Before they led Jesus out of the palace they mocked Jesus by putting on his shoulders a scarlet robe and they twisted together a crown of thorns, then they put in his right hand a stick for a scepter.

After Jesus was nailed to the cross the crowd began to mock him. "He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him", they said. The thieves picked up on that mockery. Luke calls those men simply "criminals" and he tells us even more about what those two were saying while on the cross. Evidently, both criminals mocked Jesus at first, because Matthew tells us that "the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way" that the crowd was. (Matthew 27:44.)

But Luke tells us the rest of the story. Along about noon, after the three had been hanging the cross about 3 hours, "One of the criminals who were hanged railed at

[Jesus], saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And [Jesus] said to him, **"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."** (Luke 23:39-43 ESV)

Wherever "paradise" is, there you will find God ruling. The kingdom belongs to God and paradise belongs to God. But after Jesus' crucifixion, after his resurrection, in 40 days he would ascend to His Father and would be crowned as the King of God's kingdom. The writer of the book of Hebrews says that "After making purification for sins," (that is what Jesus did by dying on the cross) "[Jesus] sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3). When Jesus was crowned as the King He also became the "head of the church, which is His body." The church of Christ is the body of Christ and it is the kingdom of Christ on the earth; there is just one church and there is just one head of the church, Jesus Christ himself!

Jesus' apostle Paul wrote in Colossians that "[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him [in Jesus] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." (Colossians 1:15-20 ESV)

And so one of the criminals blasphemed Jesus while the other one defended Jesus. The thief believed Jesus to be innocent: "This man has done nothing wrong." We do not know why the thief felt this way about Jesus, but he did. The thief also believed that Jesus would "come into" a Kingdom. He believed that Jesus would ascend a throne and become a King. Furthermore, the thief believed that Jesus' kingdom was yet to come in Christ's future. He wanted Jesus to remember him! Jesus responded by saying, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." And so we conclude from that saying that Jesus forgave the sins of this thief; the thief was justly paying for some of his sins right then while

being nailed to his cross. The thief was dying because of his thievery, but Jesus was dying for his soul's salvation.

What do some people say about this thief today? I have heard people say that they want to be saved like the thief, who just believed in the Lord while he was dying. I suppose this means that some people want to be saved on their death bed. Are these people saying they want to serve the devil all their lives, but then be saved on their death beds? Well, friends, only the Lord can judge hearts. But knowing about Jesus like I do, I would hate to live for the devil and then expect the Lord to save me on my death bed. This sounds like Hebrews chapter six, "For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt." (Hebrews 6:4-6 ESV) Do you hold Jesus in contempt? Don't you love the Lord Jesus any better than that? Don't you love him enough to give him your life while you have the time to live for him, however long or short that may be?

But other people say they want to be saved like the Thief, meaning that they don't want to be baptized. They think this thief is an example of someone being saved without being baptized. But friends, you don't know that this man was an unbaptized man! This man knew something about the kingdom of heaven, or else he would not have asked Jesus to remember him when Jesus came into his kingdom. John the baptizer was the first to preach the "kingdom of heaven" is near. Mark tells us that John baptized a large number of the Jewish population. He wrote, "John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." (Mark 1:4-5 ESV) This thief may have heard John preaching the kingdom, and may have been baptized by him.

But the thief may have heard Jesus himself or one of his apostles preaching the coming kingdom. "And [Jesus] went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them. And

great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.” (Matthew 4:23-25 ESV) John tells us that Jesus made more disciples and baptized more disciples than did John, “though Jesus himself baptized not, but his disciples...” (John 4:1-3.) You see, it is possible that the thief had been baptized either by John or by Jesus’ apostles. To say that the thief was baptized or unbaptized is to say too much; we do not know! So how do you know that you can be saved and yet be unbaptized? About forty days later, when sending his apostles into all the world to preach the gospel, Jesus said, “He that believes and is baptized shall be saved.” (Mark 16:16.)

Even if the thief was not baptized either by John or by one of Jesus’ apostles, the thief could be forgiven by Jesus in the same way that Jesus had forgiven others during his ministry upon the earth. In Luke chapter seven we read that Jesus said to a woman, "Your sins are forgiven." Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Luke 7:48-50 ESV)

While Jesus was on the earth He had God’s approval to forgive sins. In Matthew chapter 9 we read of a man who was brought to Jesus lying on a bed. The record says that Jesus saw the faith of the men who carried him, and said to the crippled man, “Son, be of good cheer; thy sins are forgiven thee.” “And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming.” But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"--he then said to the paralytic--"Rise, pick up your bed and go home." And he rose and went home. When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.” (Matthew 9:3-8 ESV) God gave the authority to forgive sins to Jesus while He was with us in the flesh. But now, we are under Jesus’ great commission that he left to His people. And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:15-16 ESV)

When Peter preached the first gospel sermon 10 days later, the hearers were cut to the heart and responded with a question: “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the

name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” [\(Acts 2:37-38 ESV\)](#) Friends, if you are asking the same question, then Peter is talking to you!