

What About the Thief on the Cross?

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4-23-06

Introduction.

- A. The hymns we have in our hymnals are a treasure. They represent the greatest achievements of some very talented men and women who were and are devoted to helping others praise God. Sadly, however, many of those authors and composers hailed from the denominational world rather than the Lord's church. This denominational background, and the false doctrine it brings with it, have posed a challenge to Christian hymnal editors for centuries.
- B. Some hymns, although beautiful, are so riddled with error that no faithful editor can allow them. At the other end of the scale, we see hymns that could be corrected by the alteration of a single word or phrase. Somewhere in between, though, we find hymns that are Scriptural except for one irredeemably false verse. The solution is fairly straightforward: remove the verse, and sing the hymn. Here is a verse that was removed from William Cowper's great hymn, "There Is A Fountain."

*The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day
And likewise I, as vile as he,
Have washed my sins away.*

- C. To a student of the Bible who knew nothing of the religious error that surrounds us, the thief on the cross would seem an odd subject for a hymn about salvation. Why not write about the repentant Jews who were instructed to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins? Why not write about the Ethiopian eunuch who learned about Jesus and himself asked to be baptized? The book of Acts is FILLED with such examples.
- D. The reason why, of course, is that the Acts accounts don't fit with the false doctrine that salvation is by faith alone, and the tale of the thief on the cross does, or at least appears to. Let's read it together: Luke 23:39-43. We learn that the thief believed in Jesus, appealed to Him, and then received a promise from Jesus without having to do anything. The faith-only folks then conclude that we don't have to do anything either.
- E. Are they right? Are we saved like the thief was, or do we have to do something else to lay hold of our salvation? This is an incredibly important question. There is no more important topic in the Bible than what we must do to be saved, and we DON'T want to get it wrong. Also, we need to be able to deal with the questions of our friends who may have run into the thief-on-the-cross story before. We need to know the truth, so let's spend some time this evening asking "What about the thief on the cross?"

I. Conversion in Luke and Acts

- A. To answer this question rightly, we first have to spend a moment considering the books of Luke and Acts. These two books were both written by the same man—Luke, obviously—and both of them were written to give us precise information about the great events of the first century. Despite these similarities, the two books describe salvation in very different ways, ways that come before and after the cross. Luke tells us how conversion occurred before the death of Jesus, and Acts tells us how conversion took place after it.
- B. Let's begin by looking at the salvation pattern in the book of Luke.
 1. It starts with the story of the paralytic man in Luke 5:18-20. Here, a paralyzed man and his four friends are coming to see Jesus. However, the crowds around the Lord are so thick that they can't get the stretcher through. In response, they climb up on the roof, dig a hole through the roof tiles, and lower the paralytic man through the opening. Jesus sees their faith and tells the man that his sins are forgiven.
 2. The sinful woman of Luke 7 is the next subject of Luke's salvation narrative. She learns that Jesus is in the house of Simon the Pharisee, comes, kneels at Jesus' feet, washes his feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, and anoints them with perfume. We see Jesus' response in Luke 7:48-50. He tells her that her sins are forgiven because of her faith. She is to go in peace.
 3. The story of Zaccheus is last in this series of three. Zaccheus is a tax collector who comes to see Jesus. Jesus sees him and tells him that he is to receive Jesus into his house. At this, some people grumble because Zaccheus is a sinner. The story picks up in Luke 19:8-9. Zaccheus repents of his fraudulent ways, so the Lord declares that salvation has come to him.
- C. The conversion stories we see in Acts are very different in nature. They are much more numerous in Acts than in Luke, so let's only look at a few of the most significant ones.
 1. In Acts 2:37-38, we see the response of the Jews at Pentecost. They have just heard the first gospel sermon and have realized that they have crucified the Son of God. They believe in Jesus, and ask Peter what they must do. He tells them that they must repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins.

2. Acts 8:35-38 tells us of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip preaches the gospel to him, and from this message of salvation, the eunuch believes in Jesus and sees that he must be baptized. In fact, he is so eager to be baptized that he stops his chariot at a roadside pond and has Philip baptize him there.
3. Finally, in Acts 22:16, we see the apostle Paul's account of how he was saved. The disciple Ananias told him that he needed to be baptized in order to wash away his sins.

II. The Differences Between Luke and Acts

- A. Just from a cursory reading as we have done, it's obvious that there are two different patterns of salvation at work in these two books. Let's highlight some of the most important differences and reasons for those differences:
 - B. All of the accounts we looked at in Luke occur before the death of Jesus, but all of the conversion accounts in Acts occur after the death of Jesus. Even if we didn't know anything about the Bible at all, we could reasonably expect that salvation after Jesus' death would be different than before it.
 - C. Once we dig a little deeper into Scripture, the reason why the death of Jesus makes such a difference becomes evident. Hebrews 9:15-16 explains. The death of Jesus marked the beginning of the new covenant, the covenant that all Christians share in with God. Before the death of Jesus, the Jews were still under the old covenant of the Law of Moses. Thus, all the salvation stories in Luke took place under the old covenant and all the conversion stories of Acts took place under the new covenant.
 - D. In addition, the two groups of narratives are different because all of the accounts in Luke involved Jesus personally, but all of the accounts in Acts involved only the disciples of Jesus. This right here is enough to explain the differences. As Jesus revealed in Luke 5, while He was on earth, He had authority to forgive sins. He could just say to someone, "Your sins are forgiven," and those sins would be. No disciple of Jesus has EVER had that awesome power. No one in Acts or today has the authority to forgive sins. However, in Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus gives all of His disciples the authority to baptize others for the forgiveness of sins. The evangelists of Acts baptized because that was what they had the authority to do.
 - E. This explains the final difference in the two groups of salvation accounts. In the accounts of Luke, only belief was required for a person to be saved, but in Acts, both belief and baptism were prerequisites of salvation. This is the final consequence of the two different books occurring under two different systems of salvation. No one in Luke was ever baptized for forgiveness of sins, nor had God ever commanded anyone to be baptized for such a thing. From the very first, however, the conversions of Acts hinge upon baptism for forgiveness of sins. The disciples in Acts baptized; Jesus in Luke didn't.

III. The Thief and Us.

- A. From this study of two different salvation patterns, there are two important conclusions that we need to draw. First, the story of the thief on the cross belongs to the Luke pattern of salvation, not the Acts pattern.
 1. Jesus' conversation with the thief, although it occurred on the cross, still took place before Jesus died.
 2. This meant that both Jesus and the thief were still under the Old Covenant. The New Covenant had not yet come into existence because it was inaugurated by the lifeblood of Jesus, and that blood had not yet been shed. These were the final hours of the Old Law, but it was still in force.
 3. In addition, the story of the thief on the cross involved Jesus personally. He was able to forgive the sins of the thief because He had authority to do so.
 4. Finally, just like all the other salvation stories of the book of Luke, the salvation of the thief involved faith only, without reference to baptism. The ordinance of baptism for forgiveness of sins had not yet been enacted.
- B. From this, we can only conclude that the story of the thief on the cross does not provide us with an example by which we may be saved. The circumstances that surrounded it are not true of us. We live after the death of Jesus, not before. We live in the time of the New Covenant, not the Old. We have been taught by the disciples of Jesus, not by Jesus Himself. Thus, our salvation cannot be based on faith only. It must involve both belief and baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
- C. This is not to say that the story of the thief on the cross is meaningless. It's a message of hope for all of us. If the thief can be saved, any of us can be saved too, regardless of how wretchedly we may have sinned. However, we cannot seek our salvation down a road that no longer exists. Instead, we need to turn to the book of Acts for our example. Acts gives us a pattern that we can still follow today, and when we follow that pattern, we can be sure that we are now right with God.

Conclusion. If you are in need of salvation, just like the repentant sinners of Acts, you need to be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins.