

Is Baptism Essential For Salvation? (No. 2)

By Casey Head

The denominational world says that we are saved by faith only and that baptism is merely an “outward sign of an inward grace,” and while that may sound good, it is not consistent with the doctrine of Christ. The fact is, baptism is essential for salvation...not because I say so, but because the word of God says so! Before I get to the numerous verses that teach the necessity of water baptism, I want to first address the many objections that are often raised. This week, I want to deal with the following question: “If baptism is essential, what about the thief on the cross?”

In Luke 23:43, Jesus told the thief that was crucified beside Him, “Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with Me in paradise.” I have heard denominational people on countless occasions use the thief as “proof” that baptism isn’t essential for salvation. There was even a time when I myself used this argument (when I was in the Baptist church). Ultimately, however, I had to acknowledge that the “thief on the cross” in no way denied the necessity of baptism. Let me explain.

First, the thief didn’t have to be baptized because he lived under the Law of Moses. He was a Jew, and as a Jew he had to be circumcised and hold to the teachings of the old covenant, but he did not have to be baptized. Jesus nailed the old law to the cross (Col. 2:14-16) and replaced it with a “better covenant” (Heb. 8:6, 13; 9:15; 10:9). The Jews of the Old Testament were bound to the Law of Moses (which didn’t command baptism) while we today are bound to the law of Christ (which does command baptism). That is the difference. The thief didn’t have to be baptized because baptism wasn’t required at that time.

Second, Romans 6:3-8 says that we are baptized into the death of Christ, buried with Christ in baptism, and raised up from that watery grave to walk in newness of life. The thief couldn’t have been baptized into Jesus’ death or buried with Jesus if Jesus was still alive on the cross!

Finally, assuming that baptism *was* essential during the Old Testament, how do you know the thief *wasn’t* baptized (Mt. 3:5-6)? He knew about the kingdom (Lk. 23:42), so perhaps he had been baptized by John or Jesus and had fallen away. The fact is, we don’t know whether he was baptized or not, so the argument falls short even if the points I made above aren’t satisfactory.

If you have any questions about the thief on the cross, or if you disagree with what I have written, please contact me. I want to hear from you. My phone number is (828)467-1463; my email address is NCBibleQuestions@yahoo.com and my mailing address is P.O. Box 401.

Thank you and stay tuned for the next article in this series...