

Things Hard To Understand (#4) But What About The Thief On The Cross?

Text: Luke 23:32-43

Introduction:

1. With the thought in mind that there are things hard to be understood in God's Word (2 Peter 3:16) – but not impossible to understand (John 8:32) – we have looked to several things pertaining to the church and salvation.
2. In today's lesson we will look to the oft heard objection to God's plan of salvation by those who ask, "But what about the thief on the cross?." As noted many times before, we have no problem with examining objections – as long as all involved in the examination have the noble attitude spoken of in Acts 17:11.

Discussion:

I. The Basis of the Objection

1. As we have noted in previous lessons, many passages speak of the essentiality of loving obedience to God, culminating in baptism as the time at which we become children of God (John 14:15; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Galatians 3:26-27)
2. The argument of those who appeal to the thief on the cross as proving baptism as non-essential to salvation can be summarized as follows:
 - (1) The thief on the cross was not baptized.
 - (2) The thief was saved.
 - (3) Therefore, baptism is not essential to salvation

II. Some Questions to Help Us Honestly Examine the Objection and the Account Under Consideration

1. "Can it be shown as fact the thief on the cross was not baptized?"
 - (1) There is no record of this man before the events at the crucifixion, thus to deny he was baptized is only an assumption.
 - (2) While we do know that the baptism of John was known and obeyed "all the land of Judea, and they of Jerusalem" (Mark 1:5). To make the assertion he was baptized is likewise an assumption.
2. "Are the circumstances surrounding the salvation of the thief the same as those we face today?"
 - (1) The thief was in Jesus' presence, and He clearly spoke directly to this man as our text says. But Paul notes that the last one to directly see the Lord was him (1 Corinthians 15:8)
 - (2) When He appeared to Paul (Saul) (Acts 9:1-6), He was asked what he must do to be saved. But unlike the events in our text, Saul was told to go to the city and it would be told what he must do (6). The answer he received was to be baptized (Acts 22:16).
 - (3) What was different? Jesus Himself stated that "the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins" (Matthew 9:6). It is clear though that after His ascension to heaven to the right hand of the Father that matters were different.

- (4) From this we see that the lesson we learn is not that we can forego baptism, but that while Jesus was on the earth He chose to use His divine prerogative and forgive the thief's sins.
3. "Between the account of the thief on the cross (who was saved directly by Christ) and the accounts of salvation recorded in Acts in which baptism was clearly commanded, what had changed?"
 - (1) The answer is in the crowning event of the whole of time - the death, burial and resurrection of Christ!
 - (2) But what did that event change in regard to our seeking salvation?
 - A. It changed covenants under which men lived (and died) (Colossians 2:14; Hebrews 10:9)
 - B. What covenant do you and I live and die under? (Matthew 29:18-20)
 4. "What does this covenant under which I live then teach me regarding salvation?"
 - (1) It is not by faith only (James 2:24, 26).
 - (2) It is by obedience to Christ (Hebrews 5:8-9; 1 John 5:3).
 - (3) It is by having faith (Hebrews 11:6).
 - (4) It is by repenting of our sins (Acts 2:38).
 - (5) It is by confessing Christ (Acts 8:36-38).
 - (6) It is by obeying Christ in baptism (1 Peter 3:21; Acts 2:38).

Conclusion:

1. For us to appeal to the events surrounding the thief on the cross is vain.
 - (1) It is an appeal to a situation in which none of us can ever find ourselves—in the physical presence of Christ on earth.
 - (2) It is an appeal to be under a law by which we cannot be saved.
 - (3) It is an appeal to a law which Christ took away by His death.
2. "What about the thief on the cross?" I thank God that he repented and turned to the Lord in the way in which he was able and thus was saved. But a more important question is "What about ME?" You and I live under the New Testament. In this New Testament we find clearly that salvation was given to those who humbly submitted to God's will.
3. Jesus wants us to be with Him (John 14:1-3), the real question is not, "What about the thief on the cross" – it is "What about me?" Will I love Him enough to do His will?