

Bible Questions and Answers

(By Robert C. Veil, Jr.)

Question: I was trying to show a friend what the Bible says about salvation, but he told me he preferred to be saved like the thief on the cross. Can we be saved like the thief on the cross?

Answer: When Jesus was crucified, the Bible tells us that two others were crucified at the same time, (Lk. 23:32). They are identified by Matthew as “robbers,” (Mt. 27:44). Although both of them at first mocked Jesus, one of them had a change of heart, because Luke informs us that he rebuked the other robber, acknowledged his own guilt, and pointed out that Jesus has done nothing wrong, (Lk. 23:39-41). He then made the following request of Jesus, "Jesus, remember me when thou comest in thy kingdom." Jesus then said to him, *"Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in Paradise,"* (Lk. 23:43). This verse is often cited in an effort to show that people today can be saved “like the theft on the cross,” without obeying God's plan for salvation, including baptism for the remission of sins. But the truth is, no one today can be saved like the thief on the cross, and for several important reasons.

First, the thief was saved under a prior law. The terms of salvation under the gospel in the Christian age, are quite different from the requirements of the past. The Hebrew writer explains, "God, having of old times spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by diverse portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made the worlds," (Heb. 1:2-3). God spoke to our forefathers in various amounts and in various ways in prior ages. During the Patriarchal dispensation, he spoke to the patriarchs, or fathers of large families. Later, the Mosaic law was given to the Jews at Mount Sinai, and God spoke through Moses.

But the law of Moses was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and was "nailed to the cross" when Jesus died, (Col. 2:14; Eph. 2:11-22). Jesus completed his mission and fully accomplished the old law, (Jn. 19:30). Accordingly, that law passed away, (Mt. 5:17-18). The Old Testament law gave way to the last will and testament of Jesus Christ, the New Testament. Today, no one is saved under the prior law, anymore than Americans are subject to the laws of our forefathers in other countries. When Jesus made this statement to the thief on the cross, the new law of Jesus Christ had not yet gone into effect, but it is certainly in effect for all of us today, and requires our respect and obedience.

Further, it should be remembered that we do not know the spiritual status of the thief on the cross prior to the crucifixion. It may be that he had obeyed the teaching of John the Baptist, or of Jesus himself, but had become unfaithful. His initial obedience would have been known to the Lord, who was in a position to forgive and restore him at the cross. This he did, in a direct fashion, before the gospel terms of salvation were first announced at Pentecost, (see Acts 2).

It is a very dangerous and unwise thing to reject God's plan for our salvation in this, the Christian age, and seek to go back to a prior dispensation. It is also unwise to base our salvation on someone about whom we know so little. This is especially true in light of the many plain cases of obedience to the gospel recorded in the New Testament. In each of those cases, as detailed throughout the book of Acts, individuals 1) heard the gospel, 2) believed in Jesus Christ as the son of God, 3) repented of their sins, 4) confessed their faith in Christ, and 5) were baptized for the remission of sins. Following their baptism, they lived as faithful Christians, and so must we! Cases of salvation should be studied and imitated, as they occurred under the law of Christ, in obedience to the gospel, and are recorded by inspiration of God for our benefit.

Basing our obedience on the thief on the cross would be similar to making out a will in accordance with the laws of 18th century England. A number of changes have occurred since then, including a revolution! If we

can see the unreasonableness of doing that when it comes to a physical document like a will, surely we can understand the importance of avoiding such a mistake when it comes to the salvation of our soul!

Robert Veil, Jr. has been a gospel preacher with the Church of Christ for over 40 years. He currently preaches monthly for the Broad Top Church of Christ. Submit your Bible questions to him at Central Church of Christ, 90 Waverly Court, Martinsburg, WV 25403.