

The Thief On The Cross

The history of interpretation of the Bible is littered with the attempts of churchgoers to water down clear Bible teachings by finding isolated verses and misinterpreting these contrary to many other verses on the same topic, this being done in order to suit the flesh. A classic example of this is Luke 23:40-43, the story of the thief on the cross next to Jesus: *“But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.’”*

I have heard some churchgoers argue: “These verses show that it is not necessary to repent and receive Jesus as Lord in order to receive eternal salvation. God saved the thief on the cross by His grace through the thief receiving Jesus only as Saviour but not as Lord and without him repenting and turning from his known sins.” But such comments involve very poor Biblical interpretation. Note the following:

The thief admitted his sins and experienced godly sorrow

In Luke 23:41, the thief admitted his wicked deeds and the fact he deserved punishment: *“And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.”*

His admission of his wicked deeds was a pre-requisite to the true heart repentance that he was experiencing at the time. In 2 Corinthians 7:10, Paul wrote: *“For godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation...”*

Paul taught here that true Holy Spirit-inspired godly sorrow about our sins produces heart repentance which is closely linked to salvation

He did not have time to live a changed life

The thief did not have time to begin to live a post-conversion changed life which would express his heart repentance at conversion. In other words, he did not have time to outwardly manifest the post-conversion fruit of repentance which Paul called *“works befitting repentance”* (see Acts 26:20). But in his heart, he had repented and turned from his known sins to Jesus Christ the Lord.

The thief emphasised the importance of fearing God

In Luke 23:40, the thief emphasised the importance of fearing God. Fearing God means to respect, reverence and be in awe of Him. Fearing God is not the same as having faith in God, but as Peter says in Acts 10:35, fearing God is very important even in New Covenant times: *“But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.”*

Peter is not here saying we are saved by good works. Instead he means works are a subjective fruit or result of our heart reverence for God.

The thief recognised Jesus as His Lord and King

In Luke 23:42, the thief emphasises that Jesus had an eternal kingdom and was therefore King: *“Then he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.’”*

By asking Jesus to remember him when His rule as King was totally manifested, the thief was recognising Jesus as his *King of Kings* and *Supreme Lord*.

In the Majority Greek Text used by the King James Version of the New Testament, in Luke 23:42 the thief calls Jesus **“Lord”**. This is further evidence that the thief received Jesus as his Lord and Saviour and not just as his Saviour, and that he was turning from having his known sins as his lord or ruler.

For a Jew to declare that Jesus had an eternal Kingdom, was the King and was the Lord involved a *dramatic* change of *heart*. Such a great change of heart is one aspect of the type of Holy Spirit-inspired repentance which accompanies saving faith.

Jesus would not contradict Himself

In Luke 24:46-47, Luke records that Jesus emphasises that one of the God-ordained conditions of receiving forgiveness from God is repentance in our hearts: *“Then He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.’”*

Jesus Christ was here referring to New Covenant conversions based on receiving God’s grace and mercy manifested through His death and resurrection.

Jesus would not say that repentance is a God-ordained means of receiving God’s forgiveness and then just earlier in the case of the thief on the cross contradict Himself by saying that the thief was forgiven by God without repenting.

God-inspired Luke did not contradict himself

Luke wrote the Books of Luke and Acts. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he did not contradict what he wrote in the case of the thief on the cross by what he wrote in the Book of Acts. In Acts 26:15-20, Luke records that Paul said that Christ commanded him to preach the Gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. In Acts 26:17-18, Jesus Christ connected receiving forgiveness of sins and an inheritance from God to having faith in Jesus: *“I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.”*

In Acts 26:20, Paul emphasised that the Gospel he preached included an emphasis on:

- (i) repentance
- (ii) turning to God
- (iii) and after conversion, as a fruit of this repentance and turning to God, to do good works which express outwardly such heart repentance.

In Acts 2:38, 3:19, 3:26, 11:18 and 20:21, Luke records that the Apostles Peter and Paul revealed one God-revealed condition of receiving forgiveness or remission of sins is repentance in our hearts. The Holy Spirit would not lead Luke in the case of the thief on the cross to contradict this.

The omission of the words “repent” and “repentance” means little

The fact that the words “*repent*” and “*repentance*” are not mentioned in Luke 23:40-43 means little. This is because Paul’s conversion recorded in Acts 9:1-18 mentions nothing specifically about Paul beginning to have faith in Jesus Christ.

If we adopted the same poor interpretation principles that some churchgoers do with Luke 23:40-43, we would have to conclude from Acts 9:1-18 that Paul received Jesus Christ and was saved and forgiven without having faith in Jesus Christ. But such a conclusion is unbiblical nonsense.

Acts 9:1-18 assumes Paul turned from unbelief to faith in Jesus Christ. Luke 23:40-43 assumes the thief on the cross repented and turned to having faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

Concluding comments

The thief on the cross began to have a faith in Jesus Christ which expressed itself in trust in Him and surrender to His Lordship. He likely knew only a little about the truths of the Gospel at this time. But he had a saving faith. People do not need perfect doctrinal understanding of all the results of Jesus’ life and death and of all aspects of His Lordship to be saved. But they do need a trusting faith in Christ which surrenders to Him as Lord in their hearts.

Bible Study Question

1. What does Luke 23:42 reveal about the nature of the conversion of the thief on the Cross?