

## What About the Thief on the Cross? By Trey Sullins

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” This simple passage in Ephesians 2:8-9 is perhaps one of the most misused and abused texts in the Bible. Many in the world will claim that this text is proof that we do not need to do anything except for believe in God in order to be saved. Proponents of this belief will often continue by saying the thief on the cross is proof that one can be saved without works. Is that really the case? Can we be saved just like the thief on the cross?

The text of Ephesians 2:8-9 is an important one to understand. This text is showing us how God’s grace and our faith brings us to salvation. There are two sides to the salvation of mankind. On God’s side, He exhibits a working grace that offers us the path we need to get to Him. Then on man’s side, we must choose to believe in Him and follow through with action and obedience. The works in reference in this passage are works of merit. In other words, there is nothing that humans can do to merit or have earned salvation. However, this does not mean that we do not have to show works to have a living faith that results in salvation (James 2:17). In truth, the Bible says works are necessary for salvation: “You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only” (James 2:24). This is the law of Christ under which we live today.

What about the thief on the cross; can we be saved like him? To understand this, we must first consider the time period in which he lived. The thief lived in the time period just before the church was established in Acts 2. In fact, John 19:32-33 reveal that he must have died only a short while after Jesus did. Therefore, the law of Christ was not in effect, and there was no church to be added to. This answers the latter question for us: we can not be saved like the thief on the cross because we live under the law of Christ. Under the law of Christ, the one and only path to salvation is by belief and obedience to the word of God: this is a living faith!

How did the thief receive paradise? Remember the basic pattern we just examined in the book of James. When we turn to Luke 23:39-43 there are some powerful statements made. One of the criminals on the crosses said, “If you are the Christ, save Yourself and us.” In response the other criminal, the thief on the cross, said, “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. Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” The first thing we must realize is this man very clearly acted on his faith. He certainly believed in God, and this caused him to say these statements of faith. Because he lived before the church, there was no baptism into Christ for him to be saved by. Furthermore, we know almost nothing about this man and his background. He may have already been believing in God and Christ or possibly even was baptized with John’s baptism. Finally, we have to remember one other important detail: Jesus is God. If He wants to bring someone to paradise, then He certainly has the authority to do so. However, this is still a unique circumstance and not a normal event applicable to our salvation today.

The followers of God follow the will of God. God has revealed this will so that we can know exactly what we need to do to be saved. The event with the thief on the cross is one which cannot be applied to us. If we are to be saved like the thief, then we would have to live before the church

was established and Jesus would have to directly tell us to enter paradise today. Will that happen today? No! Therefore, it is illogical to think that we can be saved like the thief on the cross. God's pattern is simple so we cannot allow the created doctrines of men to lead us astray. We must have faith in God, be obedient to God, and then by God's grace and mercy we can have salvation!