

Thief on the Cross

A sheep and a pig escaped from their farm. When the farmer noticed they were missing, he immediately set out to find them. Finally, on the second day of his search, the farmer heard a sheep bleating in the distance. He followed the sound to a deep ditch, where he found the sheep and pig coated in muck and unable to scramble out. The sheep pitifully cried out for help while the pig was content wallowing in the mud.



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That story reminds me of the two thieves crucified with Jesus. At first, both were complicit in railing against Him (Matt. 27:44). However, one of them soon realized that they were in deep trouble. He cried out for help while the other wallowed in his muddy condition (Lk. 23:39-43).

There were three distinct crosses that day. Jesus died on the cross of redemption surrounded by the cross of rebellion (pig) and the cross of repentance (sheep). This begs the obvious question, "What side of Jesus are you on?"

When discussing the necessity of baptism, the penitent thief usually becomes a point of emphasis. People ask, "Wasn't the thief on the cross saved without baptism?" We will answer that question in five points: (1) The thief on the cross may have been baptized by John (Matt. 3:5-6) or by the disciples of the Lord (Jn. 4:1-3). We do not know. One could just as easily assume that he was baptized, as to assume that he was not baptized. (2) The thief lived under a different covenant than we do. He lived during the Mosaic Law, before Christ shed His blood and before the baptism of Christ was commanded. (3) The will of the testator does not take effect until he dies (Heb. 9:16-17). Therefore, Jesus could forgive the thief as He pleased. Now, however, His testament, which commands baptism for the remission of sins, is in effect. (4) The thief was not an alien sinner. He, being a Jew, was already in the covenant relationship. He was simply an erring child of God. (5) The thief could not believe that God raised Christ from the dead (Rom. 10:9). Does that mean we don't have to believe it either? What proves too much proves nothing at all.

The penitent thief is a remarkable story of salvation. However, he lived under different circumstances than we do. We must look at the new covenant for how one is saved today (Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:3-5; 1 Pet. 3:21).