

Thief on the Cross Proves Baptism Unnecessary

LDS Apologetics Research

ABSTRACT

1. Introduction

One of the most commonly cited arguments against the necessity of baptism is the account of the thief on the cross in Luke 23:39-43. Jesus promised the repentant thief, "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise," despite the thief having no opportunity for baptism. Critics argue this proves that baptism is not essential for salvation — that faith and repentance alone are sufficient, and that any church requiring baptism adds a human requirement to God's free grace. This document examines the scriptural, historical, and doctrinal dimensions of this argument and presents the Latter-day Saint response.

2. The Criticism (Steelmanned)

The critic's argument is simple and intuitively powerful:

- 1. The plain text:** Jesus told the repentant thief, "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). No qualifications. No conditions. No mention of baptism. If the thief was saved without baptism, then baptism cannot be a necessary condition for salvation.
- 2. The impossibility of compliance:** The thief was nailed to a cross. He physically could not be baptized. If God requires baptism for salvation, He condemned the thief to damnation through no fault of his own — which is incompatible with a just and merciful God.
- 3. Salvation by grace through faith:** Ephesians 2:8-9 states, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." If baptism is required, it becomes a "work" and contradicts the grace-alone model of salvation.
- 4. The pattern of Jesus's ministry:** Jesus repeatedly forgave sins without requiring baptism first — the paralytic (Mark 2:5), the woman caught in adultery (John 8:11), the woman who anointed His feet (Luke 7:48). This suggests baptism is not essential to the forgiveness process.
- 5. The pastoral concern:** If baptism is absolutely required, what about those who die before being baptized — infants, deathbed converts, accident victims? A loving God would not condemn people for failing to complete a ritual they had no opportunity to perform.

This argument carries genuine force, particularly in pastoral contexts, and deserves a careful, substantive response.

3. Biblical Response

"Paradise" Is Not the Same as the Celestial Kingdom or Final Heaven

The word Jesus used was "paradise" (Greek: *paradeisos*), not "heaven" (Greek: *ouranos*). These are not synonymous in New Testament usage:

- **Luke 16:19-31 (the parable of Lazarus and the rich man)**: Jesus himself described a post-mortual state with distinct compartments — "Abraham's bosom" (comfort) and a place of torment, separated by a "great gulf." Both are in the spirit world, not in final heaven.
- **1 Peter 3:18-20**: Christ, after His death, "went and preached unto the spirits in prison" — spirits who had been disobedient. This indicates a post-mortual state where teaching and change remain possible.
- **1 Peter 4:6**: "For this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit."
- **John 20:17**: After the Resurrection, Jesus told Mary Magdalene, "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father." If Jesus had not yet ascended to the Father on Sunday morning, then "paradise" on Friday could not have been the Father's presence. Paradise is a state in the spirit world, not final exaltation.

The critical distinction: Jesus promised the thief he would be in paradise — the spirit world — that day. This is entirely consistent with the thief later receiving the gospel and ordinances (including baptism) before final judgment. The promise to the thief does not address the question of baptism's necessity for ultimate salvation.

The Bible Explicitly Teaches the Necessity of Baptism

The thief on the cross is a single narrative episode. The Bible's doctrinal teaching on baptism is extensive, explicit, and consistent:

- **John 3:5** — Jesus to Nicodemus: "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." This is an unqualified, universal statement. "Cannot" admits no exceptions.
- **Mark 16:16** — "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned."
- **Acts 2:38** — Peter on the day of Pentecost: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins."
- **Acts 22:16** — Ananias to Paul: "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins."
- **1 Peter 3:21** — "The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us."
- **Galatians 3:27** — "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ."
- **Romans 6:3-5** — Paul teaches that baptism is participation in Christ's death and resurrection — not a mere symbol but a salvific event.
- **Titus 3:5** — "He saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost."

The interpretive principle: A single narrative episode (the thief) should not override multiple explicit doctrinal statements. Sound hermeneutics builds doctrine on didactic teaching, not on narrative exceptions. If John 3:5 means what it says — "cannot enter the kingdom of God" without being born of water — then the thief must be explained within that framework, not used to override it.

Jesus Had Authority to Make Exceptions — Which Does Not Eliminate the Rule

Even if the thief received a personal exemption from Christ, this does not prove there is no rule. A king can pardon a prisoner without abolishing the law. Jesus, as the Son of God with all authority (Matthew 28:18), could extend any grace He chose to any individual. This tells us nothing about the general requirements He established for His church. After the Resurrection, He commanded baptism as a universal ordinance (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16). The thief's experience predates that commission.

The Thief May Have Been Previously Baptized

This possibility is rarely considered but cannot be excluded:

- **Matthew 3:5-6** — "Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, and were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins." John's baptism was widespread. Many people in Palestine had been baptized by John.
- The text does not say the thief had never been baptized. It only records a conversation on the cross. The assumption that the thief was unbaptized is an argument from silence.

The Old Covenant Was Still in Effect

The thief died before Jesus completed the Atonement and before the new covenant was established through the Resurrection:

- **Hebrews 9:16-17** — "For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth."
- The New Covenant, with its ordinances and requirements, was not fully in effect until after Christ's death and Resurrection. The thief died under the old dispensation. His case cannot establish the requirements of the new one.

4. Early Christian/Historical Evidence

Early Church Fathers on Baptismal Necessity

The earliest Christian writers overwhelmingly regarded baptism as necessary for salvation:

- **Justin Martyr** (*First Apology* 61, c. 155 AD): "As many as are persuaded and believe... are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated... this washing is called illumination, because they who learn these things are illuminated in their understandings."
- **Irenaeus** (*Against Heresies* 3.17.1, c. 180 AD): Connected baptism directly to regeneration and entry into the body of Christ.
- **Tertullian** (*On Baptism* 12-13, c. 200 AD): Argued extensively for baptismal necessity. On the thief specifically, Tertullian noted: "One case of salvation without baptism does not make a rule. The Lord

Himself baptized none; but what was the meaning of His saying, 'Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven'?"

- **Cyprian** (*Epistle 72*, c. 255 AD): Insisted that there is no salvation outside the church and that baptism is the means of entry.
- **Basil of Caesarea** (*On the Holy Spirit* 15.35, c. 375 AD): "If there is any grace in the water, it does not arise from the nature of the water but from the presence of the Spirit."
- **Augustine** (*On Baptism* 4.22, c. 400 AD): Acknowledged the possibility of "baptism of desire" for catechumens who died before receiving water baptism, but affirmed the normative necessity of water baptism.

The consensus: The earliest Christian churches universally taught baptismal necessity. The idea that baptism is merely symbolic or optional is a later Protestant development, not the historic Christian position.

The Thief in Patristic Interpretation

Early Christian writers did address the thief on the cross, and their interpretations are instructive:

- **Cyril of Jerusalem** (*Catechetical Lectures* 13.31): Treated the thief's case as exceptional — a unique act of Christ's personal authority, not a precedent for ordinary salvation.
- **John Chrysostom** (*Homilies on the Gospel of John* 25): Emphasized that the thief's salvation was a demonstration of Christ's divine authority to forgive in extraordinary circumstances, not an abolition of baptism.
- **Ambrose** (*On the Mysteries* 4.20): Argued that the thief received a form of "baptism of blood" through his suffering on the cross alongside Christ.

No major Church Father used the thief on the cross to argue that baptism is unnecessary.

5. LDS Doctrinal Position

Baptism for the Dead Resolves the Pastoral Problem

The most powerful element of the critic's argument is the pastoral concern: what about those who cannot be baptized through no fault of their own? Latter-day Saint doctrine provides the most comprehensive answer to this problem in all of Christianity:

- **1 Corinthians 15:29** — "Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for the dead?" Paul references the practice of vicarious baptism for the dead as evidence for the Resurrection. He does not condemn it or correct it.
- **D&C 128:15-18** — Joseph Smith taught that baptism for the dead is the mechanism by which God ensures that every person who has ever lived has the opportunity to receive baptism, regardless of their mortal circumstances.
- **1 Peter 3:18-20; 4:6** — The gospel is preached to the dead in the spirit world. Baptism for the dead provides the corresponding ordinance.

This doctrine simultaneously affirms baptism's necessity (John 3:5) and God's justice and mercy (no one is condemned for lacking an opportunity). The thief on the cross can receive vicarious baptism and accept the gospel in the spirit world. The tension the critic identifies — between baptismal necessity and divine justice — is fully resolved.

Ordinances Are Essential, Not Optional

Latter-day Saint theology teaches that ordinances are not "works" in the Pauline sense of attempting to earn salvation through human effort. They are authorized channels through which God's grace operates:

- **D&C 84:19-22** — The ordinances of the Melchizedek Priesthood hold "the key of the knowledge of God," and "without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh."
- **Articles of Faith 1:4** — "The first principles and ordinances of the Gospel are: first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, Repentance; third, Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; fourth, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost."

Ordinances are not human additions to grace. They are the divinely appointed means through which grace is administered. Just as a king may pardon through a signed document (the document does not create the king's authority but is the means through which it is exercised), baptism is the means through which Christ's atoning grace is applied.

The Spirit World and Continuing Opportunity

Latter-day Saint doctrine teaches that the spirit world is a place of continued learning, growth, and gospel acceptance:

- **D&C 138** — President Joseph F. Smith's vision of the redemption of the dead. Christ organized missionary work in the spirit world so that "the faithful elders of this dispensation... continued their labors of preaching" among the dead (D&C 138:57).
- The thief on the cross would have entered paradise (the spirit world), heard the fulness of the gospel, and had the opportunity to accept vicarious ordinances performed on his behalf.

6. Key Scriptures

- **John 3:5** — "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God"
- **Mark 16:16** — "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved"
- **Acts 2:38** — "Repent, and be baptized every one of you... for the remission of sins"
- **1 Peter 3:18-21** — Christ preached to spirits in prison; "baptism doth also now save us"
- **1 Peter 4:6** — "The gospel preached also to them that are dead"
- **1 Corinthians 15:29** — Baptism for the dead referenced by Paul

- **Romans 6:3-5** — Baptism as participation in Christ's death and resurrection
- **Acts 22:16** — "Be baptized, and wash away thy sins"
- **Hebrews 9:16-17** — The testament is in force after the testator's death (new covenant not yet in effect when the thief died)
- **John 20:17** — Jesus had "not yet ascended" to the Father after the Resurrection; paradise is not final heaven
- **D&C 128:15-18** — Baptism for the dead
- **D&C 138:29-35** — Gospel preached in the spirit world

7. Responses to Common Objections

"Jesus said 'today you will be with me in paradise' — that means the thief was saved."

"Paradise" (Greek: *paradeisos*) is not "heaven" (Greek: *ouranos*). Jesus himself had not yet ascended to the Father as of Sunday morning (John 20:17). Paradise refers to the spirit world — a post-mortal state of rest and teaching, not final exaltation. The thief was promised he would be in the spirit world with Christ, which is consistent with further gospel instruction and vicarious ordinances.

"Baptism is a work, and we are saved by grace, not works (Ephesians 2:8-9)."

The "works" Paul opposes in Ephesians 2 are works of the Mosaic Law (circumcision, dietary laws, Sabbath observance) — not divinely commanded ordinances of the new covenant. Paul himself was baptized (Acts 9:18; 22:16) and baptized others (1 Corinthians 1:14-16). He described baptism as participation in Christ's death and resurrection (Romans 6:3-5). If baptism is a "work" that contradicts grace, then Paul contradicted himself throughout his ministry. Obedience to divine commands is not the same as attempting to earn salvation.

"John 3:5 refers to natural birth ('water'), not baptism."

This interpretation is historically novel and was unknown to the early church. Every major Church Father — Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine, Chrysostom — understood "born of water" as a reference to baptism. The context of John 3 (which immediately precedes Jesus's own baptizing ministry in John 3:22) makes the baptismal reading the most natural. Additionally, "born of water and of the Spirit" parallels the dual requirement of outward ordinance and inward transformation that characterizes New Testament theology throughout.

"What about deathbed conversions? Must they be baptized?"

Latter-day Saint theology answers this with unique completeness. Those who die without baptism — whether deathbed converts, infants, accident victims, or people in remote regions who never heard the gospel — can receive vicarious baptism through temple ordinances (1 Corinthians 15:29). The gospel is

preached to them in the spirit world (1 Peter 3:19; 4:6; D&C 138). They retain the agency to accept or reject. This system preserves both the necessity of baptism and the justice of God.

"Jesus forgave sins without baptism during His ministry."

Jesus had personal authority to forgive sins by His own word (Mark 2:5-10). He also established a church with ordinances and commissioned baptism as a universal requirement (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16). That He could personally forgive during His mortal ministry does not eliminate the ordinance He established for His church. A doctor who can heal by touch still prescribes medicine for the broader population.

8. Conclusion

The thief on the cross is a powerful narrative, but it cannot bear the doctrinal weight critics place upon it. The word "paradise" does not mean final heaven — Jesus himself had not yet ascended to the Father when He appeared to Mary on Sunday morning. The thief died under the old covenant, before the new covenant's ordinances were fully established. The Bible's explicit doctrinal teaching on baptism — John 3:5, Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38, 1 Peter 3:21, Romans 6:3-5 — is consistent, emphatic, and universal. The earliest Christian churches unanimously taught baptismal necessity; no Church Father used the thief to argue otherwise. The pastoral concern about those who die unbaptized is fully addressed by the Latter-day Saint doctrine of baptism for the dead (1 Corinthians 15:29; D&C 128), which preserves both the necessity of baptism and the justice of a merciful God. A single narrative episode should not override the weight of scripture, the consensus of the earliest Christians, and the explicit commands of Christ Himself.

Further Reading:

- [Baptisms for the Dead — Gospel Topics Essay](#)
- [FairLatterdaySaints: Baptism](#)
- [FairLatterdaySaints: Baptism for the Dead](#)