

“There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.” (Lk 15:7)

✠ Lecture XII: The Salvation of The Thief ✠

+ Introduction:

Protestants, in their attempt to emphasize that salvation is not dependent on human achievements, say that good works play no role in our salvation, and to stress the point that salvation is not due to human merit, say that evil works will not affect the salvation of a believer! Thus, their views regarding salvation turned into a heresy that needed to be refuted. This understanding of salvation is focused entirely on the words of St. John, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believe in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (**Jn 3:16**), as if this verse was the only one speaking about salvation in the entire Holy Bible. No one argues regarding the necessity of faith for salvation, all (except the pluralists) agree that whoever does not believe will perish. When we say to the Protestants that good works are important for salvation, they reply, ‘the thief was saved without any good works’, when we say that baptism is necessary for salvation, they answer, ‘the thief went to paradise without being baptized’. Protestants teach that faith is a feeling in the heart, which is obtain in a moment and consequently a person is saved in a moment without any Church Sacraments or Priesthood. They support this heresy by saying that the thief was saved in a moment without Church or Priesthood mediation. Before we provide, by the grace of God, the Orthodox refutations of the Protestants claims concerning the salvation of the thief, we should understand that the way the thief was saved is irrelevant for the Christian era since neither the Church nor the Christian Priesthood had yet been established.

The Church was born on the Pentecost day when the Holy Spirit came down on the apostles as divided tongues of fire (**Acts 2**). The Christian Priesthood was established after the Resurrection, when our Lord breathed on the disciples saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any they are retained” (**Jn 20:22-23**). Nevertheless, the thief was saved through our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, the head of the Church (**Col 1:18**) and the Chief High Priest (**Heb 8:1**) who represents both the Church and the Christian Priesthood. In what follows, we shall, by the grace of God, discuss the 10 good works performed by the crucified thief, we shall prove that he was indeed baptized, we shall demonstrate that he was not saved in a moment and finally, we shall consider his position in the Coptic Tradition.

✠ The Ten Good Works of The Thief:

The **first** good deed of the thief was to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord said to the Jews, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent” (**Jn 6:29**). Just to believe was not an easy task for the thief because he believed in the Lord Jesus while He was crucified, humiliated, despised, and in a weak state in front of all. The cross of the Lord made many to stumble, even the disciples, the Lord said, “All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written, I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered” (**Mk 14:27**). And it happened that the sheep were scattered! No one could stand by the cross except the Maries, St. John the beloved and this thief!

“O blessed thief, what did you see and what did you observe; that you confessed the crucified Christ in the flesh, the King of heaven and the Lord of all? You did not see Christ, God, glorified on Mt. Tabor in the glory of His Father; but you did see Him in the Kranion; the disciple denied and the thief cried out saying: Remember me O Lord when You come into Your Kingdom.” (The commemoration of the thief – Good Friday – 6th Hour)

Certainly, the thief needed to strive hard against himself in order to believe, he fought a ferocious fight against his own doubts; he fought and overcame, “To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God” (**Rev 2:7**). No wonder our Lord said to him, “Today you will be with Me in Paradise” (**Lk 2:43**).

St. Matthew said, “Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing” (**Mt 27:44**), and St. Mark said, “Those who were crucified with Him reviled Him” (**Mk 15:32**). Evidently, This thief had reviled the Lord in the beginning and then repented! So repentance was his **second** good work. Our Lord said, “Unless you repent you will likewise perish” (**Lk 13:3,5**). King Solomon said, “He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy” (**Prov 28:13**), this verse leads us to the **third** good work the thief performed, i.e. confessing his sins. He said, “We receive the due reward of our deeds” (**Lk 23:41**). Thus, he confessed his sins and acknowledged that the death penalty on the cross was the due reward for his evil deeds. His conduct was also spiritual, for while the other thief was thinking of means to escape the punishment saying to the Lord, “Save Yourself and us” (**Lk 23:39**), the good thief was concerned about his spiritual salvation and eternity. He even tried to talk some sense into the other thief when he told him, “Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation?” (**Lk 23:40**).

The **fourth** good work of the thief was to have tremendous hope in spite of his evil life and his reviling the Lord in the beginning. He had hope that an evil person like himself could be saved and allowed to enter the Kingdom of heaven if he repents and confesses his sins. Judas Iscariot, the disciple, did not have such hope and perished as a result! The thief loved our Lord Jesus and although he never heard the words of St. John, “Let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth” (**1Jn 3:18**), he truly loved in deed and performed his **fifth** good work and defended the Lord saying, “This Man has done nothing wrong” (**Lk 23:41**). Our Lord stood alone, no one defended Him of those who enjoyed His gifts and miracles, not even His disciples or followers, but the voice of this thief came out loud to put to shame the ungrateful thousands. At this point, it is noteworthy to mention that this blessed thief, by his good deeds, became an example of the three major virtues of Christianity: Faith, Hope, and Love (**2Cor 13:13**). The **sixth** good work of the thief was actually done for Virgin Mary who was standing by the cross in overwhelming pain that is best described by the prophetic words of Simeon the elder, “A sword will pierce through your own soul also” (**Lk 2:35**). The words of the thief, “This Man has done nothing wrong”, comforted Virgin Mary’s heart in the midst of all the reviling, the mocking and the blaspheming against the Lord.

The **seventh** good work of the thief was to declare a complete confession of faith. He said, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom” (**Lk 23:42**), these words imply many meanings; they imply that the crucified person is a Lord and a King, that He will be coming into His Kingdom, i.e. death has no power over Him, and that salvation is through this person crucified next to him. The thief declared this confession publicly, before all, without being ashamed, a matter that St. Peter and many disciples could not dare to do. He declared his faith before the people passing by blaspheming and wagging their heads (**Mt 27:39**), before the rulers who sneered saying, “He saved others, let Him save Himself” (**Lk 23:35**), before the Roman soldiers who also mocked our Lord (**Lk 23:36**), and finally before his fellow crucified criminal who blasphemed (**Lk 23:39**). This bold and public declaration of faith and defense must have provoked all these people to revile and mock the thief also as they did to our Lord. This leads us to the **eighth** good work of the thief, which was to endure mocking and insults for the sake of the Lord, “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven” (**Mt 5:11-12**).

In order to identify the ninth good work of the thief, we need to appreciate the symbolic similarity between the story of the Samaritan woman (**Jn 4**) and the story of the crucifixion: They started at the sixth hour, the disciples had left, and the Lord said that He was thirsty in both stories. The Holy Bible doesn't tell us that the Samaritan woman actually drew water from the well and gave our Lord to drink, but was He simply thirsty for this water about which He said, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again" (**Jn 4:13**)? When the disciples urged Him saying, "Rabbi eat", He said, "I have food to eat of which you do not know" (**Jn 4:32**). Indeed, He also had water to drink that we do not know. Our Lord said, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work" (**Jn 4:34**). St. Augustine commented on this verse saying, "Therefore, in the case of that woman, it was even His drink to do the will of Him who sent Him. That was the reason why He said to the woman 'give Me a drink', namely to work faith in her and to drink of her faith". So although the Samaritan woman may not have given Him water from the well, she truly quenched His thirst by her faith.

Now on the cross, Our Lord said, "I thirst" (**Jn 19:28**) and "They gave Him sour wine mingled with gall to drink, but when He had tasted it, He would not drink" (**Mt 27:34**); He refused to drink and remained thirsty but this blessed thief quenched His thirst by his faith and good works. Our Lord said, "Whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward" (**Mt 10:42**) and "Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward" (**Mk 10:41**). A cup of water given to a little child or to an apostle will not be forgotten before God and will be rewarded. What about this cup of spiritual water given to the Lord Himself on the cross? In the last day, the Lord will say to the thief, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was thirsty and you gave Me drink" (**Mt 25:34-35**). Our Lord said, "He who endures to the end will be saved" (**Mt 24:13**). Our Lord died in the ninth hour (**Mk 15:34-37; Lk 23:44-45**), both thieves were still alive and the soldiers had to break their legs to speed their death at sunset (**Jn 19:32**). So the good thief remained on the cross after the death of our Lord for approximately three hours during which his faith was put to the test; can you imagine what the other thief might have told him about our Lord who is now dead and in whom the blessed thief had hope? By enduring to the end the thief performed his tenth good work and was saved.

→ "You see then that a man is justified by works and not by faith only" (**Jam 2: 24**) ←

✧ The Baptism of The Thief:

It is a common practice by the Protestants to cite a situation in which water baptism is physically impossible (Lost in a desert, pinned down by enemy gunfire, etc...) and to conclude from such that baptism has no necessary connection with salvation at all. The thief on the cross is a commonly misused example in this context. Baptism, in its essence, is death with our Lord Jesus Christ, "Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized **into His death?**" (**Rom 6:3**). Nevertheless, the baptismal water is not a literal death but rather a simulation of the death of the Lord, "We have been united together **in the likeness of His death**" (**Rom 6:5**). Therefore, since baptism is death with our Lord Jesus Christ, and the thief literally died with the Lord, not just 'in the likeness of His death', his death in this manner became for him a baptism in the deepest meaning. The only believer in the whole world who can literally say, "I have been crucified with Christ" (**Gal 2:20**) is this thief. Thus, his unique death became an ideal baptism and a model for the Sacrament. Likewise, those who believed and were martyred before being baptized with water are considered baptized in the 'baptism of blood'. Their martyrdom for the sake of the faith became for them a baptism. This possibility was quite prevalent in the early Christian centuries when initial faith and baptism were often separated by lengthy periods of catechetical instruction.

Moreover, our Lord Jesus Christ asked the sons of Zebedee, “Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and **be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?**” (Mt 20:22; Mk 10:35), and he said also, “**I have a baptism to be baptized with** and how distressed I am **till it is accomplished**” (Lk 12:50). Now on the cross the Lord said, “It is finished (accomplished)” (Jn 19:30) Our Lord called the death on the cross a baptism, would anyone now dare to say that the crucified thief who believed was not baptized?

✠ Was the thief saved instantly?

According to the Protestants’ heresy of ‘salvation in a moment’, a person can obtain eternal salvation the moment he/she believes and accepts the Lord Jesus Christ as his personal savior. Salvation, to them, is merely a personal experience attained in one’s room in a moment or in the moment one hears a moving sermon. Their salvation is based on faith alone, which is defined as a feeling within the heart and on grace that is from God. Thus, when you speak to one of them, he will ask you, ‘have you been saved? Have you accepted Christ as your savior and redeemer?’ Some of them might present you with a copy of the Holy Bible with a vow to sign and date by which you declare that you accepted the Lord as a savior. As a result, one’s life becomes an individual relation with God and the Holy Bible becomes the heavenly instruction manual for this do-it-yourself salvation. The role of the Church, Priesthood, and Sacraments disappears from one’s spiritual life. Protestants try to justify themselves by saying that they are making the way of salvation easy before the people by telling them that it is not difficult to attain; it can be attained in a moment. Our Lord Jesus Christ did not do the same, He said, “Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Mt 7:14). Protestants try to support their false teaching by saying that the thief was saved in a moment without striving, good works or baptism. We have already discussed the issues of striving, good works and baptism, now we need to answer this question, “was this thief really saved in a moment?”

They say that the thief was saved in the moment he believed and said, “Lord remember me when You come into Your Kingdom” and the Lord replied, “Today you will be with Me in Paradise”. Of course the thief was **not** saved at this moment because “without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb 9:22) and at this point the Lord had not yet shed His precious blood. Actually, the Lord promised salvation to the thief in the sixth hour of the day, which is the first hour of the crucifixion, and He actually died and shed His blood three hours later; in the ninth hour of the day. So, was the thief saved in the ninth hour? **NO**. In the ninth hour, the Lord died for him but still the thief had to die and share the Lord’s death to be saved. This thief actually died in the eleventh hour, at sunset and only then was he saved. So, the Lord told him, “Today you will be with Me in Paradise” and he was saved five hours later!

✠ The Thief in The Coptic Tradition:

The thief has a unique position in the Coptic Holy Tradition and the Church gives him a great deal of attention by reminding her children of his story every single day of the week. In the ninth hour of the day, the Church teaches us to commemorate the redemptive death of our Lord in the flesh on the cross and His acceptance of the repentance of the thief. We pray that our savior may mortify our carnal lusts, make us partakers of His grace, and accept our repentance:

“O You, who commended the spirit into the hands of the Father as You hung on the cross, in the ninth hour, and guided the thief who was crucified with You into entering Paradise, do not neglect me, O good One, nor reject me, I, the lost one”

“When the thief saw the Prince of Life hung on the cross, he said: had not the One crucified with us been God Incarnate, the sun would not hide its ray, nor would the earth have quaked trembling. But O the Almighty One who endures all things remember me O Lord when You come into Your Kingdom”

“ O You who accepted unto Him the confession of the thief on the cross, accept us unto You, O Good One; we who deserve the sentence of death because of our sins. We all confess our sins with him and acknowledging Your Divinity we cry with him saying: remember us O Lord when You come into Your Kingdom”

“Lord, abolish for us the power of the adversary and all his evil armies, as Your Only Begotten Son has trampled on them by the power of His life giving cross. Accept us unto You, our Lord Jesus Christ, as You accepted the thief at Your right hand while You were hung on the cross”

(From the prayer of the ninth hour of the day – Coptic Book of Hours)

The Holy Bible mentioned that the Lord was crucified between two evildoers (**Mt 27:37; Mk 15:27; Lk 23:33; Jn 19:18**) but it did not specify which of the two was saved. Was it the right thief or the left one? According to Holy Tradition, it was Demas the thief who was crucified on the right hand of the Lord. Hence, he is known as **The Right Thief**. Another simple example of Tradition is Adam’s apple; the Holy Scripture did not specify whether the forbidden fruit was an apple or a banana. It doesn’t make much difference to most of us to know the kind of the forbidden fruit, but in the case of the thief it is more fitting to call him ‘the right thief’ rather than the ‘left’ because this title not only points to his position in relation to our Lord on the day of crucifixion but also to his position in the Day of Judgment, “He will set the sheep on His right and the goats on the left” (**Mt 25:33**). Therefore, even if this thief was crucified on the left, he still ought to be called “The Right Thief”.

The words of the thief “Lord Remember Me when You come into Your Kingdom” are highlighted in the beautiful hymn of “Golgotha” which is sung at the twelfth hour of Good Friday. Also during the commemoration of the thief at the sixth hour of the same day the whole congregation pray saying:

“Remember me, O Lord when You come into Your Kingdom; Remember me, O Holy One when You come into Your Kingdom; Remember me, O Master when You come into Your Kingdom”

In the nighttime litanies of the Holy Pascha Week the Coptic Priests pray saying:

“O You, who accepted the repentance of the Ninivites, when they fasted and received the confession of the right thief on the cross, likewise make us worthy to please You and to gain Your compassion, crying and saying: Remember us, O Lord, when You come into Your Kingdom.”

During the prayer for the departed, the Coptic Priests ask the Lord to open the door of Paradise before the soul that departed from our world as He opened it before the right thief. The story of this blessed thief should not be a stumbling block to Christians, but unfortunately it is commonly misused by Protestants to support their heresies. A good explanation of this sad state is provided by the following words of St. John Chrysostom:

→ **“Diseased persons are injured even by healthy food”**⁺ ←

* This lecture is adapted from ‘*The Heresy of Salvation in a Moment*’ by H.H. Pope Shenouda III.

⁺ Introduction to the Holy Epistle to the Galatians.