

Nov 14th 2010: Luke Miller's Baptism: The Final Hope: Luke 23:26-49

It may seem strange to you, and indeed it is a little strange to me, that on this day when our focus is on the act of baptism I have felt led to preach on the one conversion account in the New Testament that was definitely not followed by baptism. **The repentant thief**, as he is known, **came to faith in Jesus** only hours before his death, hanging on a cross next to his Saviour. **Baptism** for him was not an option.

Yet his story expresses so well the rich truth that the rite of baptism presents. **You see when a person is baptized** as a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ every part of this rite is a declaration and a confirmation of three things that have changed forever in their lives because of the relationship they now have with Jesus. **It is an open declaration** before witnesses and a confirmation for themselves, that these changes have truly taken place.

The first change relates to the past.

When we consider the thief hanging on his own cross right next to Jesus we know he had a past that made him a criminal in the eyes of society, let alone in the eyes of God. **Matthew and Mark name** him as one of the two **robbers** crucified with him. Luke simply calls him a **criminal**.

Alexander Whyte, a great Scottish preacher at the end of the 19th century, suggested that these two men were part of Barabbas' band of rebels who were in rebellion against the Romans. That like him they too were murderers as well as thieves. Indeed, Whyte suggests that the original plans would have been for four crosses that day not three. **That Barabbas missed his execution** only because of Pilate's unsuccessful attempt to have Jesus released.

He could well be right. The **Bible doesn't** tell us one way or another. **But** the Scriptures do point out in Matthew's Gospel that when this thief was first hung upon that cross he was **full of anger** rather than remorse. **And like** the other criminal he too heaped insults upon Jesus. **He had a past** and that past made him a guilty, shameful, and marred creation before a sinless and perfect Creator.

And that is what we **have in common** with that thief on the cross. **Every last one of us.** **And so** did everyone who was there that day, either around

those crosses or on those crosses, with the exception of Jesus. **All of us and them have a past life** that has been stained with wrong thoughts and acts and attitudes that have affected our lives and those around us.

The other day my wife Judy was making a birthday cake for our daughter and one of our granddaughters was helping her. So Judy asked Caitlin to make up some coloured icing mix and suggested she put in just a little of the blue colouring and then mix it in with her fingers. Well Caitlin decided it would be a lot more creative and fun if she put in quite a bit more than just a little. So the icing turned out a lot bluer than planned but much worst than that was the colour of Caitlin's fingers. Now she washed them well but the blue remained and it leached out of her fingers on to everything she touched. Her hamburger roll she had for lunch took on a blue tinge where she touched it. I had held her hand when we said grace as did someone on her other side and we both shared that tinge with her food. That's just like our wrong doing be it small in our eyes or large. It stains our souls and affects others, and unlike blue colouring no amount of soap will wash it away.

It is now part of our past and our past never stops happening and never stops being tainted with what the Bible calls sin. **We will go on** through life always adding to that sin until we die, and only then is the past completed.

The book of our life is closed and we stand before our Maker with that book in our hands.

For that thief it would seem at first that he would **boldly add** to his sin right to the end. **He was even adding blasphemy** against the Son of God as he cried out against Jesus such comments as: **"Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"**

But then something changed within him. He watched Jesus' reactions, and they **were not full of anger** and bitterness but love and compassion even to those who were crucifying Him. **He heard Jesus cry out(Luke 23:34)"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."**

And the Spirit of God penetrated through his anger and bitterness and pain, and **he knew that somehow Jesus** was the answer. **That Jesus was indeed King like** the sign above him said, and that even he could appeal to this Jesus for the **ultimate rescue**.

So he rebuked the other criminal for the same words that he no doubt had once used against Jesus; **Luke 23:40-41:-***"Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."*

, and then he gasped out to Jesus from the midst of his excruciating agony:-*"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

He knew full well that he had a **past that demanded judgment**. He admitted that he had done wrong. **And yet he** trusted this Jesus dying next to him to be able to include him, despite his past, in His coming kingdom. **And amazingly Jesus responded:** "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

Paradise was reserved for the righteous. Paradise was for the sinless and not the sinful. **Yet Jesus promised** him paradise because Jesus has the power to make the past redundant as far as the taint of falling short of God's **perfect** standard is concerned.

That was the first and Major change in the state of that criminal before God. **He had trusted** his soul to Jesus, and Jesus cleansed his sinful past just like that. **And that has been true** for every believer eversince. **When** we come to Christ Jesus and ask His forgiveness for the wrongdoing that is part of us all, **He cleanses us completely.**

He takes our past every moment of the day and makes it perfectly clean. **He assures** us that whenever the time comes for us to front up with our past before God, **we will have** in our hands a past life that is Justified. **Just as though sin** had never been part of it.

And that is the first thing, Paul says, that our baptism illustrates. **For the going beneath** the water shows that we have taken our sinful life and attached it to the cross of Jesus. **His death** has covered all our sin. Our past can no longer destroy our eternal future.

Romans 6:6-7 (CEV) **We know that the persons we used to be were nailed to the cross with Jesus. This was done, so that our sinful bodies would no longer be the slaves of sin.** ⁷**We know that sin doesn't have power over dead people.** Our past as far as our sins is concerned, **is redundant.** **In God's** sight we have already died—already come into His presence with our past life completed, cleansed, and dealt with. Sin can no longer harm us.

The second change that our Baptism celebrates refers to the **future**. Even as the thief on the cross **suddenly had a future in** God's kingdom, so the Christian has a future through the resurrection of Jesus. **It is a future that** begins straight away and continues on for an eternity spent with God in a new heavens and a new earth.

Even as the going beneath the water in baptism illustrates the sharing of Christ's death and burial, so the coming up out of the water illustrates the sharing in His resurrection. Paul says in Romans 6:4

We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

And then again in v5

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.

This resurrected life that belongs right now to the believer comes with Christ **honouring responsibilities**. We are to live out a life by the power of Christ that is **daily alive to God** and available for Him to use.

This then becomes the **Third change** that Baptism celebrates and it relates to the present as well as to the future. **For in baptism** when a person **walks out of the water** they show their commitment to live each **day by God's Spirit**.

For the dying thief that mission to live out a changed life was to be short lived. **He was dying** when he turned from his old life of sin to Jesus. **Yet in saying** that we know from the Bible that the two thieves were still alive after Jesus had given up His Spirit, and that to hasten their deaths the Roman soldiers broke their legs.

God did not rescue the repentant thief from the pain of a horrible death. **He obviously** suffered just as much as the unrepentant thief.

But I believe that God enabled him to be a witness even in his time of great suffering to the power of God's love working through him. **Maybe there** were some on that day who heard the conversation between him and Jesus, and **noticed something** in that man that wasn't there before, and **were drawn** towards Jesus themselves because of that.

The point is that accepting Jesus as savior is the beginning of a mission that we are now on for Him, and **baptism emphasizes** that mission. **None of us** have any idea what God has ahead for Luke, but in His baptism today **he is saying to God**, Here I am wholly available. **Here I am willing to live** out that new life that you have placed within me.

It is these three declarations that make baptism so important for the believer. **The act of baptism** doesn't save us, the story of the thief upon the cross makes that clear. **But it** does publicly declare that we belong to Jesus and **commits us to living** out our new life in Him. **It's an act of obedience** that God demands of all believers and it is one that He uses to bless and to set apart that believer for His service. **In two weeks time** two more young men will be baptized. **Is God calling you to join them.** To proclaim your love and commitment to Him in a way that leaves no doubt about your relationship to the One **who being God, is also your lord, Saviour and friend.**