

understanding
the Bible's teaching

Baptism

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Baptism

The importance of Baptism

Baptism must be very important because it is referred to so many times in the Bible. There are over 100 mentions of the word 'baptize' or directly related words in the New Testament. Baptism featured prominently in the teaching of Jesus and in the preaching and the actions of his apostles – Paul, Peter and Philip in particular.

In addition to these direct references there are other more incidental allusions to baptism in both the Old and New Testaments and these also highlight its importance.

An example is found in 1 Peter chapter 3 in the New Testament, where Peter refers back to the days of Noah and the time of the flood and



Artist's impression of the Ark and the Flood

reminds us that out of the whole of the world's population at that time, only Noah and his immediate family, eight people altogether, were saved. All the rest were destroyed by the flood.

Noah and his family were saved because they alone had obeyed God's instructions and were therefore in the ark. The floodwaters which were responsible for drowning everybody else enabled the ark to float safely, thus preserving the lives of those eight people. Peter says that effectively Noah and his family were saved by water. This is what he wrote: '*...the long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water*'.

And then he continued by comparing being 'saved through water' with baptism: 'There is also an antitype which now saves us, namely baptism'. (1 Peter 3.20, 21)

Put in its simplest form, Peter's point is this. Just as the ark floating on the water was essential to the salvation of Noah and his family, so baptism in water is essential if we are to be saved. If Noah had refused to listen to God and had not been prepared to enter the ark then he would have died. Likewise, if we refuse to be baptized then we cannot have any hope of being saved from death.

Another illustration is found in the New Testament writings of the Apostle Paul and again he draws an analogy between baptism and a historical event recorded in the Old Testament. He was writing about the Exodus - the way in which the Israelites fled from persecution in Egypt in the days of Moses after God had brought the ten plagues on that country.



Crossing the Red Sea

God miraculously allowed His people to cross the Red Sea so that they could escape from the pursuing Egyptians. The waters of the Red Sea parted and the Israelites walked through on a dry pathway. A cloud, representing God's presence, was above them, so they had water all around them as they crossed through the sea to safety.

As with Noah and his family, the Israelites were effectively saved through water – and like Peter, Paul says this was a form of baptism:

‘Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.’ (1 Corinthians 10.1, 2)

Again, put in its simplest form, Paul's point is this. The Israelites' passage through the divided sea under the cloud, surrounded by water, was essential if they were to be saved from death at the hands of the Egyptians who were pursuing them, so baptism in water is essential if we are to be saved. If the Israelites had refused to listen to God and had not been prepared to cross the sea when it parted then they would have died. In the same way, if we refuse to be baptized then we cannot have any hope of being saved from death.

Baptism is the beginning of a new life

An important feature of both of these Old Testament illustrations is that 'baptism' marked the beginning of a new life. Noah and his family emerged from the ark when the floodwaters had receded. A whole new phase in the earth's history and in their lives began at that time. The earth had been cleansed; the evil and violence with which it had been filled had been swept away and a new start was made.

Similarly with the Israelites and the crossing of the Red Sea – their journey led them away from their former life as oppressed slaves in Egypt; they were now free men and women. A substantial change for the better had taken place and a new life had opened up for them.

If we follow this analogy through to Christian baptism we would expect the same to be true. Baptism should mark a new beginning in a person's life; old ways should be left behind and a new start should be made.

When we read the New Testament we find that this is exactly how baptism is presented. In the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans for example, this change is referred to on a number of occasions. Paul likens baptism to the end of an old life and the beginning of a new one:

'Therefore we were buried with him (that is Jesus) through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in **newness of life.**' (Romans 6.4)

Later in the same chapter he contrasts the old and new lives of the baptized person when he describes the old person as being a slave of sin but the newly baptized person as having become a slave of righteousness:

'...God be thanked that though you were (before baptism) slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.'
(Romans 6.17, 18)

In another of his New Testament letters written to Titus, Paul refers to baptism as being '*the washing of rebirth and renewal*'. (Titus 3. 5 NIV)

If baptism is not followed by this newness of life then it is useless. There is a very good example of this in the Acts of the Apostles which tells of a man called Simon who was a sorcerer: '*...there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great*'. (Acts 8. 9) This man, along with many other people, listened to Philip as he preached Christianity and in response to what Philip was saying, they were baptized:

'...when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip.' (Acts 8:12, 13)

So far, so good – but the problem was that Simon didn't persevere with his new Christian way of life. His baptism didn't lead in his case to a

spiritual rebirth and renewal and even though he had been baptized, he was rebuked very strongly by the Apostle Peter, who had come to Samaria to join Philip. Peter told Simon that his baptism and his conversion to Christianity were worthless because they hadn't led to any real change in his life:

'...Peter said to him..."You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.'" (Acts 8. 20-23)

To summarise what we have learned so far:

- ❖ Baptism is essential for our salvation - just as essential as it was for Noah to enter the ark and so to be saved by water; and just as essential as it was for the Israelites to cross the Red Sea to safety after they left Egypt.
- ❖ Baptism marks the beginning of a new way of life - what Paul refers to as *'the washing of rebirth and renewal'*.
- ❖ Without a new beginning baptism is ineffective.

When should Baptism take place?

It is noticeable that in the New Testament there are no examples of very young children or babies being baptized and there is a very good reason for that. In Acts chapter 8, where the baptism of Simon the sorcerer and others at Samaria is referred to, it is noticeable how baptism only took place after the people had believed Philip's preaching:

'...when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. Then Simon himself also believed: and when he was baptized he continued with Philip...' (Acts 8.12, 13)

These are not isolated references. In a later chapter of the same book we read about a woman named Lydia:

‘Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshipped God. **The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken** by Paul. And when **she and her household were baptized**, she begged us, saying...’ (Acts 16.14, 15)

Here is the same order of events. Lydia heard and heeded Paul’s preaching and then she was baptized. Later on in the chapter another incident demonstrates the same sequence. It describes the belief and subsequent baptism of the man in charge of the prison at Philippi:

‘...“Sirs, (he said to Paul and Silas) what must I do to be saved?” So they said, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.” Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized.’ (Acts 16.30-33)

This emphasis on belief before baptism in these practical illustrations from the Acts of the Apostles reflects the fact that the apostles were carrying out an instruction which Jesus himself had given to them. In Mark’s gospel record we read some of the last words of Jesus to his disciples before he ascended to heaven:

‘And he said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.”’ (Mark 16.15, 16)

Note the requirements of Jesus. *‘He who believes (first) and is (then) baptized will be saved.’* Notice, too, that if there was no belief then baptism didn’t even come into the picture; it just wasn’t relevant, and certainly an unbelieving person couldn’t be saved: *‘He who does not believe will be condemned’* said Jesus.

It must also be noted that in carrying out the command of Jesus, the disciples were following the example that he had set them before the commencement of his public ministry. When Jesus went to John the Baptist to be baptised, John protested *"I have need to be baptized by you, and are you coming to me?"*. The reply of Jesus was *"Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness"*. (Matthew 3.14,15) If Jesus himself submitted to baptism, how important it is for his followers to be baptized as well.

Preparing for Baptism

In one of his New Testament letters Paul refers to baptism as a washing of our bodies with pure water and he tells us what must precede it: *'let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water'*. (Hebrews 10.22) Paul is saying that before we are baptized we must have faith in God and our hearts and consciences must have been affected. In other words we must have prepared ourselves for that newness of life that we read about earlier.

This belief (or faith) is the very foundation on which acceptance by God is based. Paul tells us that *'without faith it is impossible to please Him (God)'*. (Hebrews 11.6) So what is it that we have to believe, or have faith in, before we can be baptized? We have already answered that question in the words quoted earlier from Acts about Simon the Sorcerer. There had been two aspects to Philip's preaching. He had spoken about the things concerning:

- ❖ **The Kingdom of God;** and
- ❖ **The Name of Jesus Christ**

The name Jesus means 'saviour'; so the things relating to the name of Jesus are those concerned with his sacrifice. The name Christ means 'anointed' a name which relates to the future role of Jesus as king over the kingdom of God. It was only after they had shown an appreciation of all that Jesus has accomplished by his death and resurrection, and a strong faith in the coming kingdom of God on earth, that Philip had been prepared to baptize the people at Samaria.

Knowledge of these two fundamental aspects of Christianity should have a marked effect on a person. In the New Testament this effect is described as **repentance**. It is a word which means that the believer becomes aware of their sins and that, as a sinner, he or she is estranged from God. They also become aware of the permanence and finality of death, which is God's punishment for sin and want to express their gratitude to God for the fact that, through Jesus, they can find eternal life. **Repentance** means a change of outlook and must follow belief but precede baptism.

In the book of Acts we read about the Apostle Peter preaching the gospel. He had been explaining the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, and the narrative tells us about the response that his preaching evoked in the people who were listening to him:

‘Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?”’ (Acts 2. 37)

Here are the beginnings of repentance, of that change of outlook which an appreciation of the gospel message should bring. The next verse gives us Peter's reply to their question:

‘Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.”’ (Acts 2. 38)

He is telling them that they must be sure that their immediate change of outlook on life is not just a temporary thing (like Simon the Sorcerer's was), and that when they are sure that they really do believe, then they must show their commitment to their new way of life by taking the next step, which is baptism.

What is Baptism?

Christian baptism is the complete immersion in water of the person who has heard and understood and believed the gospel message. The very meaning of the word makes the point. The word ‘baptism’ is the Anglicised equivalent of a Greek word which means ‘to submerge’ or ‘to

plunge'. In its article on baptism, The Encyclopaedia Britannica describes the way in which the rite was carried out in the first century by stating that *'the candidate for baptism is submerged under the water.'*

The testimony of reliable historians confirms this view. Mosheim, for example, again referring to the first century AD and the times of the apostles, wrote: *'the sacrament of baptism was... performed by the immersion of the whole body.'* Dean Stanley in one of his 'Lectures on the Eastern Church' wrote: *'there can be no question that the original form of baptism – the very meaning of the word – was complete immersion in the deep baptismal waters.'*



A believer about to be immersed

There are numerous allusions in the New Testament to the fact that the baptism administered by the apostles involved this submersion of the believer under water. In the gospel record of John for example, it is explained that John the Baptist selected a certain place for his work of baptizing *'because there was much water there'*. (John 3.23) The record of Jesus' own baptism by John the Baptist tells us that, having been baptized, he was seen *'coming up out of the water'*. (Mark 1.10 NIV) Again in the book of Acts we read how the Apostle Philip baptized an Ethiopian man. The point is made that they both went down *'into the*

water' (Acts 8.38) so that Philip could baptize the man and then we read that *'they came up out of the water'*. (Acts 8.39) So there is no doubt that baptism in its original form, as practised by the apostles on Jesus' instructions, was total immersion in water; and the reason why this was so, will become clear.

What is the effect of Baptism?

In a passage we looked at earlier, the Apostle Peter told the people: *'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins'*. (Acts 2.38) Peter says that baptism effects the remission (or forgiveness) of past sins and relates the believer to the name of Jesus Christ. The same two points are made for example in a later incident in the same book of Acts when Ananias says to Paul: *'Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord'*. (Acts 22.16) Baptism is described here as a washing away of sins; and there is that same connection with *'the name of the Lord'* or the name of Jesus Christ. Baptism links a believer to the name of Jesus – a name which means 'saviour'.

The baptized Christian is often referred to in the New Testament as being ***'in Christ'***. By contrast, before baptism the believer was ***'in Adam'***. We can see the use of these phrases by looking at one of the New Testament letters of the Apostle Paul:

'For as **in Adam** all die, even so **in Christ** all shall be made alive.' (I Corinthians 15.22)

Those who are ***'in Adam'*** are in their natural state, a condition in which sin and death prevail. But those who find and believe the gospel message and who repent and are baptized become ***'in Christ'*** - a state which, if they continue in it, will lead them to God's reward of eternal life and a place in Jesus' kingdom here on earth.

The significance of Baptism

Baptism has a very important significance and when we understand what that is, we can understand why every believer must be baptized. The Apostle Paul sets out the significance very clearly like this:

‘...do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of his death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of his resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him.’ (Romans 6.3-8)

There is figuratively, says Paul, a correspondence between Jesus’ death and resurrection and the change which repentance and baptism make in the life of a believer. Just as Jesus died on the cross and was buried in the tomb and then rose from the dead to a new life, so, by baptism, the believer dies to their old way of life. Figuratively speaking, he or she buries their old life as they sink beneath the waters of baptism, their sins are washed away, and then they rise to a new life in Christ; they have identified themselves in a very positive way with the name of Jesus – the name which means ‘saviour’. Through baptism they become ‘*in Christ*’ and therefore related to the hope of the gospel – the hope of bodily resurrection at the return of Jesus followed by the bestowal of the gift of eternal life and a place in Jesus’ kingdom on earth.

The change which baptism effects in the life of a person is described by Paul in the same chapter:

‘But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.’
(Romans 6.22, 23)

Why Baptism is important for you

We have covered a lot of ground in this short booklet. In summary, we have discovered that Bible teaching confirms that it is absolutely essential for a person to be baptized if they wish to escape the finality of death.

Have you been baptized as an adult believer? Even if you have, you need to ask yourself whether your baptism was valid. Was it carried out in accordance with the Scriptural principles that we have looked at? Was it, for example, preceded by a full knowledge of *'the things concerning the Kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ'*? Did you undergo that process of belief and repentance and did you begin a new life after your baptism?

If you have not been baptized, or if your baptism was not in accordance with what we have seen from the Bible, then, to quote Paul's words, you are still *'in Adam'*, and *'in Adam all die'*. You still need to be baptized according to the Scriptural standard so that you become *'in Christ'* for only those who are *'in Christ'* can have any hope at all of being made alive for ever. We urge you to consider your present position carefully in the light of Bible teaching and take the appropriate action.

**“arise and be baptized
and wash away your sins”**

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