

811 Should We Be Baptized?

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God's Answers to Life's Questions

Baptism has always been a controversial topic. Some think it's necessary; others say no. Some baptize infants; others baptize only adults. Some think they are saved before baptism, and others say salvation comes only after baptism. What does the Bible say? Should we be baptized? Many years ago I was studying the Bible with a group of people, and the subject of baptism came up. One man who denied the need of baptism for salvation said, "If I never see another drop of water, I know I'm saved." He believed that a person was saved at the point of faith and felt baptism was an act of obedience for the person who is already saved. The idea that salvation takes place without baptism is commonly taught by many, but the question we must ask what the Bible teaches. Truth is not determined by counting noses or getting opinions. Truth comes from the Bible, so that's where we need to go to find the truth about this matter.

There are more than 80 passages of Scripture in the New Testament that speak of baptism, so we should take the time to know what God's word says about it. Baptism was a part of every example of conversion in the New Testament. The Eunuch did not rejoice until after his baptism; he was not content to wait and asked to be baptized. The jailer and his household considered baptism so important that they were baptized in the middle of the night. When the Samaritans believed the preaching of Philip about Jesus and His kingdom, they were baptized. The 3000 who obeyed at Pentecost were baptized that very day. If baptism were a non-essential, why is there a constant urgency in the New Testament to submit to it? #B

First, we want to look at what the Lord teaches us about baptism. In Matthew 3:13-17, the Bible says: Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Jesus walked from Galilee to Judea to be baptized in the Jordan River. This trip would be like walking from Bowling Green to Nashville. He walked for two or three days just to do this. It must have been important to the Lord Jesus. Now Jesus is not like us in that he never sinned. John knew who Jesus was and felt he should be the one being baptized rather than doing the baptism. Jesus, however, wanted to fulfill all righteousness, even if he didn't need his sins forgiven. It was the right thing to do. In his baptism, he came up out of the water. This indicates that he was immersed in the water of the river. Of course that's what the word baptism literally means, an immersion in water. After his baptism, the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove, and God recognized him as his "beloved Son," with whom he was well pleased. God was pleased by his willingness to fulfill all righteousness by being baptized.

Jesus later talked about baptism as a new birth. In John 3, a man named Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Nicodemus recognized Jesus as a teacher from God, because of the miracles he worked. In John 3:3-7 we have more of that conversation. Jesus told Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'"

This is very strong language. Jesus said you must be born again; must means that it is spiritually necessary. Jesus said, "Truly, truly"; in the original language, these words are "Amen, Amen." Unless a person is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus wonders how he as man can be born a second time. Jesus explains, "Amen, Amen, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Every ancient writer who spoke of this passage said the birth of water and Spirit was baptism. What Jesus is saying truly, then, is that one must be baptized in order to enter the kingdom of God. This would have surprised Nicodemus, who was a ruler of the Jews and a teacher in Israel. No matter who you are, however, you must be born again of water and the Spirit to enter the kingdom of God.

The apostle Paul gives us a little more insight into this new birth in his inspired epistle to Titus in chapter 3, verses 4-7: "But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life." There was a time in all our lives when we strayed from God by committing sin. God loves us. Paul was telling Titus how God saves us in Christ. God is always the one doing the saving. We cannot earn our way to heaven. How does God save us?

Paul says that he saves us through his own mercy by "the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit." Here again water and the Spirit are joined together. The phrase "washing of regeneration" has two aspects. First, it is a washing or a cleansing. The purpose of it is to make one pure from sin. Second, this washing regenerates. Regeneration is here referring to a "rebirth." There is a washing that causes one to be reborn. What is it? Baptism! At the time we are baptized, God washes and saves us. At the time we are baptized God renews us by means of His Spirit. That is when we are born again, freed from all of the old sins and the old life. Notice that this happens by God's mercy and grace. Baptism is the means by which God acts upon us to save us and cause us to be reborn!

Jesus further speaks of baptism in giving the Great Commission. In Mark 16:15-16, the Lord Jesus said, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." Here the words "baptized" and "saved" are in the same verse, and baptized comes before being saved. Someone asks, "Well, what if a person believes and isn't baptized? It doesn't say that a person who isn't baptized will be condemned, only a person who doesn't believe." This sounds convincing to some, but the New Testament thinks of a believer as a person who has been baptized. Christian salvation without baptism is foreign to the New Testament.

It was not until the sixteenth century and the Reformed movement that anybody taught you could be saved without being baptized. Before that time people understood God's grace worked through baptism. Although it is popular today to say one is saved by faith alone apart from baptism, that view was never the thinking of the early church. In fact, according to the writings of the apostles in the Bible there is no gift or power available to man in consequence of the redemption of Christ that is not available to him in baptism. That may sound like a bold statement, but one who looks closely at the Scriptures sees that God is active in blessing mankind through baptism. Let's look at some examples.

God's Word says in Romans 6:3-7: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in

order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin."

Baptism is the time that God unites us with Christ. We are baptized into his death. Of course, it was in his death that Christ was sacrificed and his blood was shed. We are not merely baptized in water, we are also baptized into the death of Christ, coming into contact with the blood. It is Christ's blood that washes away our sins and frees us from the guilt and consequences of sin. In baptism we die with Christ, so that we may die to sin. In baptism God buries us with Christ and raises us up to walk in newness of life. Just as Jesus had new life when God raised him up, God gives us a new life when He raises us up with Christ. God crucifies that old self with Him, God buries us with Christ, God raises us up, God gives us new life, and God frees us from sin. God is the active one in our baptism giving us blessing after blessing through Christ by uniting us to the Lord Jesus. God is so good to us!

Now this explains what Peter meant, when he was preaching by the power of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. You'll remember that a great multitude of people assembled, and Peter preached about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He concluded his sermon with these words in Acts 2:36, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." The Jews assembled at Pentecost were remembering the crucifixion of Jesus and how he suffered just fifty days before. They remembered how they cried out for his blood. Now that they understood he had risen from the dead and was the promised Messiah, they felt agonizing guilt for what they had done. They called for the crucifixion of God's Son.

Verse 37 says: Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" They wanted to know what they could do, since they had committed such a great sin. They were cut to the heart and needed help. Peter didn't ignore their question. The Bible says in Acts 2:38-41: And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

The question they asked was what to do to respond to this guilt they felt. Peter's answer was simple, "repent and be baptized!" They

were to do this "for the forgiveness of their sins." There are some modern versions that help us understand this verse better. God's Word translation says, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the Name of Jesus Christ so that your sins will be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" The New Revised Standard Version says, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." The International English Version says, "Change your hearts and each one of you must be immersed by the authority of Jesus the Messiah, so that your sins may be forgiven. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." In fact, there are more than a dozen new versions that make it clear that repentance and baptism are the response Peter gave so that their sins might be forgiven. My friend, the gospel Peter taught is the same gospel I'm preaching to you today. If you wish to be saved, believe in Jesus Christ, repent, and be baptized so that your sins will be forgiven.

At this point, I can hear someone say, "Phil, don't you know that Saul of Tarsus, who became the apostle Paul, was saved on the road to Damascus?" I know the Biblical account, but are you sure that he was saved at that point? Just because he had a conversation with Jesus does not mean he was saved. The most important thing that happened on that road that day is that Paul found out who Jesus was. While Jesus revealed himself, there is no Scriptural indication that Saul was saved that day. In fact, the Bible makes it clear he was not yet saved. Jesus told Saul to go into Damascus, and there it will be told what you are to do (Acts 9:6). Saul or Paul after being struck blind and talking to Jesus went into Damascus. Acts 9:9 says that "for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank." We find out in verse 11 that he was praying. Paul's prayers were serious and fervent. You can imagine how this man who persecuted Christ and imprisoned and stoned Christians must have felt to be shown the truth. You can imagine how guilty he felt for all the harm he had done. He was probably praying like he had never prayed before. Acts 22 reveals that God sent Ananias to Paul. Ananias laid his hands on Saul, and Saul regained his sight.

Then Ananias gives us an insight into when Saul or Paul was saved. He said, "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name." Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins? Paul still had sins? If Paul had been saved on the road, why does he still have sins? If Paul was saved by prayer, why does he still have sins? Well, the fact is that Paul was not saved on the road or by prayer. He was saved when he rose and was baptized. That's when his sins were washed away. That's when your sins will be washed away too. When Jackie and I wash our clothes, we wash the dirty ones to make them clean. God washes our souls clean in baptism and not before then. That's when we come into contact with the death of Christ, that's when we become free from sin. My friend, wouldn't you like your sins forgiven today? You too need to rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name. Won't you do that today?

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