

WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES ABOUT BAPTISM

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Introduction

The subject of baptism has long been one of controversy, especially in respect to its purpose and its action. I suppose that uninspired men have written at least hundreds of books and millions of words about baptism. Many of these things we could read to our profit, but those works will not be the subject of this study. Rather, we are going to study the only book (with the only words) on this subject that really matters—the Word of God. We will not quote from the Bible encyclopedias or dictionaries, the commentaries, the Greek Lexicons, or other books of that kind. We are simply going to examine what the **Bible** teaches about baptism.

Before we can study the subject of baptism we must narrow the field of study, however. Those who are familiar with the Bible know that it identifies several “baptisms.”

1. Jesus referred to the suffering He would undergo in His death as a “baptism” (Mark 10:38–39).
2. John the Baptizer preached and administered a baptism in water (Mat. 3:1–5, 11; Mark 1:3).
3. Jesus, during His earthly ministry, also administered a baptism through His apostles (John 4:1–2).
4. The New Testament speaks of baptism in the Holy Spirit (Mat. 3:12).
5. The New Testament speaks of baptism in fire (Mat. 3:12).
6. Paul called Israel’s passing through the Red Sea when they left Egypt a “baptism” (1 Cor. 10:1–2).
7. Finally, after His death Jesus commanded His apostles to begin preaching and administering a baptism in what we call the “Great Commission” (Mat. 28:18–220; Mark 16:15–16).

Of the foregoing baptisms, which one is relevant to those living almost two thousand years since the time the New Testament discussed the subject?

The baptism with which we are concerned is the one of which we read in Acts 8:36 where the man from Ethiopia said to Philip the Evangelist, “Behold, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?” The baptism of this study is the one Peter commanded at the household of Cornelius: “Can any man forbid the water, that these should not be baptized...? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (10:47–48).¹ The baptism now under consideration is the one that same Apostle Peter wrote about in 1 Peter 3:20–21 when he referred to the eight souls that were saved through water in the ark in Noah’s day, and then said:

Which also after a true likeness doth now save you, even baptism, not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the interrogation of a good conscience toward God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In about A.D. 62, the Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians, in which he said, “There is one Lord, one faith, and one baptism” (4:5). Now he did not mean that he was unaware of the several other kinds of baptisms mentioned above. Rather, he meant that at the time that he wrote only one of those baptisms was in force. He meant either that all of the other baptisms had fulfilled their function and had passed from the scene into obsolescence, or that they were not yet in effect. Obviously, only one baptism was in force at the time that he wrote. Now which baptism was that? It was the one of which we have already read in Acts 8, Acts 10, and 1 Peter 3. It is also the very same one (number 7 in the list above) of which Jesus spoke in Matthew 28:19:

Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: [now note carefully His words] and lo, **I am with you always, even unto the end of the world** (emph. DM).

The foregoing statement tells us the reason this baptism is relevant. If the world stands another two thousand or ten thousand years, it will be just as relevant to those people then as it was when Jesus uttered those words—and as it is now. As long as the world endures—until Jesus comes—Jesus ordered His followers to preach and administer this baptism.

Mere men did not “invent” the New Testament act/doctrine of baptism. Jesus is its author, and as such, He alone has the right to determine—and he has determined—every facet of it, including its

element, its purpose, those who are eligible for it, its antecedents, and every other matter pertaining to it. The only source of that information is the New Testament portion of our Bibles. I assume that those reading these words accept the Bible as the inspired Word of God, and therefore believe that it is not a message from fallible, opinionated men, but one from God to man. We therefore turn to the New Testament to see what it teaches about baptism. We will pursue this study by asking questions about the subject and seeking their answers in God's Word.

Should Everyone Be Baptized?

To begin with, let us ask this question: "Is baptism for everyone, or should everyone be baptized?" (I am referring to those who are accountable and responsible creatures before God, thus excluding innocent children and those who are mentally incompetent). Should all of those who are capable of hearing, understanding, and responding to the will of God be baptized? Actually, there are two correct answers to this question. The first correct answer is "Yes." in God's "ideal will" they should all be baptized. Jesus' words in Matthew 28:19, as noted above, demonstrate the fact that He desires all nations to hear and obey His Gospel message, which includes baptism. The parallel account in Mark 16:15–16 has the same force:

And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned.

However, the second correct answer to that question is "No, baptism is not for everyone." God's "realistic will" as revealed in the New Testament leads to the foregoing conclusion, specifically:

Baptism is not for unbelievers. It would do an unbeliever no good whatsoever to be baptized, except to bathe his body. Jesus said in John 8:24: "For except ye believe that I am he, ye shall die in your sins." Regardless of how many times an unbeliever might go through a religious act called "baptism," this act would not benefit his soul in any way. Therefore, unbelievers should not be baptized (including infants, the mentally handicapped, and those who deny the evidence and remain infidels).

Baptism is not for unconfessing believers. Even if one believes in Christ, if he is unwilling for any reason to confess his faith in Him in the presence of others, baptism will not profit him spiritually. According to Scripture, such a believer is not ready to be baptized. When the Ethiopian (mentioned

earlier) asked, “What doth hinder me to be baptized?” Phillip answered, “If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” The man responded: “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (Acts 8:36–37, KJV). Philip’s words imply that he would not have baptized the Ethiopian had he not confessed his faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. The same verse that teaches that one must believe with his heart unto righteousness also states, “and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation” (Rom. 10:10).

Baptism is not for those who refuse to repent, even if they have confessed their faith in the Christ. A person might even believe in Christ and willingly confess his faith in Him, but if he is unwilling to repent of his sins, then such a one is not yet a Scriptural candidate for baptism. Baptism would be premature for him. To repent means to change one’s mind about his sinful behavior and then change one’s life to conform to that change of mind. Thus the murderer must decide it is wrong to murder, and he must cease murdering. Likewise, the thief, the liar, the adulterer and all others who behave contrary to the will of God, must cease those practices. Repentance requires those who believe and practice religious error to depart from it, as well.

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter commanded (to people who had implicitly confessed their faith in Christ by asking, “What shall we do” [Acts 2:37]): “Repent ye, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (v. 38). Turning away from sin (in repentance) precedes forgiveness of sin (in baptism) in the New Testament plan.

Baptism is not for those who wish to be baptized for a motive other than to obey Jesus Christ. It is right for parents, a husband or wife, or a boy friend or girl friend to strongly desire one to be baptized into Christ. However, if one goes through the act merely in order to please another human being, rather than in order to submit his will to Christ’s will, his baptism avails nothing. When the people on Pentecost were told to repent and be baptized in order to receive forgiveness of their sins (Acts 2:38), about three thousand of them were baptized (v. 41b). They did so, not to please men, but because they “gladly received his word” (v. 41a, KJV). (Note: When a person who has not been baptized gladly receives God’s Word, he will never argue about what the Bible teaches about

baptism. Conversely, when one argues with the Bible about baptism, he proves thereby that he has not gladly received the Word of God.)

Paul reminded the saints in Rome of the time when they became Christians, and he thanked God that whereas they **once** were the servants of sin, they no longer were: “**Ye became obedient from the heart** to that form of teaching whereunto ye were delivered; and being made free from sin, ye became servants of righteousness” (Rom. 6:17–18, emph. DM). That “form of teaching” which they had obeyed from the heart involved baptism (vv. 3–4). They obeyed “from the heart” Jesus’ command to be baptized. They decided themselves to do this, and they likely would have done it with or without the approval of their loved ones. They knew exactly **why** they were doing it. The motivation was correct—obedient response to the will of God. If one is not yet convinced **in his own mind** to be baptized in order to please God, then he is not ready to be baptized.

Baptism is not for those who do not know its Scriptural purpose, or who knowing it, deny or reject its purpose. Some teach that as long as one is baptized “in order to obey God,” this is all that the candidate needs to understand or believe about the purpose of the act. This statement contains a glaring fallacy: *In order to obey God* is not a statement of **purpose**, but of **motive**. We have already shown at some length that obedience to God, Christ, or the Scriptures should be the primary Scriptural **motive**. However, we must not confuse the **purpose of** baptism with the **motive for** baptism. *In order to obey God* does not relate to the purpose of baptism.

Some also teach that “as long as one is baptized for a Scriptural purpose,” his baptism is Scriptural. Here we have another fallacy: *For a Scriptural purpose* very clearly implies the existence of more than one Scriptural purpose of baptism. The New Testament does not so teach. There is one—and only one—Scriptural purpose of baptism.

The New Testament states the purpose of baptism in a variety of ways, but they all equal one purpose, nonetheless. For example, baptism is in order to (1) be saved (Mark 16:16), (2) enter the kingdom (John 3:5), (3) receive the remission of sins (Acts 2:38), (4) wash away sins (22:16), and like expressions, but they all equal the same purpose. Baptism distinguishes between those who have not and those who have entered the kingdom/church of Christ it (John 3:5). It differentiates between

those who are still in the world in their alien sins and those who have had their sins forgiven and have been added to the Lord's church (Acts 2:38, 41, 47). It sets apart those who are in the condemnation of their sins from those who have had their sins washed away (22:16). Baptism is therefore the line that the Lord has drawn between those who are still under "the power of darkness" and those who have been "translated into the kingdom of the Son of his love" (Col. 1:13; 2:12). Several other statements in the Bible present additional illustrations of the purpose of baptism, but they all end up saying the same thing—setting forth the single purpose of baptism. Peter summed all of these up in his simple statement on Pentecost: **The purpose of baptism is for/unto (in order to receive) remission (forgiveness) of one's sins (Acts 2:38).**

In spite of the plainness of the Scriptural testimony, men continue to claim that the sinner need not know or understand the purpose of baptism the Bible sets forth. Besides the comments cited above to this effect, a man wrote an entire book a few years ago, arguing the foregoing thesis. If this claim (i.e., that one can be baptized Scripturally without belief in or knowledge of its Biblical purpose) is correct, then there are tens of millions of people in the religious world whom we should embrace in fellowship. These are folk whom we need to acknowledge as brethren, who have been baptized without their having any idea what the scriptural purpose of baptism is, or if they do, denying what the Scriptures say about it.

Baptism is one of those Biblical requirements, with which its purpose is so innately entwined, that to negate its purpose is to render the act itself vain. There are other such things in the New Testament. Could a stranger come into a worship assembly of the church on the Lord's day, knowing nothing about the meaning of Lord's supper, and eat of the unleavened bread and drink of the fruit of the vine and it be an acceptable observance of the Lord's supper for that person? Surely, none will affirm that it could. Even a Christian, who understands the symbolism of the bread and the fruit of the vine and the purpose of observing the supper, partakes to his own judgment if he fails to remember its purpose in partaking (1 Cor. 11:29). To remove or ignore the purpose of the act renders the act itself totally vain and void, yea abominable. Praying and singing spiritual songs are additional illustrations of this principle: "What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the

understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the **understanding** also” (1 Cor. 14:15, emph. DM). One must pray and sing with “understanding”—involving their purpose—or these acts are vain. It is the same with baptism.

One cannot be taught incorrectly on baptism and be baptized Scripturally. Millions of people, sincerely believing they were obeying God, have been taught by someone who denies the Scriptural purpose of baptism. Some of these, upon learning the Scriptural purpose of baptism, then convince themselves that they were baptized for the Scriptural purpose, in spite of the fact that they were not thus taught before they were baptized. I once wrote to a denominational preacher, commending his strong Scriptural stand on moral issues in a sermon I heard him preach. I asked him if he could see those things so clearly, why could he not see just as clearly what Acts 2:38 and other passages teach about baptism and its purpose? He responded that I could write him anytime about anything, except one—what he called the “heresy” of baptism in order to receive the remission or forgiveness of sins. In spite of being taught and baptized by such preachers, some become convinced that they were Scripturally baptized. However, this is impossible. Again, one cannot be taught incorrectly and baptized Scripturally.

It would be helpful if we had a case in the Bible in which some were “baptized” on the basis of incorrect teaching and in which an apostolic reaction is recorded to such. The New Testament provides just such an occurrence. Acts 19:1–7 tells us of Paul’s return to Ephesus. The first two verses tell us that he found there certain ones who had been baptized. Paul’s assumption, it is apparent, was that they had been taught and baptized Scripturally. But upon some conversation with them, he perceived that they were ignorant of certain things they would have learned had they been Scripturally taught and baptized. His reaction is instructive. Did he say, “Well, that’s all right? You did it ‘in order to obey God.’ That’s all that’s necessary.” Did he say, “You did it ‘for a Scriptural purpose.’ God will take care of assigning the right purpose whether or not you knew it.” Most preachers of today would have thus reacted. However, the Apostle Paul immediately taught these men correctly and then baptized them Scripturally (vv. 3–5). We must react in the same way to any similar circumstance. This occurrence demonstrates beyond the shadow of a doubt that one cannot be

taught incorrectly and baptized Scripturally. One who does not understand the Scriptural purpose of baptism, or if he understands it and denies it, is not ready to be baptized.

Will There Be Anyone in Heaven Who Has Not Been Baptized?

Let us now explore another question: “Will there be anyone in Heaven who has not been baptized?” Members of the Lord’s church who have studied the Bible with their non-member denominational friends have likely been asked a question similar to this at some time. This question does not pertain to infants or to those who are mentally incompetent. Rather, this question relates to those who have sufficient mental faculties to make them accountable and responsible beings before God. Will there be any such in Heaven who were not baptized? I have been asked this question a few times when I believed the querist was more interested in appealing to emotions than in seeking the Truth. However, it is a good question and it deserves a Biblical answer.

As before, there are two correct answers to this question, also. The first correct answer is “Yes,” there will be many, many people in Heaven who were never baptized.” If the Bible teaches anything clearly, it teaches this, calling many of them by name. The Lord named some of them: “And I say unto you, that many shall come from the east and the west and shall sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven” (Mat. 8:11). *Kingdom of heaven* in the book of Matthew most of the time refers to the church (Mat. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; 16:18–19, 28; et al.). However, there are a few passages in which it could not refer to the church, but must refer to the eternal Heaven, and this is one of them. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were and will never be in the church, but the Lord said they would be in the eternal state of the kingdom—Heaven. They never heard of baptism, but Jesus said they will be in Heaven. Hebrews 11 records a long list of great heroes and heroines of the faith. Starting just outside the Garden of Eden with Abel, the writer names many Old Testament saints to the time of the prophets, finally saying that time failed him to list others (11:32). The writer acclaims each one as living “by faith.” The implication is unmistakable that each one named will be saved in Heaven at last, but not a one of them ever heard of baptism. The Bible contains numerous other illustrations of the same fact. So, yes, there will be many people in Heaven who were never baptized. However, it is imperative that we understand the following principle concerning everyone of whom the

Bible speaks as being saved or in Heaven who was not baptized: **They all lived before Christ died on the cross.**

If those who have lived since our Lord's death and since the Gospel began to be preached in its fullness on the day of Pentecost, then the Bible answer to our questions is, "No, there will be none in Heaven who were not baptized." I know that many, even most, people have great difficulty accepting this statement. In our age of great permissiveness, tolerance, and non-judgmentalism, they simply cannot comprehend such a statement of "exclusiveness," as they view it. Most who profess faith in the Bible and in Jesus as the Christ have been taught that all is necessary for one to be saved is to believe in Christ—"faith only salvation." I invite the reader to reason with me briefly. Do not those who advocate salvation by faith alone draw a very exclusive line against all unbelievers of every kind? Does not their "line" exclude all Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Confucianists, Atheists, and every other kind of unbeliever? The Bible certainly excludes unbelievers from being saved. Jesus said, "For except ye believe that I am he, ye shall die in your sins" (John 8:24b). However, as I will demonstrate, the Bible just as certainly excludes those who are not baptized for the forgiveness of their sins from being saved. No one has the right to draw the line of inclusion or exclusion where the Lord has not drawn it. I would not be the friend of anyone if I taught them otherwise.

Several New Testament statements link baptism and salvation or its (equivalent) in a very concise statement. In every case, baptism precedes salvation, and salvation is related to baptism as cause is to effect. We will notice only eight of these, for indeed, if one will not accept the teaching of Scripture in these, he would not accept it in fifty such statements. We will take them in the order of their appearance in the New Testament.

Mark 16:16: Jesus said: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned." Notice the order: Believe, be baptized, and be saved. It is not: Believe, be saved, and then be baptized if one wants to, or if one wants to join a denomination, which is the doctrine of most Protestant denominations. The Lord's version places baptism before and makes it (along with believing) a condition of salvation. But some object: "Jesus did not say, "He that disbelieveth and is **not** baptized shall be condemned." No, He did not. It would have been redundant

and superfluous had he done so. If one does not believe, he is certainly not going to be baptized. The Lord did not need to say, “He that is not baptized,” because when He said, “He that believeth not” He implicitly took care of baptism in the last half His statement.

John 3:5: The Lord said to Nicodemus: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of the water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God!” Nothing else in all of the Bible besides baptism can explain the figurative expression, *born of water*. Please notice: If being in the kingdom of God requires that we be saved (and it most certainly does, 1 Cor. 15:21), and if being born of water is baptism in water (which it most certainly is), then being baptized in water is absolutely necessary to being saved. The word *except* has the force of *if and only if* or *apart from baptism*. This statement powerfully and clearly teaches the necessity of baptism for salvation.

Acts 2:38: When those on Pentecost who believed on the Lord, having been convicted of their sins, asked what they should do to be forgiven of their sins, especially the sin of crucifying the Christ, Peter replied: “Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Notice the order here: Repentance and baptism both precede the desired result—remission (forgiveness) of sins, the equivalent of salvation.

Acts 22:16: Jesus sent a Christian named Ananias to Saul of Tarsus in the city of Damascus. Ananias said to him: “And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on his name.” Notice that Saul’s sins were still upon him before he was baptized and they would be forgiven (“washed away”) **when**, and **not until**, he was baptized. If this is not the meaning of the words of Ananias, words have no meaning.

Romans 6:3: Paul asked a rhetorical question in this passage: “Or are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” Surely all who believe in Jesus as the Christ understand that salvation is to be found only in Him—only through the merits of the blood He shed in His death on the cross. Now, how does one gain access to that blood and enter into Christ? Paul says in this passage we are **baptized** into Him. The New Testament never gives any other means of coming into Christ and into the merits of His death.

Romans 6:4: This verse is also relevant to this subject. “We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life.” When does the newness of life begin? It is **after** baptism; it is when one has been raised from baptism that we have a new life in which to walk, having put to death the old “man of sin” in repentance and having buried him in baptism.

Galatians 3:27: Paul here wrote: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ.” Consider the following two columns, with their respective headings, in which the names of people might be Scripturally entered on the basis of the foregoing passage:

Column A	Column B
Those Baptized	Those “In Christ”
1. Joe Brown	1. Joe Brown
2. Jim White	2. Jim White
3.	3. Bob Green

Now, according to the teaching of this passage, I could not list any person under Column “B” unless his name first appeared under Column “A.” Notice the explicit language of the passage again: “For as many of you as...”—the very same number—not one more, not one less, no exceptions: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ.”

1 Peter 3:21: The heart of Peter’s simple statement, earlier quoted, is clear: “Which also after a true likeness doth now save you, even baptism...” (“The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us...” [KJV]).

If I were going to concoct some “plan of salvation” that involved only a single act, promising salvation to people upon that single act apart from all others, it would not be a “faith-only” plan, which is what most of the Protestant world advocates. The book of Acts records more than one case of conversion in which faith is not mentioned in the conversion process. Of course, it is always implied, and it is obviously always there, but it still remains that it is not mentioned in every case. My one-act plan would not be “confession-of-faith only,” because the book of Acts seldom specifically mentions this condition of pardon, though its presence is implied in every conversion. Nor would my “plan of

salvation” be “repentance-only,” because repentance is seldom explicitly mentioned in the records of the cases of conversion in Acts, although it is likewise always implied.

Were I inventing a one-act “plan of salvation,” I would advocate “baptism-only.” In doing so I would be on much firmer Scriptural ground than those who are teaching “faith only,” “confession only,” or “repentance only.” In **every** case of conversion the book of Acts records, where any details whatsoever are given, **baptism is always present, always mentioned, and is always the consummating act.** (Is it not exceedingly ironic that the one act [baptism] that the New Testament invariably mentions in the detailed cases of conversion is also the one act that Protestant preachers almost invariably reject as part of the Lord’s plan of salvation?) But the truth of the matter is that even as the New Testament knows of no such thing as “baptism-only,” neither does it teach salvation by faith alone, confession of faith alone, or repentance alone. Rather, the Bible teaches that all of these are necessary parts of and make up the whole of the Lord’s conversion process whereby He forgives the sinner and delivers him out of darkness and translates him into His kingdom, the church (Acts 2:37–47; Col. 1:13–14). Men have as much right to remove faith as a condition of salvation as they do to remove baptism—**which is no right at all.**

What Is the Action Involved in Baptism?

The New Testament explicitly tells us the action involved in baptism. Paul described baptism as follows: “We were **buried therefore with him through baptism** into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4, emph. DM). He repeats this definition later: “Having been **buried with him in baptism**, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:12, emph. DM). The fullest description of a baptism in the New Testament is in Acts 8:38–39:

And he commanded the chariot to stand still: **and they both went down into the water**, both Philip and the eunuch, and **he baptized him**. And when **they came up out of the water**, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, for he went on his way rejoicing (emph. DM).

Now, what did Philip do to this Ethiopian when the New Testament says “he baptized him”? Did he pour some water on him? Did he sprinkle some water on him? He did neither. If we let the Bible answer this question, it tells us he buried him in the water (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12).

One does not have to know the first letter of the Greek alphabet (the original language of the New Testament) to know beyond doubt or question that **Bible baptism is immersion and never any other action**. However, it might be helpful to know that there are three separate words in the Greek language for sprinkling, pouring, and immersion, just as there are in the English language. The Greek word meaning “immersion” is always the word that appears behind our English word, *baptism*. The action involved in baptism is an overwhelming, a dipping, a plunging, an immersion—a burial—in whatever element is involved in the various baptisms the New Testament mentions (as enumerated earlier).

The baptism pertaining to us (i.e., the one that is to be preached and administered until “the end of the world” [Mat. 28:19–20]) is baptism in water in order to be saved from our sins, thus requiring immersion in water to meet the demands of Scripture. If the **action** of baptism is unimportant (as millions allege), one might argue consistently that the **act itself** is unimportant and unnecessary (which millions also allege). The New Testament teaches, however, that the **act** of baptism is necessary and that only one **action**—immersion—constitutes baptism.

Does the New Testament Say What Baptism Is For?

The King James Version in Acts 2:38 states: “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ **for the remission of sins**, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost” (emph. DM). While Peter’s words appear plain and easily understandable (i.e., that men must repent and be baptized in order to receive remission of sins), many reject this conclusion. As a basis for doing so they explain that the preposition *for* is capable of more than one meaning, which fact could effect the meaning of Peter’s statement. We freely admit this to be the case. One of the peculiarities of the English language is that the same word may have almost opposite meanings, depending on its usage. So it is with this preposition. We use *for* in two different senses in our daily conversation, and we “automatically,” depending on context, interpret which meaning is intended.

For example, if one goes into a supermarket **for a loaf of bread**, he does so **in order to get** a loaf of bread. If, however, one has been arrested and jailed **for robbing a bank**, he is not there **in order to rob** a bank, but **because he has robbed** a bank. In the first case, *for* refers to something one seeks to accomplish, but which he **has not yet attained** (i.e., buy a loaf of bread). This usage therefore looks **forward** to a future desired result. In the second case, *for* looks **backward** to action already completed. The man was arrested and jailed **because of** something he **had already “accomplished”**—bank robbery. Those who reject the Scriptural purpose of baptism have long argued for the latter meaning of *for remission of sins* in Peter’s words on Pentecost— that is, he meant (and means) that men must repent and be baptized **because** they have **already received** remission of their sins. This averment has deceived millions of people for several centuries, but it is impossible for this to be Peter’s meaning for several reasons.

First, the immediate context of Acts 2:38 does not allow or support a retrospective meaning of *for*. The acts of repentance and baptism are inseparably joined by the coordinate conjunction, *and*, which means that they are equally related to their common object, remission of sins. They are spiritual “Siamese twins.” Where one goes in relation to remission of sins, the other must go, also. Therefore, if baptism is **because of** remission of sins, then so is repentance. However, one will search the Bible in vain to find a single instance in which God or His Son ever promised or pronounced forgiveness of a single sin prior to repentance. Moreover, the New Testament explicitly states the necessity of repentance for salvation. Jesus said: “I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all in like manner perish” (Luke 13:3, 5). Paul wrote that God “commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent” (Acts 17:30b). Since forgiveness of sins **cannot** precede repentance, **neither can it precede baptism**. Likewise, since repentance **must** precede forgiveness of sins, **so also must baptism**. To argue otherwise creates the following absurdity of Peter’s statement: “Repent for [in order to receive] remission of sins, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for [because you have already received] the remission of sins.”

Second, the Bible is its own best commentary or interpreter. The serious Bible student consistently finds that other passages shed light on the passage he may be studying. Acts 2:38 is not the only

passage that contains the phrase, *for remission of sins*. Its identical twin appears elsewhere in the New Testament. Before consulting it, we do well to observe that the meaning of this prepositional phrase relating to the direction of the action involved must be understood as the same in both cases. In other words if *for* means “because of” in one passage, it must mean that in both. Likewise, if *for* means “in order to” in one, it must carry that meaning in both.

Now let us consider the parallel: “And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many **for the remission of sins**” (Mat. 26:27–28, emph. DM). Did Jesus shed His blood **because** men had already received remission of sins, or **in order that** men might do so? To ask this question is to answer it. Those living in the Patriarchal and Mosaic eras had poured out millions of barrels of animal blood over thousands of years to atone for sin, but to no final and permanent avail: “For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins” (Heb. 10:4). However, a blood offering from some source or of some sort was necessary to procure forgiveness of sins, for “apart from shedding of blood there is no remission” (9:22a). Only of the blood of Christ, does the New Testament writer state: “nor yet through the blood of goats and calves, but through his own blood, entered in once for all into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption” (9:12). These statements of Holy Writ (with many others) explicitly set forth the Truth that Jesus shed His blood in order that we might be redeemed, and only through His blood may any person receive forgiveness of sins.

If this great blessing could have been accomplished by some other means, the Second Person of the Godhead could have stayed in Heaven, thus avoiding all of the trials and temptations of the human frame and the agony of the cross. Unarguably, *for remission of sins* in Matthew 26:27–28 means “**in order to obtain** remission of sins.” This being so, it can mean nothing else in Acts 2:38, namely, that men must repent and be baptized **in order to receive** remission of sins. To be consistent, those who argue that baptism is **because remission of sins has already been received**, must also accept the heresy that the Christ poured out His blood on Calvary **because the redemption of men from sins had already been accomplished**.

Third, the Greek preposition translated “for” in the King James Version points **forward** rather than **backward**. The American Standard Version correctly reflects this linguistic fact in its rendering of Acts 2:38: “And Peter said unto them, Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ **unto the remission of your sins**; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (emph. DM), thus destroying the unjustified quibble based on the preposition, *for*.

Fourth, the remote context in numerous passages, some of which we have earlier cited and quoted (e.g., Mark 16:16; John 3:5; Acts 22:16; Rom. 6:3–4; Gal. 3:27; 1 Pet. 3:21; et al.) teach that baptism is a condition of salvation or forgiveness of sins. To allege that Peter, in Acts 2:38, teaches that remission of sins **precedes** baptism places Peter in conflict with all of these passages, including one which he later wrote himself.

Is Baptism a Work of Man’s Own Merit or Righteousness?

Most Protestant churches aver that baptism is a “work” which men perform, and that since we are not saved by our own “works” of righteousness (Eph. 2:8–9), baptism is therefore not a condition of salvation. To put it another way, some argue that to teach that baptism is necessary in order to be saved, is to teach that one can be saved by one’s own works. What does the Bible teach on this matter? Clearly, it teaches that we **cannot** be saved by “works”: “For by grace have ye been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; **not of works**, that no man should glory” (Eph. 2:8–9, emph. DM). Just as clearly, however, the Bible also teaches that we **are** saved by “works”: “Ye see that **by works a man is justified**, and not only by faith.... For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, even so faith apart from works is dead” (Jam. 2:24–26, emph. DM). Since the Bible does not contradict itself, we must conclude that Paul wrote of one kind of “works,” while James wrote of another kind. Paul identified the works of which he wrote as those which are “of yourselves” in which men could “glory” or “boast” (KJV). In a similar passage he further stated the futility of seeking salvation by such works: “Not by **works done in righteousness, which we did ourselves**, but according to his mercy he saved us...” (Tit. 3:5a, emph. DM). It is obvious that no one can be morally good enough himself or do enough good works to boastfully say, “I have saved myself from sin and condemnation.”

When James wrote that we **are** saved by works, what sort of “works” did **he** mean? The context indicates that his reference is to **works of obedience to the will of God**, which one’s faith causes him to perform. He cites the cases of Abraham and Rahab in the context as examples of those who were justified before God by such obedient faith (Jam. 2:21, 25). The Scriptures everywhere, in both the Old and New Testaments, enjoin faith-actuated obedience. Such obedience is the means through which we are saved: “And having been made perfect, he [Christ] became **unto all them that obey** him the author of eternal salvation” (Heb. 5:9, emph. DM; cf. Mat. 7:21; et al.).

The pertinent question now is, to which class of “works” does baptism belong? Is it a work of man, of which he can boast, because it is something he does himself, or is it simply an act of obedience to Christ, based upon one’s faith? The Bible teaches that it is the latter. After stating that we are not saved by “works of righteousness” which we do ourselves, but through the mercy of God (as noted above), Paul then wrote that God saves us “according to His mercy” “through the **washing of regeneration** and renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Tit. 3:5b, emph. DM). The only thing in the New Testament to which *the washing of regeneration* can refer is baptism. Please notice where Paul placed it. He **excluded** it from being a “work of righteousness” of man’s own accomplishment, but rather identified it with **God’s merciful plan of salvation**.

Another statement from Paul reinforces the foregoing truth: “Having been buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:12). Note that Paul is discussing baptism, stating that it is a burial, as we earlier emphasized. However, now notice in the latter part of his statement that he says that in being baptized, if one is properly taught, one’s faith is not in himself, but in “the working of God,” Who has proved we can depend upon His promise and His power by raising Jesus from the dead. God has promised to forgive our sins when, upon believing in His Son, repenting of our sins, and confessing our faith in the Christ, we are baptized into Him. When we are baptized, we trust, not in ourselves, but in the “working of God” to fulfill His promise of forgiveness and salvation.

Thus when Peter commanded the people on Pentecost to repent and be baptized unto the remission of their sins (Acts 2:38 and when Ananias commanded Saul to be baptized and wash away

his sins (22:16), they did not command these various ones to submit to a work of their own righteousness or merit, but to God's plan of salvation. Nor were they already Christians at the time these men commanded them to be baptized. Rather, they were to be baptized in order to have their sins forgiven and to thereby become Christians. By no means is New Testament baptism a work of man's own righteousness or human merit.

Does the Bible Tell Us the Relationship Between Baptism and the Blood of Christ?

For failure to grasp the connection between baptism and the blood of Christ, many people woefully misunderstand the role of baptism in God's plan. I am convinced that if they understood this relationship they would no longer question the necessity of baptism. Those who deny that baptism in water is necessary for one to be forgiven of sins and saved sometimes accuse those who thus believe of teaching "water salvation." This accusation is often made when we emphasize the unmistakable language of Acts 22:16: "And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on his name." The accuser may say, "You believe that if you just get the sinner in the water, it will wash away his sins." I certainly do not believe any such thing, nor have I ever met anyone who believed or taught such an obviously absurd and erroneous doctrine. Neither Acts 22:16 nor any other passage of Scripture even remotely teaches that water can wash away sins. There is not enough water in all of the oceans, lakes, and rivers of the world to wash away even one sin. Had it been possible for water to wash away sins, the incarnate Word could have remained in Heaven.

Acts 22:16 does not tell the reader what element washes away or removes sins. We must look elsewhere in the New Testament for this information. Jesus spoke on this subject when He instituted the Lord's supper: "For this is my **blood** of the covenant, which is poured out for many **unto remission of sins**" (Mat. 26:28, emp. DM). Peter wrote on the same subject: "Knowing that **ye were redeemed**, not with corruptible things, with silver or gold, from your vain manner of life handed down from your fathers; but with precious blood, as of a lamb without spot, **even the blood of Christ**" (1 Pet. 1:18–19, emp. DM). The principle stated in Hebrews 9:22 reaches all the way back to the offerings of Cain and Abel and culminates especially in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross: "Apart from shedding of **blood** there is no **remission**" (emp. DM). After speaking of the Christ, John explicitly identified the cleansing

agent for sin: “Unto him that loved us, and **washed us from our sins in his own blood**” (Rev. 1:5, KJV, emp. DM). The old hymn has had it exactly right all along: “What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.”

The question then arises, “If Ananias was not telling Saul of Tarsus (Acts 22:16) what would wash away his (and our) sins, what was he telling him?” He was telling Saul **when** his sins would be washed away **in the blood of Christ**. The conclusions are irresistible: No baptism—no blood; No blood—no forgiveness of sins; No forgiveness of sins—no salvation. Paul tied baptism and the blood of Christ together in one grand statement: “Or are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” (Rom. 6:4). This rhetorical question teaches us that when one is baptized according to the teaching of Scripture, he is not only baptized “into Christ” (i.e., into fellowship with Christ), but also “into his death” (i.e., into the benefits of Jesus’ death, wherein He shed His cleansing blood). This passage teaches us that Scriptural baptism is the sinner’s avenue of access to the blood of the Savior. Jesus is the only avenue of salvation: “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6).

The foregoing demonstration of the Biblical relationship between baptism and Jesus’ blood explains the numerous statements of the inspired writers, earlier noted, to the effect that **baptism is a necessary condition for remission of sins or salvation** (Mark 16:16; John 3:5; Acts 2:38; 22:16; Rom. 6:4; Gal. 3:27; 1 Pet. 3:20–21; et al.). The reason baptism is necessary for salvation is evident: Baptism, with its Scriptural precedents, is the consummating act of obedience by which sinners gain access to the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus the Christ.

Does the Bible Tell Us When One Should Be Baptized?

The Bible tells us, by implication, when one should be baptized. When the multitudes on the day of Pentecost heard the first Gospel sermon (preached in its fullness), Luke records the response as follows: “They then that received his word were baptized: and there were added unto them in that day about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41). It is highly unlikely that any of these had come to this remarkable occasion with a change of clothes and a towel tucked under their arms, yet they obeyed the apostolic command immediately. When Philip “preached Jesus” to the Ethiopian on the road to Gaza,

the man did not want to wait until they came to the next town, but besought the evangelist to stop at the first body of water sufficient to immerse him: “And as they went on the way, they came unto a certain water; and the eunuch saith, Behold, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?” (v. 36). Philip immediately complied with the man’s request (vv. 38–39). “When the jailor at Philippi asked Paul and Silas what he should do to be saved, it was already past midnight (16:25). Yet, upon being told what he should do, they did not wait for the dawning of the day. The jailor and his household were baptized “the same hour of the night” (vv. 30–34). When Ananias came to Saul of Tarsus, he urged the sinner seeking salvation to wait no longer to secure it: “And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on his name” (22:16). The narrative implies that Saul did this very thing.

The immediacy and urgency of these baptismal responses in each case are unmistakable. The preachers did not suggest any delay and the subjects did not request any delay for even an hour, much less a few days or until a “special baptismal service” a week later. The reason for such instant response should be equally evident. The faithful men who delivered the Gospel made it clear to these sinners that until they were baptized they were still in the guilt and condemnation of their sins, which would cause them to be lost eternally. The Bible therefore teaches when one should be baptized—at the earliest moment one learns that he is a sinner in need of salvation and that he must be baptized in order to receive forgiveness of his sins.

Conclusion

Baptism is more than a ritualistic exercise. It is more than a mere point of theological curiosity or discussion. It is more than an optional religious act. It is more than a means of gaining admission to a humanly conceived and established religious organization. It is not an act of human merit or righteousness. Rather, the Bible teaches us that baptism is the very act in which the Lord Jesus cleanses and saves the sinner from his sins by His own blood, whereupon He adds him to His church, which is His depository of those who are saved (Acts 2:27–47). Baptism, incidentally, also serves as a test of one’s allegiance to the authority of the Son of God and His New Testament. It is sad beyond description that multiplied millions of people have stumbled and continue to stumble to their own eternal

destruction at this simple test. I pray that none of those who read these words will be among those millions.

At the beginning of this treatise, I indicated that this study would involve what the **Bible** teaches, rather than what men have taught and teach, concerning baptism. I will let the reader be the judge of the fulfillment of this aim.

ENDNOTE

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1. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.