

# Water Baptism

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## **Excerpt from *Preaching Through Acts*, “The Meaning of Baptism” Ac 2:21,37-41**

We’re often told a person will be saved if they pray the sinner’s prayer. But that’s not true. Reciting a short prayer won’t save anybody. We’re often told if we raise our hands to receive Jesus we’ll be saved. But that’s not true either. And a lot of people have been misled into thinking they’ve done what it takes. The problem is that reciting a prayer or raising my hand can be done without really understanding what God requires of me. When I pray, I may not understand what I’m saying because words mean different things to different people. I can tell God I’m a sinner without knowing what a sinner is. Or tell Him I repent without a clue of what I just said I would do. And this type of shallow, uninformed invitation to follow Christ may be one reason so many people who say they’re Christians don’t act like it. Some hearts don’t seem to have changed. A person can become religious, but not more loving, self-controlled, forgiving, honest or pure than they were before. The only difference is now they assume they’ll go to heaven.

Something is wrong with this picture. Something must be missing. As we look back at the early Church, we see people who became amazingly different. When they got saved their hearts changed. They lived lives that were a great witness. They were respected and admired, even by people who didn’t agree with them. Not that they became perfect, but they did become much more Christ-like. I believe a large part of the reason that their lives changed so dramatically was because they understood the cost of following Jesus before they were saved, and I believe water baptism played a big part in this. When they were baptized, there was no mistaking what they were saying to God.

### **That day (Ac 2:41)**

Here’s the obvious point we so often miss: three thousand people were baptized that day, not weeks or months later after going through a class. They were baptized that day, as soon as they were ready to follow Jesus. In other words, baptism didn’t follow conversion, baptism was the moment of their conversion. It was by baptism that they declared their repentance and faith.

Let’s look at more examples from the Book of Acts:

- Ac 8:12 Philip goes to Samaria
- Ac 8:35, 36 Philip on the road to Gaza
- Ac 9:18 Saul with Ananias
- Ac 10:47 Peter preaches to Cornelius and his household
- Ac 16:15 Lydia at Philippi
- Ac 16:33 Philippian jailer
- Ac 18:8 Corinthians

- Ac 19:25 Ephesian disciples
- Ac 22:12-16 Paul recounts Ananias' words

### **Calling upon Jesus (Ac 2:37-38)**

Let's reflect on how people got saved on that first day.

(v37) Thousands of those who were listening saw that what Peter said about the Messiah was true and realized that they had directly or indirectly participated in His execution, and as a result they would someday stand before Him in judgment. Luke says they were "stabbed in the heart," meaning a deep, troubling conviction came over them. They were filled with sorrow for what had happened in the past and fear for what lay ahead in the future. They called out to Peter and the apostles standing with him, "Brethren, what can we do?" In other words, they were asking, "Is there a way for us to escape the wrath which will fall on us for doing such a thing?"

(v38) Peter answered using terms with which they were all very familiar. For years John the Baptist had challenged the nation to "Repent and let each of you be baptized" (Mk 1:4), and many had responded to his call and had been baptized in the Jordan River (Mt 3:5, 6). But unlike John, Peter doesn't warn them about the "One who is coming" (Mk 1:7); he is announcing that the Messiah has already come. Having just quoted a passage from the prophet Joel which concludes with the words, "And it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (v21), Peter tells them that the Lord's name is Jesus, and the way to "call upon" that name is to repent and be baptized. He says if they do this, they too will receive the same "gift of the Holy Spirit" which had been given to the disciples.

(v38) English translations of this verse do not normally translate it literally because Peter uses a preposition which initially appears to make no sense. He tells them to be baptized upon Jesus' name. Everywhere else people are said to be baptized "in" or "into" someone or someone's name (Ac 8:16; 10:48; 19:5, Ro 6:3; 1Co 1:13, 15; 10:2, Gal 3:27). So his substitution of the word "upon" is confusing, until we recognize that he is deliberately echoing the wording found in Joel's prophecy. Joel said "...everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (v21). By telling his listeners to be baptized "upon" Jesus' name, Peter is explaining that baptism is the way they can call upon Jesus to save them. Being symbolically buried in water (Ro 6:3, 4) is a God-ordained way of expressing repentance and calling on God for mercy (Ro 10:13). In effect, baptism serves as a spiritual statement, a cry for help, which is understood in heaven as clearly as words.

### **The origin of baptism**

There are few topics more controversial than baptism. Different groups say baptism means different things, and they baptize different ways or not at all. In fact, trying to understand baptism has become so confusing it has lost its meaning for many, and a sizeable percentage of Christians have never bothered to be baptized. "Why do it if it's merely some sort of ancient ceremony that leaves me with wet hair? If I don't have to, I don't want to." So let's ask the question, what did baptism mean? Why were people immersed in water? When we look in the Bible, we see it took on different meanings depending on who was baptizing.

- Mikvah (Jewish ritual bath): The ritual bath was a common activity among observant Jews. It was performed either in a place with a natural body of fresh water, such as a lake or stream, or in a “mikvah,” which was a special tank of water containing at least 85 gallons located in homes or near religious sites. The bath was meant to cleanse people physically and spiritually in order to prepare them to approach God in worship. In a mikvah, a person would walk down a series of steps into the water, totally immerse themselves underwater and then walk back up the steps on the “clean” side of the stairway (Vamosh, Miriam Feinberg, *Daily Life at the Time of Jesus*. Palphot Ltd., PO Box 2, Herzlia, Israel, pp. 26-27). It symbolized washing, acknowledging that I’m ceremonially unclean.
- John the Baptist: Repenting, acknowledging that I’m morally unclean. Calling on God to have mercy to wash away my sins.
- Jesus (Mt 3:13-17): Submission, the water became a grave. For Jesus Himself there could be no repentance. He had done nothing wrong, yet He was determined to be baptized, and the Father openly celebrated His baptism and baptized Him in the Holy Spirit. For Jesus baptism meant submitting to God’s revelation that He was the suffering Messiah spoken of by the prophets. By it He also declared His faith in the promise that He would be resurrected (Isa 53:12; Ps 16:8-11). For Him the water became a grave. He began His ministry by being “buried” and “rising.” He may have said this to John, because the day after Jesus was baptized John spoke of Him as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29, 36). By using this term he was unmistakably declaring Jesus to be the Passover lamb who would be slain for Israel and the world. That a dying Messiah was a novel concept to John is demonstrated by the fact that he lost that understanding over time and returned to expecting only a triumphant Messiah (Mt 11:2-6). Jesus warned John not to be offended, that He had come as the Lamb and not yet the Lion.
- Peter: Identification, the water becomes Jesus’ grave. Baptism is the way we acknowledge our sin and call upon God for mercy. It’s the decision of the heart being acted out physically. It’s a form of prayer. By it we are saying: “I call upon You to save me by joining Jesus in His death and resurrection. I die with Him, and I rise with Him. I know I deserve to die, but I believe if I join myself to Him by faith, His death becomes my death, His cross becomes my cross, so that my sins are now paid for in full. Today I also baptize myself into Jesus’ resurrection, because I believe I, too, will rise from the grave and live forever.”

Note: We don’t baptize you. You baptize you. We’re just here to help lower you into the water and raise you up again and agree with you in prayer.

### **What does baptism say?**

When I’m baptized, I’m acting out a prayer. And what it requires me to say is much more painful than raising my hand. What I’m saying is much more radical than the words we usually say:

- Father, I’m a sinner and I need to be washed clean. Today I die to my flesh and its passions. I surrender; I submit to your boundaries and your will.
- Jesus, I join you on the cross. By faith I plunge myself into your death. I join you in the grave, and because I’m spiritually joined to you, I will also rise from the grave at the resurrection.

## **Conclusion**

Baptism says all these things without using words. It confronts me with painful truths. It doesn't let me escape the fact that I'm dirty with sin and need God to cleanse me. It doesn't let me escape the fact that the old me has to die, not just try harder to be a better person, die in a grave. It doesn't let me escape the fact that I must place my full faith in the cross of Jesus Christ, not just that He died for me, but that I must lie down in the grave with Him. My independence, rebellion and selfishness have to die. And baptism doesn't let me escape the promise that the grave has lost its power to hold onto me, and because I'm joined to Him, I will live forever.

No wonder those early believers got so saved when they came to Christ. They didn't hear a soft gospel. They heard the call to be baptized, to come and stand beside Jesus' grave and join Him in His death. They heard the truth... and that truth set them free.

## **Questions**

1) Have you been water baptized? What did it mean to you at the time? What were you saying to God when you were baptized?

2) If you were going to lead someone to Christ, what would you tell them about water baptism?

## **Excerpt from *Study Verse by Verse: John, John 1:29***

**Ch1 v29:** On the day after that discussion took place, John looked up and saw Jesus walking toward him. This may have been the very moment when Jesus was returning from His temptation in the nearby Judean wilderness (Luke 4:1-2). What is really surprising though are the first words John uttered when he saw Him. He said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who [lifts up and] takes away the sin of the world (cosmos)!" To John himself, and to those Jews who heard this statement, the term "lamb," particularly one that "takes away the sin of the world," could have meant nothing else than a lamb used for sacrifice. He pointed to Jesus and prophesied that the moral guilt of the entire human race would be transferred to Him, and like the lamb eaten in the Passover meal (Ex 12:3-11) or one of the lambs sacrificed in the temple, He would rescue us from God's judgment by dying as our substitute.

That picture of Jesus is radically different from the one John had been preaching. Two of the other gospels give us samples of typical sermons that he preached (Mt 3:11-12; Lk 3:3-17). They reveal that he focused on the idea that the Messiah would bring God's judgment, not His mercy. The Coming One would not only baptize the righteous with the Holy Spirit, He would also baptize the unrighteous with the "fire" of God's judgment (Mt 3:11-12; Lk 3:16-17). John's central message was to warn people to repent before the Messiah arrived because once He arrived, it would be too late. With that in mind, the first words that came out of John's mouth when he saw Jesus are shockingly different. Instead of saying, "Here comes the One who's going

to judge us!” he said, “Behold here comes the One who is going to die for us!” This dramatic change in his message forces us to ask the question, “Where did he get this new revelation?”

Since John was a true prophet, one possibility is that he spoke words that were given to him by the Spirit but that he didn’t understand. Such things did happen (1Pe 1:10-12), but I personally suspect he spoke a truth Jesus had recently taught him. When Jesus presented Himself to be baptized, John initially resisted saying, “I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?” (Mt 3:14). To understand John’s reaction, we need to remember that Jesus was not unknown to him, nor is it likely that he was unaware of the unique circumstances of Jesus’ birth (Lk 1:20-35). John’s mother was the person who took Jesus’ mother, Mary, into her home and sheltered her while she was pregnant when it was not safe for her to stay in Nazareth (Lk 1:39-40, 56). As John was growing up in that household, is it possible to think that Elizabeth did not tell him how he had “leapt” in her womb when Mary arrived at their door (Lk 1:41), or that his father, Zacharias, did not tell him about the prophesy he spoke over him at the time of his birth (Lk 1:57-80)?

For John, baptism represented repentance; it was a prayerful renouncing of our sins and calling on God to wash us clean. That’s why baptizing Jesus made no sense to him. Jesus had done no sin, so it confused him when Jesus insisted on being baptized (Mt 3:15). And I believe it was during that conversation that Jesus explained to John that He was the “Lamb of God.” His obedience to God’s plan would lead Him to a violent death. Yes, He needed to be baptized, but in His thinking the waters of baptism were going to take on a new meaning. He had not come to the river to wash away sins but rather to lay Himself down in a “watery grave.” He was using the symbolism of baptism to indicate His full submission to a cross that He knew was waiting for Him in the future. In effect, as He stood there by the river, He was asking John to “bury” Him. He would use that act to seal His full surrender to the Father’s will.

I admit there is no passage to which I can point that proves this conversation between John and Jesus occurred, but the circumstances imply that a conversation like that must have happened. And if it did, it answers two very important questions: First, why did Jesus want to be baptized when He had done no sin? And second, where else would John learn such a profound insight about the substitutionary death of the Messiah because it does not appear that he understood that truth prior to meeting Jesus. Nor did he retain that insight. As time passed, he grew discouraged, and from a dungeon in Herod’s prison he sent a messenger to ask Jesus, “Are you the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?” (Mt 11:3). It seems that he had returned to thinking of the Messiah as a fearsome judge, and Jesus was not doing the things that a fearsome judge would do. John seems by then to have forgotten his own words about Jesus being the “Lamb of God,” so Jesus warned him, “...blessed is he who does not take offense at Me” (Mt 11:6).

Yet the fact that Jesus already understood this truth about Himself as early in His ministry as His baptism at the Jordan is shown by statements He made only a few days later. To religious leaders who challenged His authority to drive money-changers out of the temple He replied, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn 2:19); and to Nicodemus on a

rooftop at night He said, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up...” (Jn 3:14). It’s even possible that it was these same sorts of passages that He was discussing with the teachers in the temple when He was only twelve years of age (Lk 2:40-47).