

Lesson 19: Important Final Questions, Part One

Is Baptism Necessary for Salvation?

April 7, 2019

To answer this question, we must deal with several passages that can be interpreted as requiring water baptism in order to attain salvation:

1Pe 3:21 Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

An interpretation: Just as the ark was the means by which Noah and his family were carried safely through water, baptism is the means by which believers are saved.

Mar 16:15-16a And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. (16) Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved...

An interpretation: Saved people are ones who both believe and are baptized

Act 2:38 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.

An interpretation: Repentance and baptism are necessary in order to receive forgiveness of sins. No baptism. No forgiveness of sins. No eternal life in God's presence.

Act 22:16 And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.'

An interpretation: Baptism washes away sins. No baptism. The sin of stain remains, and the outcome is the same described for Acts 2:38.

Joh 3:5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

An interpretation: The water here is the water of baptism – there is no entrance to the kingdom of God without it.

We teach that while baptism is an important witness in the life of every believer, it is not a part of what saves us. Rather, it is a public testimony of our connection to the one who saved us through the shedding of his blood – everyone who is baptized into Christ is baptized into his death. But how do we reconcile our belief with what many would call “clear teaching” to the contrary – that unless one is baptized, he cannot be saved?

Part 1: The Analogy of Faith

This is commonly known by the phrase "let Scripture interpret Scripture". The general idea is that the Bible does not contradict itself or it would lose the power of authority. Thus, passages in one part of Scripture should be interpreted in light of teaching from other parts of Scripture. And, consider the following passages of Scripture:

Faith leads to eternal life

Joh 3:14-18 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, (15) that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. (16) "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (17) For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (18) Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

Act 16:31 And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

Joh 5:24 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

Joh 11:25-26 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, (26) and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

Act 16:31 And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

Faith leads to forgiveness of sins

Act 13:37-39 but he whom God raised up did not see corruption. (38) Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, (39) and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

Act 10:43 To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Mat 9:2 And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven."

Act 26:15-18 And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. (16) But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, (17) delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles--to whom I am sending you (18) to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

Faith leads to imputation of Christ's righteousness to us – i.e. we are declared “not guilty”, because Christ IS not guilty.

Gal 2:16 yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Php 3:8-9 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ (9) and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith--

And that faith, like repentance and all other aspects of salvation, is a gift from God

Eph 2:8-10 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, (9) not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (10) For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Rom 3:21-25 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it-- (22) the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: (23) for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (24) and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, (25) whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

Tit 3:4-7 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, (5) he saved us, NOT (emphasis mine) 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, (6) whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, (7) so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Many biblical examples back this up

Luk 7:50 And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Luk 18:13-14 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' (14) I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Luk 23:39-43 One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" (40) But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? (41) And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." (42) And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (43) And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Since the general teaching of the Bible is, as we have seen, that baptism and other forms of ritual are not necessary for salvation, no individual passage could teach otherwise. Thus we must look for interpretations of those passages that will be in harmony with the general teaching of Scripture. – Grace to You website

Part 2: Dealing with the Texts

1. *1Pe 3:21 Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,*

An interpretation: Just as the ark was the means by which Noah and his family were carried safely through water, baptism is the means by which believers are saved.

Response:

- a) Not even those who hold to baptismal regeneration believe that baptism saves. Most if not all would reject the notion that someone who gets baptized and lives a life rebellious to Christ is saved. In the Church of Christ, for example, the “plan” of salvation is as follows: Hear, Believe, Repent, Confess, Be Baptized, and live faithfully until death. If any of those elements are missing, then a person is not saved. Thus, baptism may be an element of salvation, but it ultimately is useless apart from faithful living. So, baptism does not save.
- b) Consider that the other passages we are examining deal with baptism washing away sins. But Peter makes clear that is not what is in view in this passage – explicitly he says “not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” In other words, cleansing is not in view. What is in view is the appeal to God for a good conscience – it is what is represented in baptism – the calling on the name of the Lord – in other words, faith. Baptism is an outward representation of an inward reality. We have been saved by grace through faith. That faith manifests itself in a calling out to God – calling on His Name.

2. *Mar 16:15-16a And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. (16) Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved...*

An interpretation: Saved people are ones who both believe and are baptized

Alternative interpretation:

First, we need to finish verse 16:

Mar 16:15-16 And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. (16) Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

If we interpret verse 16a as only believers are saved, then what do we do with the 2nd part of the verse given that only those who don't believe are condemned? Is there some alternative between saved and condemned for believers who are not baptized?

Or, we could interpret the passage to suggest that belief and baptism are closely linked. A normal characteristic of believers is that they are baptized. Why? Because saving faith produces fruit – i.e. obedience. It is normal – and even expected – that someone who has placed their faith in Christ desires to follow his command to be baptized. I would question anyone's faith that lived a disobedient life. On the other hand, the example of the thief on the cross is the perfect example of one who believed and was therefore not condemned. He believed and was saved in spite of his inability to come down from the cross and be baptized. To be consistent with the rest of Scripture, we must say that the thief's faith saved him and in a normal circumstance he would have been baptized as a public profession of that salvation – on account of repentance and faith.

3. Act 2:38 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.

An interpretation: Repentance and baptism are necessary in order to receive forgiveness of sins. No baptism. No forgiveness of sins. No eternal life in God's presence.

Interpreting using the analogy of faith:

The preposition translated "for" is the Greek word *eis* and has several different meanings depending on context: some of the more common ones are "for the purpose of", "into", "at", "because of".

Rom 6:3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

Mat 12:41 The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

Mat 26:28 for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (note that this use is consistent with "in order to have", but baptism is not in view – the shedding of Christ's blood is in view. So Christ's blood was shed in order to bring about forgiveness of sins – not baptism.

Mat 3:11 "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Note here that John is not baptizing in order to get repentance – he is baptizing in response to repentance)

So, while we could translate Acts 2:38 in such a way as to say baptism is required for forgiveness of sins, we don't have to, because there are clear examples of other usages that better fit the rest of Scripture. We receive forgiveness of sins through faith that is a gift – and in response to that, we repent and are baptized in accordance with the commands of Jesus – the one in whom we have placed our faith.

Additionally, consider that in the very next chapter, Peter is preaching in Solomon's portico and says this:

Act 3:19 Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out,

Does Peter contradict himself? Does he forget that baptism was also crucial to having sins blotted out? Or does this mean that repentance is necessary for salvation but not baptism? Or, does it simply mean, consistent with the rest of Scripture, that we are saved by grace through faith and that the natural response to coming to faith is to repent and be baptized? This is what the reformers meant when they said that we are saved by faith alone, but not a faith that is alone. True faith in Christ necessarily brings repentance and obedience to Christ's commands.

4. Act 22:16 And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.'

An interpretation: Baptism washes away sins. No baptism. The sin of stain remains, and the outcome is the same described for Acts 2:38.

Alternative interpretation:

From Grace to You: *In Acts 22:16, Paul recounts the words of Ananias to him following his experience on the Damascus road: "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name." It is best to connect the phrase "wash away your sins" with "calling on His name." If we connect it with "be baptized," the Greek participle epikalesamenos ("calling") would have no antecedent. Paul's sins were washed away not by baptism, but by calling on His name.*

Rom 10:9 because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Rom 10:12-13 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. (13) For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Joh 1:12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,

5. ***Joh 3:5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.***

An interpretation: The water here is the water of baptism – there is no entrance to the kingdom of God without it.

Alternative interpretation:

The water and Spirit here are the promise of the New Covenant from Ezekiel 36:

Eze 36:25-27 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. (26) And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. (27) And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Consider Jesus' closing statement in the passage:

Joh 3:8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

What Jesus is describing in the passage is the necessity of a 2nd birth – the birth of the Spirit – which is prophesied in Ezekiel 36.

Tit 3:4-7 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, (5) 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, (6) whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, (7) so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Conclusion: the new birth has nothing to do with water baptism. The sprinkling of water comes from God. The Spirit comes from God. The justification comes from God. Salvation comes from God. Praise be to God!