

# The Role of Water Baptism in Salvation

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## Introduction

This analysis of water baptism is intended to enlighten those who desire a better understanding of its significance in the New Testament, and to assist others who may be confused or struggling with its role in the matter of salvation. A number of passages state, or allude to the fact, that baptism has a saving role in redemption. The purpose of this analysis is to elucidate those passages in light of the whole testimony of New Testament Scripture on the subject.

## Biblical Passages on Baptism

### I Peter 3:20-21

This is a good starting place for two reasons. First, Peter is the one who preached on the day of Pentecost. In his remarks to a largely Jewish audience, he said, "*Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost*" (Acts 2:38). Many have argued that Peter was teaching baptism as essential to salvation. The text of I Peter 3:20-21, however, allows this Pentecostal preacher to clarify his understanding of the significance of baptism. Secondly, the passage in 1 Peter does state that "*baptism doth also now save us.*" It is therefore vital to understand the manner in which baptism saves. Peter's comparisons in this passage allow us to do that. Moreover, an honest and thoughtful exegesis of these verses will bring light to other passages cited as "proof" that baptism saves.

The first point of clarification must be that salvation has more than one tense or application in the New Testament. Actually, there are three. The first is **justification**. This act of God declares the sinner to have a righteous standing before him by virtue of Christ's imputed righteousness. This act constitutes a moment in time, not a process. This is also the moment of regeneration, wherein the very life of Christ is brought into the bosom of the sinner by the Holy Ghost. The act of justification is one time for all time. It is represented in the New Testament by the past tense, whether aorist or perfect in the Greek.

The second is **sanctification**. This aspect of salvation is both positional and practical. The idea of sanctification is that of being "set apart" unto God. The believer is sanctified *positionally* when he is placed into Christ by Spirit baptism (1 Corinthians 12:13). He is sanctified *practically* as he walks in the Spirit after justification, and ceases to fulfill the lusts of the flesh as a pattern of life. As Paul made clear in Galatians 3:3, there is a beginning in the Spirit, and there is a subsequent perfecting (a bringing to maturity and Christ-likeness) by the same Spirit. This perfecting is represented in Scripture by the present tense.

The third is **glorification**. This aspect of salvation is both present and future. There is something of the glory of Christ that is imparted to every believer (2 Corinthians 3:18). But the full manifestation of glory in the sons of God will come to fruition in the resurrection, wherein our vile bodies shall be transformed like unto His glorious body in sinless perfection (Romans 8:18; Philippians 3:20-21).

1 Peter 3:21 says: "*The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us.*" The first question that ought to command the attention of the interpreter is the verb tense of the salvation in view. The tense is present, and therefore cannot refer to the act of justification. It must therefore have reference to the second aspect of salvation, which is sanctification.

Let's look at the text and examine that position. Verse 20 says that the "*ark was a preparing*" (was completed after 120 years of labor). It was in the ark that eight souls were saved. And yet it is said that they were saved "*by water.*" So we have the ark (a picture of the believer's position in Christ) and the water (a picture of the believer's separation from the world) both working together to provide salvation for the eight souls.

The question, then, is this: Exactly what roles did the ark and water play in this salvation? How were they instrumental? It may be said with certainty that the water, apart from the ark, would have resulted in the deaths of Noah and his family. The ark itself provided their salvation, which is a figure or type of Jesus Christ. The water saved them inasmuch as it separated them (set them apart) from a wicked world under

the judgment of God. The salvation of the eight was accomplished by (1) the ark with regard to position, and (2) the water with regard to separation.

This analogy holds true for the Christian age. The believer is positioned in Christ by faith prior to the administration of baptismal waters. Water baptism separates the one who is safely sheltered in Christ from the world that resides under the condemnation and wrath of God. Baptism is a public declaration of one's separation from the world by virtue of their position in Christ. Suggesting that baptism puts the sinner "into" Christ places the cart before the horse, and violates the analogy given here by Scripture. If you are not "in Christ" prior to baptism, the water shall avail you nothing!

1 Peter 3:21 teaches us that water baptism does for the believer what the floodwaters did for Noah. The word "**figure**" means antitype. Water baptism corresponds to the floodwaters as a separator of saved men from lost men. Baptism is a one-time event with on-going benefits. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the reality that provides life and salvation for every believer, and corresponds to the ark. Baptism is the public affirmation of the believer's relationship to (and position in) Christ, and corresponds to the floodwaters as a public separator (sanctifier) unto Christ.

Peter is careful, however, to explain to his readers what baptism is not! It is not, according to Peter, the "**putting away of the filth of the flesh**". This phrase has been variously interpreted. Those who argue for baptismal regeneration (that is, that water baptism is instrumental in putting one into Christ and thus bringing eternal life) insist that Peter's reference here to "**the flesh**" is simply the body itself. They interpret "**filth**" as physical dirt, which is removed from the body through ceremonial washing. In other words, baptism is no mere ceremonial act. Those who argue for baptism as an antitypical act of obedience see the word as a reference to sin and moral defilement, and "**the flesh**" as in the Pauline sense—the sin nature within the bodily flesh of man that produces moral and spiritual defilement. The second position seems to be the obvious intent of Peter. However, neither position governs the interpretation of the significance of baptism.

What Peter does tell us is that baptism is "**the answer of a good conscience toward God**." The word "**answer**" speaks of a public reply to a query, and was often used in the context of a courtroom. For example, a defendant might be asked to issue a public response to charges leveled against him by his accusers. Baptism is an answer! That is, it is the believer publicly affirming his response to this query: "Is Jesus Christ your Lord, and are you His disciple?" Baptism is the resounding "Yes!" to both the church and a lost and dying world, separating him unto Christ from that world.

Peter also adds the phrase "**of a good conscience**." The Greek preposition translated "**of**" is **ek**, and means "out of" (with reference to source, location, or sphere). A good conscience is in place prior to, and at the time of, the answer of baptism. The New Testament clearly defines the "good conscience" as the result of grace and forgiveness in Christ. The believer, as the recipient of grace and a good conscience by virtue of justification by faith, proceeds to affirm by baptism that Christ indeed has saved him from sin and guilt. The good conscience answers!

If the professor of faith in Christ demonstrates reluctance to answer by baptism, one of two things is true. (1) The professor possesses only mental and or verbal assent to the claims of Christ, has not received a good conscience, and casts a cloud of disingenuousness upon his profession. (2) The professor has been saved, but jeopardizes his conscience through disobedience to Christ's command to be baptized. The essence of Christ's teachings, and that of the New Testament, is that a profession that will not baptize is not worth a plug nickel in the kingdom.

Baptism is the answer that proceeds from a good conscience. The good conscience is the result of the blood of Christ having been applied to the soul. Even as Noah was "in the ark" when the floodwaters came to separate him from the world, so also is the believer "in Christ" prior to the waters of baptism being ministered to him as the answer of his good conscience. Baptism therefore saves us (present tense) as a matter of sanctification, locking in a good conscience going forward.

Proper understanding of the phrase "**the answer of a good conscience**" gives baptism its proper place. So whether one argues that baptism is no mere ceremony, or that baptism has nothing to do with cleansing one from the defilement of sin, he is correct. Neither position detracts from the teaching that baptism is the answer of a good conscience, having an antitypical relationship to the floodwaters of

Noah's day.

Peter, the preacher at Pentecost, has provided for us his understanding of the significance of baptism. That understanding obviously had not changed during the twenty-seven years that elapsed between Pentecost and the writing of his First Epistle. His inspired insights can now be brought to bear upon other passages that speak of baptism in relation to salvation and the remission of sins.

## Acts 2:38

The Jews to whom Peter preached on the day of Pentecost were "*pricked in their heart*." The idea expressed is that of being pierced through with conviction. A sense of imminent peril for their sin against God's Lord and Christ was expressed as: "*Men and brethren, what shall we do?*" Peter responded by giving clear instructions as to how they might also receive the Spirit. The Scripture goes on to tell us that "*they that gladly received his word were baptized*." What Peter said here has been misconstrued by many to mean that remission of sins is the result of baptism. We know from Peter's view of baptism in I Peter 3:20-21 that this cannot be the case.

What did Peter actually say? The answer to that question lies in the meaning of the little preposition "*for*" in the phrase "*for the remission of sins*." The Greek preposition is **eis**, and has a range of meanings, depending on the context. It can mean "with a view toward", or "with reference to", or "unto", or "as a result of". If it is here given the meaning of "with a view toward" or "unto", the meaning would be clear—one submits to baptism with a view to receiving the remission of sins. That is a legitimate meaning of the preposition, but I Peter 3:20-21 disallows that meaning here, inasmuch as Peter excluded baptism as an act that can put away the filth of the flesh. It is rather an act that proceeds from a good conscience, the result of remission of sins.

Peter cannot be in conflict with himself on this matter! The meaning "as a result of" is the proper meaning in this context. The teachings of Jesus, and the New Testament as a whole, connect the actual remission of sins with repentance, not water baptism. The force of Peter's admonition, then, is as follows: "Repent, and be baptized in the name of Jesus for [because of, as a result of] the remission of sins [which repentance brings], and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."

I have heard many advocates of baptismal regeneration reject this meaning for the preposition **eis**, claiming that it is never so used in the New Testament. They are, of course, mistaken. In Matthew 12:41, Jesus Himself used the preposition **eis** to mean exactly that. In reference to the men of Nineveh, Jesus said: "*they repented at [eis] the preaching of Jonah*." I know of no intellectually honest interpreter who would insist that the Ninevites repented *in order to get* the preaching of Jonah. The book of Jonah reveals otherwise. They repented *because of* his preaching, *in response to* it. The meaning "as a result of" or "with reference to" with respect to the preposition **eis** is therefore clearly established in Scripture. There is no reason to assume that Peter meant anything else in Acts 2:38, especially in the light of his I Peter 3:20-21 clarification.

## Mark 16:16

How many times have baptismal regenerationists thrown this verse out in defense of their position? They insist, "What does it say? What did Jesus say?" When an explanation is offered, they come right back with "But what did Jesus say?" That question is easily answered if you properly understand I Peter 3:20-21, and the full nature of salvation, both justification and sanctification. Jesus, of course, was referring to the whole package of salvation, not just justification. Baptism does indeed afford the believer a continuing good conscience as a public answer in discipleship, and as the foundation for spiritual growth in sanctification going forward. It is impossible to experience full salvation without baptism! This is what Jesus meant, and this interpretation is consistent with Peter's teaching in I Peter 3:20-21, and the New Testament teaching.

Jesus also added: "*but he that believeth not shall be damned*." Jesus emphasized the critical nature of faith. Baptism without faith is meaningless and powerless. This is a point that must be conceded by the baptismal regenerationist. It is therefore faith that brings justification, and baptism (in response to the

remission of sins that repentance and faith bring) that allows the disciple to move on with God in practical salvation (also known as sanctification) with a good conscience still in tact.

## Acts 22:16

This is yet another passage cited by baptismal regenerationists. Paul was testifying in Jerusalem about his experience with Jesus, and in Damascus was commanded by Ananias to "**arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling upon the name of the Lord.**" The key phrase here, of course, is "**wash away thy sins.**"

The first issue that must be resolved here is whether Paul was still a lost and unregenerate man at this time. The immediate context supplies the answer. In 22:13, Ananias addressed the apostle as "**Brother Saul.**" In 22:14, he instructed Paul with the words: "**God...hath chosen thee.**" The conclusion we draw from these phrases, as they are representative of Ananias' mindset, is that (1) Ananias considered Paul a spiritual brother (he had already experienced regeneration), and (2) Paul was chosen (elected).

The baptismal regenerationist cites this text as proof that Saul was yet in his sins, and unregenerate, at the time of Ananias' visit, and that his use of "brother" when addressing Saul was a reference to Jewish (not Christian) brotherhood. That argument lacks credibility when considered in the light of Acts 9:10-16. Ananias had expressed doubts about Saul from a Christian (not Jewish) viewpoint. Having received assurance from the Lord that Saul was one of the elect in Christ (not Judaism), he set out on his mission. The content of "**Brother Saul**" is clearly spiritual (not national) in nature.

If the baptismal regenerationist maintains this untenable position of national brotherhood, he also must logically adopt the erroneous Calvinistic view that Paul was elected before he was regenerated, a position typically rejected by theologians who advocate baptism and works as redemptive prerequisites. The language used by Ananias as related by Paul supports the position that Paul was a regenerate man and in Christ prior to his baptism.

Another strong argument for Paul's salvation prior to baptism is the verb tenses used by Ananias as told by Paul. Both of the imperatives ("**be baptized**" and "**wash away thy sins**") are aorist middle. The aorist (past) tense in the imperative signifies the doing of something not previously done. The middle voice speaks of Paul acting in his own best interest by compliance to the commands. This is particularly instructive with regard to "**wash away thy sins.**" When Jesus washes believers from their sins in His own blood, the believer is passive (Revelation 1:5). Here Paul is commanded to be active, and act in his own best interest. Since no believer can wash away his own sins, the meaning must be antitypical. What Paul is being commanded to do is provide a public answer out of a good conscience (wherein he is a spiritual brother and a chosen vessel). This answer, wherein he publicly affirms the washing away of his sin, sets the stage for sanctification going forward.

## John 3:5

This text is often referred to as proof that Jesus Himself taught water baptism to be essential to the new birth experience. The immediate context, as well as the testimony of other New Testament texts, argues against this possibility. There are three (3) viable interpretations of the "**water**" in John 3:5, none of which are water baptism.

The first interpretation is that of **physical birth**, often referred to as a water birth. The context logically supports this view. Nicodemus was grappling with the concept of a second birth, and went so far as to mention an entrance back into his mother's womb (3:4). Nicodemus never believed this was a possibility. He was simply illustrating his total lack of comprehension of this "born again" language. In response to Nicodemus' query, Jesus adds "**water**" to the equation by saying, "**Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.**" In 3:6, Jesus further distinguishes between the two births. The flesh can never give birth to anything but flesh, and it remains flesh. Likewise the Spirit produces only a spirit birth, and it remains spirit in nature. The two are distinct—two distinct events—and cannot be mixed. Thus many see Jesus as condescending to Nicodemus' level in terms of "**earthly things**" (3:12), making spiritual birth a kingdom necessity for those of physical birth.

The second interpretation offered for "**water**" is **the Word of God**. This has scriptural support from

passages such as I Peter 1:23, which says that we are "*born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth forever.*" The Word is attributed the ability to generate life in the believer, and thus render him regenerated. Ephesians 5:26 also depicts the Word (Scriptures) as water that washes the church, sanctifying and cleansing it.

Those who see the water of John 3:5 as the life-giving Word have strong support from other scripture sources. There is an interpretive principle in the Greek language that may also apply here. It is often cited as Granville Sharp's rule. It states that when a preposition is followed by two nouns of the genitive case, the definite article preceding the first noun and omitted before the second, the nouns being connected by the Greek conjunction **kai** (and), that the two nouns are descriptive of one-and-the-same person or event. The phrase "*the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ*" in Titus 2:13 is a prime example. Paul employed it to identify Jesus as both Savior and the great God. Jesus used that same Greek construction when describing the born again experience to Nicodemus. This interpretive rule, applied to John 3:5, combines the life-producing capacity of both the Word and the Spirit in the event of regeneration. This also eliminates the possibility that the "water" refers to water baptism, inasmuch as baptism is a distinct and separate event. The grammar used by our Lord does not allow for water baptism as a possible meaning.

The third interpretation possible for the water is the Spirit. The Greek conjunction **kai** usually has the force of "and" as a connective. But in certain contexts it may also have the meaning of "even." This would make the second noun a restatement of the first as further clarification. That is, Jesus may well have said to Nicodemus: "*Except a man be born of the water, even the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*" This would make "water" a self-same reference to the Spirit in an attempt to assist Nicodemus with his thinking on the matter. It would also be in harmony with Granville Sharp's rule. Moreover, it would be consistent with the apostle John's other two (2) usages of "water" in his gospel. In John 4, Jesus used the imagery of living water with the Samaritan woman, and again referred to living water in John 7:37-39 in speaking of the Spirit. We can conclude that Jesus was speaking to the woman at the well about the Spirit inside of the believer.

In Titus 3:5, Paul said that it was "*not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.*" Here the interpreter has two clear choices, both of which are validated by Scripture. Paul could have used the connective **kai** (and) with the sense of "even", thus making "the washing of regeneration and (even) the renewing of the Holy Ghost" a dual reference to the work of the Spirit in the new birth. Paul also could have used the phrase "washing of regeneration" as a reference to the Word in combination with the "renewing of the Holy Ghost" in the new birth experience. Paul's usage of the phrase "*the washing of water by the Word*" in Ephesians 5:26 would seem to compliment his language here.

The second interpretation, equating the water with the Word of God, appears to be the one best supported by both grammar and scripture. In John 3:14, Jesus cited an Old Testament event, with which Nicodemus was certainly familiar, to illustrate the means of experiencing this new birth. Moses lifted up the brass serpent in the wilderness (Numbers 21) as God's prescribed means to avoid death by snakebite. Life was given for a look of faith. The word went through the camp that a remedy was in place. A look in response to the word of provision was a life-giving / life-saving experience for the snake-bitten. The cry throughout the camp was "Look and live!" Even so now a look to the Christ of Calvary in response to the Word of the Gospel brings eternal life through the operation of the Spirit. The born again experience comes from the joint powers of the Word and the Spirit.

Advocates of baptismal regeneration run into the horns of a dilemma here. The repentant thief on a cross next to Jesus cried out in his last hour, "*Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.*" Jesus responded: "*This day shalt thou be with me in paradise.*" In other words, the thief was saved—and assured of that salvation by Jesus Himself—without baptism. In order to gainsay this truth, the baptismal regenerationist claims that the thief died under the old covenant (whether Abrahamic or Mosaic is not clear), and therefore did not require baptism. Baptism, they say, is required only for those after Christ's death and resurrection. That position, as we have shown, is totally without merit. However, assuming it is true, and the "water" of John 3:5 is indeed a reference to water baptism, Jesus was sharing a message of salvation with a man who would be required to wait nearly three (3) years in order to experience it. The woman at the well, on the other hand, experienced it just days after Jesus instructed

Nicodemus.

A final word on this covenant issue is in order. First, no one in any age of history has ever been justified as a result of the law (Mosaic covenant). Secondly, the Pauline epistles of Romans and Galatians make clear that believers in this age are saved by the same pattern of faith established by Abraham, and are included in the Abrahamic covenant, which Christ fulfilled. The argument for a covenant change after Christ's death and resurrection that altered the basis upon which God justifies sinners is the fruit of Biblical ignorance.

## Conclusion

This treatment was not intended to be exhaustive. It is, however, an attempt to give light and understanding to those who have been caught up in the baptismal regeneration error. What is clear is that faith in Christ provides the basis for justification. Christ provides forgiveness (cleansing from sin) and eternal life to the believer in response to repentance and faith. The candidate for water baptism therefore has a good conscience and a relationship with God before he enters the water. Baptism is the believer's public answer to the query, "Is Jesus Christ your Lord, and are you His disciple?" It separates him from an unregenerate world. Having provided the answer of a good conscience, the disciple goes on with God to experience full salvation.