

## Baptism

### What is baptism?

In the Old Testament, ritual washing or immersion symbolised cleansing from sin, sickness or corruption.

Moses and Aaron and his sons used it to wash their hands and feet. They washed whenever they entered the Tent of Meeting or approached the altar, as the Lord commanded Moses. **Exodus 40<sup>31-32</sup>**

On the seventh day he must shave off all his hair; he must shave his head, his beard, his eyebrows and the rest of his hair. He must wash his clothes and bathe himself with water, and he will be clean. **Leviticus 14<sup>9</sup>**

Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed." **2 Kings 5<sup>10</sup>**

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. **Psalms 51<sup>1-3</sup>**

At the start of the New Testament, John the Baptist continued the tradition of baptism being a symbol of cleansing from sin.

John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River. **Matthew 3<sup>4-6</sup>**

However, later in the New Testament, being baptised is seen as a public identification by born-again Christians with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

This water symbolises baptism that now saves you also - not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience towards God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, **1 Peter 3<sup>21</sup>**

Symbolically, the old life is buried under the water and we rise again to new life through the work of Jesus on the cross.

Don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. **Romans 6<sup>3-4</sup>**

Having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. **Colossians 2<sup>12</sup>**

Baptism is also a symbol of identification with Jesus and his church

For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body - whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. **1 Corinthians 12<sup>13</sup>**

There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. **Ephesians 4<sup>4-6</sup>**

## Why baptise?

Jesus tells us to be baptised once we are born-again.

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." **Matthew 28**<sup>18-20</sup>

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. **1John 5**<sup>1&2</sup>

The apostles also told people to be baptised once they were born-again.

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptised, 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." **Acts 2**<sup>38</sup>

There is the example of Jesus to follow. Even though he did not need to be baptised, he did so in obedience to the Father as a prophetic foreshadowing of his own death, burial and resurrection.

When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened **Luke 3**<sup>21</sup>

There are many examples in the early church of born-again Christians being baptised.

Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. **Acts 2**<sup>41</sup>

Baptism is not necessary for a person to be with Jesus for eternity. Our eternal salvation is ensured by faith alone when we put our trust in Jesus.

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." **Romans 1**<sup>16&17</sup>

When one of the criminals, who was crucified at the same time as Jesus, put his faith in Jesus, he could not have been baptised, but Jesus confirmed that he would still be with him in heaven.

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." **Luke 23**<sup>39-43</sup>

It is a command of Jesus and, in normal circumstances, Christians would be expected to seek baptism as soon as possible after being born-again.

And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptised and wash your sins away, calling on his name. **Acts 22**<sup>16</sup>

## How to baptise?

The Greek word used in the Bible for baptise is *baptizo*, which means to immerse, dip or plunge. Originally it referred to the dyeing of clothing and the necessity to fully immerse

the garment during the process. The implication is that the person being baptised is totally submerged, so in normal circumstances, baptism should be by full immersion in water. The important symbolism of union with Jesus in his death, burial and resurrection is simply not present in any other kind of baptism.

In the New Testament, there is no definitive description of the method of baptism, but it looks very much as if John the Baptist took Jesus down into the river and that he emerged out of the river.

As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. **Mark 1<sup>10</sup>**

John chose to baptise at Aenon because there was plenty of water there.

Now John also was baptising at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were constantly coming to be baptised. **John 3<sup>23</sup>**

The incident where Philip met the Ethiopian official also seems to indicate that full immersion took place.

As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptised?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptised him. **Acts 8<sup>36-38</sup>**

### **Who to baptise?**

Baptism is for born-again Christians, who understand what they have done and have a desire to freely declare that they count themselves dead to their former lives and have come into a new life under the Lordship of Jesus.

Some people baptise the babies of Christians (and/or nominal Christians) on the basis of the Old Testament practice of circumcising the male children of Jews, who were seen as part of the covenant. They say that the promise of God's grace extends to children of believers in the New Testament church and so it is legitimate to baptise them. The problem with this is that the Bible does not make this connection with the children of believers. Quite the opposite:

In those days people will no longer say, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' Instead, everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes - his own teeth will be set on edge. **Jeremiah 31<sup>29-30</sup>**

Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." **John 3<sup>3</sup>**

Where the New Testament connects circumcision with baptism, it assumes that those who are baptised have been born again.

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ. **Colossians 2<sup>11</sup>**

For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh. **Philippians 3<sup>3</sup>**

In the New Testament there is no example of babies being baptised. The, so-called, "household baptisms" in the book of Acts seem to stress an active response on behalf of everyone in the household.

When she and the members of her household were baptised, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us. **Acts 16<sup>15</sup>**

He then brought them out and asked, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? They replied, Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved - you and your household. Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptised. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God - he and his whole family. **Acts 16<sup>30-34</sup>**

Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptised. **Acts 18<sup>8</sup>**

Moreover, there is a clear order of believe first and be baptised afterwards in the New Testament. As babies cannot profess faith in Jesus for themselves, the baptism of babies and young children is not supported by the Bible.

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. **Matthew 28<sup>18-20</sup>**

Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. **Mark 16<sup>16</sup>**

There is nothing "magical" about baptism. The pool used for baptisms is not "sacred" and the water used is not made "holy". There is nothing conferred by the act of baptism itself. It is a rich and moving symbol, but not something that has power of itself. All the same, because of what it symbolises and the attitude of heart it represents, it is a significant time in the life of a Christian

Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. **Acts 19<sup>4-6</sup>**

Baptism is an exciting and important public declaration. It is an act of obedience to the words of Jesus. When we are baptised, we are declaring to God, to the church, to our family and friends, to the world, to the heavenly powers and, not the least, to ourselves that we belong to Jesus that we have decided to follow him, that we have died to our old life and started a new life. Making this declaration is important in establishing who we now belong to. It is making a covenant<sup>1</sup> of sorts that settles things once and for all, giving us a foundational reference point for the rest of our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> A covenant is an irrevocable promise or agreement made between two parties, often sealed by the shedding of blood. God made a covenant on a number of occasions between himself and his people. For example:

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." **Jeremiah 31<sup>33-34</sup>**