

What Does the Bible Say About Baptism?

Few subjects are talked about more and understood less than baptism. People argue over how it should be done, who should receive it, and whether it matters at all. Some treat it as a small thing, an outward sign of a decision already made. The New Testament does not treat it that way. It speaks of baptism plainly and often, and it ties baptism to the forgiveness of sins and to entering Christ. Let us set our opinions down and read what the Bible says.

Baptism Is a Burial in Water

The first thing to settle is what baptism is. In the New Testament it is a burial in water. Paul wrote, *"Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death"* ([Romans 6:4](#)), and again, *"Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him"* ([Colossians 2:12](#)). A burial is not a sprinkle on the forehead. It is a covering over. Baptism pictures a death, a burial, and a rising again, and only immersion does that.

The accounts bear this out. John baptized at Aenon *"because there was much water there"* ([John 3:23](#)). A few drops would not require much water. When Philip baptized the Ethiopian, *"they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch... and when they were come up out of the water"* the work was finished ([Acts 8:38-39](#)). They went down into the water and came up out of it. That is immersion, and that is what the Bible calls baptism.

What Baptism Is For

If baptism is a burial, what is its purpose? The Scriptures answer without flinching. When the crowd at Pentecost asked what to do, Peter said, *"Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins"* ([Acts 2:38](#)). Baptism is joined to the remission, the forgiveness, of sins.

Paul was told the same. After three days of prayer, a preacher named Ananias said to him, *"arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord"* ([Acts 22:16](#)). Saul already believed, and he had been praying for three days. Yet his sins were still on him, and he was told to wash them away in baptism. Jesus Himself joined the two: *"He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved"* ([Mark 16:16](#)). And Peter, years later, wrote that *"baptism doth also now save us"* ([1 Peter 3:21](#)).

Some teach that baptism is only an outward sign of a salvation already received, that a man is saved the moment he believes and is baptized afterward to show it. The verses will not allow it.

They place the washing, the remission, and the salvation at the point of baptism, not before it. James says plainly that a man is justified *"not by faith only"* ([James 2:24](#)). We are not saved by a faith that stops short of obedience. We are saved by a faith that obeys, and baptism is where that faith lays hold of the blood of Christ.

This is not the water doing the work. Peter is careful to say that baptism saves us, *"not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God"* ([1 Peter 3:21](#)). The power is in the blood of Christ and in God who raised Him, not in the water. But God has appointed baptism as the place and time where He applies that blood, and we are in no position to move it somewhere else.

Baptism Puts a Person Into Christ

Baptism also marks the moment a person enters Christ. Paul wrote, *"For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ"* ([Galatians 3:27](#)). Notice where Christ is put on. Not at faith only, but in baptism. He wrote elsewhere that we are *"baptized into Jesus Christ"* and into *"his death"* ([Romans 6:3](#)), and that *"by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body"* ([1 Corinthians 12:13](#)). Every spiritual blessing is in Christ, and baptism is how the New Testament says we come to be in Him. A man outside of Christ is not saved by intending to enter. He enters the way God said to enter.

Who Should Be Baptized

Baptism is for those who can believe and repent. Before the crowd was baptized at Pentecost, they heard the gospel and were cut to the heart ([Acts 2:37](#)). Before the Ethiopian was baptized, he confessed, *"I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God"* ([Acts 8:37](#)). At Corinth, *"many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized"* ([Acts 18:8](#)). The order is always the same. A person hears, believes, repents, confesses, and then is baptized.

This tells us who is not a candidate. An infant cannot hear and believe, and an infant cannot repent, for he has done nothing to repent of. Each person becomes a sinner by his own sin, not by his birth, so a baby has no guilt that baptism would wash away. The Bible never records an infant being baptized, and by its own teaching an infant never could need it. Baptism is for the one who is old enough to believe the gospel and turn from sin.

The Examples Agree

Watch how the first Christians treated baptism, and you will see they did not think it optional or distant. Three thousand were baptized the day they heard ([Acts 2:41](#)). The Ethiopian was baptized at the roadside as soon as he came to water ([Acts 8:36](#)). Saul arose and was baptized

without waiting ([Acts 9:18](#)). Cornelius and his house were commanded to be baptized that same day ([Acts 10:47-48](#)). The jailer at Philippi, hearing the word at midnight, "*was baptized, he and all his, straightway*" ([Acts 16:33](#)). Every account of conversion in the book of Acts includes baptism, and in every case it happened at once. No one was told to wait, to think it over, or to be baptized later as a formality. When men believed, they were buried with Christ that very hour.

But What About the Thief on the Cross?

Someone will mention the thief on the cross, who was saved without baptism. It is a fair question, and the Bible answers it. The thief lived and died before the new covenant came into force. A testament takes effect only after the death of the one who made it ([Hebrews 9:16-17](#)), and the command to be baptized into Christ's death was given after Jesus rose ([Matthew 28:19](#); [Mark 16:16](#)). While He walked the earth, the Lord could forgive sins directly, and He did ([Mark 2:5-10](#)). The thief was forgiven under that authority, in those days. He is not the pattern for us, who live on this side of the cross and the Great Commission. We are told plainly what to do, and we are not left to guess.

One Baptism, and No Reason to Wait

There is "*one Lord, one faith, one baptism*" ([Ephesians 4:5](#)). Not many baptisms for many reasons, but one, commanded by the Lord, received by a penitent believer, for the remission of sins and entrance into Christ. If you have been immersed for that reason, thank God. If you were sprinkled as an infant, or baptized only as a sign of something you thought you already had, then you have not yet obeyed the baptism the New Testament teaches.

So the question comes home. Have you been buried with Christ and raised to walk in newness of life? If not, what keeps you? The same word that told three thousand what to do tells you. "*And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins*" ([Acts 22:16](#)). The Lord has not changed the terms. He still adds the obedient to His church, and He still washes sins away in the water of baptism by the blood of His Son. Do not put off until tomorrow what the jailer would not put off past midnight.

Every Scripture reference in this study links to the King James Version. Open it and read for yourself.