

Baptism Required For Salvation?

Is baptism necessary for salvation? Every Christian who honestly desires to know what God really requires to have one's sins forgiven needs to be willing to ask this question. If we are wrong on this question, we are in serious error. If baptism is required in addition to believing or trusting in Jesus, then we need to know. This is a controversial issue with some people, but everyone who is serious about pleasing God will want to know the truth. In answering this question, we will explore the background and meaning of baptism, the meaning of a series of New Testament passages related to baptism, and then a number of New Testament passages about salvation.

BACKGROUND. Historically, water has been used down through the ages by various religious groups as a rite of initiation. The Jews required that a Gentile who desired to become a convert to Judaism be circumcised, undergo a ritual bath, and offer a sacrifice. Within Judaism the ritual bath was referred to as baptism. Baptism was used to symbolize purification and repentance.

The Greek word for the verb "to baptize" is BAPTIZO. The ancients used this Greek word in a variety of ways. For example, the word had the meaning "to dip, to immerse, to bathe, to drown, to sink, to perish, and to go under." One significant usage of the word was a reference to a ship "sinking." It referred to dipping into water. Due to disagreements about the method of baptism, the King James Version Bible did not give us the meaning of the verb BAPTIZO but transliterated it, or converted each Greek word to an English word in order to avoid controversy.

A difficult New Testament passage for those who believe that BAPTIZO means to sprinkle is John 3:23. Here we are told that John the Baptist baptized where there was a lot of water. Why did John need lots of water? Obviously, he did not need lots of water to sprinkle someone. He only needed lots of water to dip someone down into the water. Therefore, we conclude that baptism referred to someone being dipped into water.

MEANING OF JOHN'S BAPTISM. Now let us ask the question, "What was the meaning of John's baptism?" The answer comes in Matthew 3:1-6 where we find John the

Baptist baptizing people who were confessing their sins. The Greek language in Matt 3:5-6 reveals that the people who were being baptized were confessing their sins.

Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. (NASB) Matt. 3:5-6

The Greek verb for "confess" is a present participle which indicates they were confessing again and again. I can understand this because I have done the same thing. Have you ever sinned and felt so badly about what you did that you confessed, and confessed and kept on confessing? That is the picture of the seriousness of these people. In fact every real Christian never stops repenting of his or her sins. The baptism of John the Baptist was a baptism of repentance (Matt. 3:11) - a regret and turning away from sin. Mark 1:5 gives us the same idea,

All the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, [the ones repeatedly] confessing their sins. (NASB) Mark 1:5

John's baptism did not save anyone. It was a symbol of repentance.

MESSAGE IN ACTS. The book of Acts is a historical snapshot of the development of the early church and it provides

valuable insight into the teaching about baptism. In Acts 13:24 we are reminded that John preached a baptism of repentance.

... after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. (NASB) Acts 13:24

Baptism is a result of believing in Jesus. It comes after one believes Jesus is our Savior God who takes away our sin (John 1:29). In Acts 10:44-48 we find that Cornelius had believed and was saved. Baptism did not save him, because verse 45-46 says the Holy Spirit came on Cornelius and the rest of the family who had also believed. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was proof they were Christians (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 1:13-14). Scripture is interesting in that it does not always explain everything in one place, and Acts 19:3-5 finally helps us put it all together.

And he said to them, "Into what then were you baptized?" So they said, "Into John's baptism." Paul said, "John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus." (NKJV) Acts 19:3-5

It is here that we learn that John the Baptist baptized people only after encouraging them to believe on Jesus who would come after him. John's baptism was for people who were repenting of their sin in preparation for Messiah.

ANCIENT RECORDS SPEAK. John the Baptist was such a famous individual that even the Roman historian Josephus in the Antiquities of the Jews, Book 18, Section 5, paragraph 2 says,

Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness toward one another and piety toward God, and so to come to baptism; for the washing if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away, of some sin but for purification of the body: supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness.

The historical perspective, while not inspired by God, is consistent with the New Testament teaching about baptism. The message is clear, John's baptism was for people who were repenting of their sin in preparation for Messiah.

EXAMINING A FEW PASSAGES. Now someone may say, there are five New Testament passages: Mark 16:16; John 3:5; Acts 2:38; Romans 6:4 and 1 Peter 3:21 that suggest baptism is required for salvation. How do we understand these passages? There are two principles we will use as we examine these passages. Scripture explains scripture, and the verses that go before and after the passage help us understand the passage (context). We have already learned that baptism is symbolic of being cleansed from sin.

Mark 16:16. Our first passage leaves us with the impression that both baptism and belief are necessary in order to be forgiven of our sins.

He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. (NKJV) Mark 16:16

A clear understanding of this verse requires that we closely consider the last part of the sentence. The first part tells a person how to be saved and appears to require baptism. The last part of the sentence gives us a warning that those who do not believe will not be saved. The last part of the verse reveals that there is only one thing that causes one to be condemned - not believing. If not being baptized causes one to be condemned, why was that not included? If baptism is required then the verse should have read something like this: "... but he who does not believe and he who is not baptized will be condemned." But the verse does not read that way. A person is only condemned if they do not believe.

Water baptism is sometimes included with the requirement to believe in Jesus because baptism shows that you are serious about your commitment, and nothing more. It is required as an symbol to others of an internal commitment to God in your heart.

John 3:5. The second passage we will explore is a statement that Jesus directed to Nicodemus about being "born again."

Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born

of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.
(NKJV) John 3:5

Jesus' statement can be difficult to understand; therefore, we want to stop here and discuss this verse for a little while before we go on. We want to discover what Jesus meant. Imagine for a moment that you are Nicodemus. If Nicodemus had been watching John the Baptist and Jesus for a while, what do you think he would have seen them doing? First, he would have seen Jesus doing miracles and performing signs. Second, he would have watched Jesus talking with people and baptizing people as they repented of their sins. Those are the things that have been described to us. John 2:1-12, 23 told us that Jesus did miracles and signs. We know from John 3:22-23 and 4:1-2 that both John and Jesus were baptizing people. Both of them had baptized and taught others, but only Jesus performed miracles and did signs.

The baptism of John and Jesus was about repentance - not salvation. Their baptism was one of preparation and not about salvation. So when Jesus referred to water in verse 5, what do you think Nicodemus would have thought about? As we have already said, we know from John 3:22-23 and 4:1-2 that both John and Jesus were baptizing people. But if we look closely at John 3:25-26, we discover that their baptism is referred to as purification. The Jewish ritual of baptism was a symbolic act of purification. It did nothing for the one being baptized. It was strictly a symbolic act that revealed one's heart. Nicodemus would have understood that the baptisms of John and Jesus were symbolic acts of purification - an indication that the one being baptized was repenting of his sins.

We must remember that Christian baptism did not come about until after Jesus returned to heaven. John and Jesus were not practicing Christian baptism. During their ministry, baptism was symbolic of repentance. Nicodemus would have understood this and would have been reminded of Ezekiel 36:25-27 where "water" and "Spirit" are used together. Water referred to repentance. Baptism does not save. Baptism does not change one's life. The Spirit changes a life.

Baptism was an outward act of an inner heart-felt repentance. When we come to Jesus, our sins are washed away

(Isa. 1:18; 3:5) and at the same time we are given His Holy Spirit.

Notice John 3:6-8 indicates that one does not become spiritual by any human act, not by washing, not by physical birth, nor by anyone you know. Jesus' message to Nicodemus is that he must be spiritually born by the Holy Spirit. If water baptism is so important, why did Jesus not include the act of physical baptism in John 3:8 and in John 3:16? Why did Jesus only refer to the Holy Spirit? Why is baptism left out of so many New Testament passages?

Acts 2:38. Our third passage occurs on the day of Pentecost. Peter's sermon starts at verse 14. In verse 21, Peter tells them what they must do to be forgiven from their sins, "Call on the name of the Lord . . ." In verses 22-24 Peter reminds them of the miracles, wonders and signs that Jesus had performed and then the fact that they had killed him anyway. Peter then declares that Jesus returned to life just as King David had predicted. Then the people asked, "What shall we do?" Peter responds with these words,

Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (NKJV). Acts 2:38

Peter had already told them what was necessary for salvation in verse 21. Now he adds that they need to repent from their sins and demonstrate their commitment to turn from sin by being baptized.

Romans 6:4. The fourth passage is found in the book of Romans.

Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life (NKJV). Rom 6:4

It is a discussion about "Should we continue sinning?" The Holy Spirit gives us a better understanding of the meaning of baptism. It is a symbol of our dying along with Jesus and then returning to life just as Jesus did. So when a Christian is immersed into water, it symbolizes that he/she has died

New Testament Passages About Salvation

Passage	Key Phrase (NASB)
Mark 1:15	... repent and believe in the gospel.
Mark 16:16	He who believes and is baptized will be saved ...
Luke 8:12	... so that they may not believe and be saved.
John 1:12	... the right to become children of God, to those who believe ...
John 3:5	... unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.
John 3:15	... so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.
John 3:16	... whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.
John 3:18	He who believes in Him is not judged ...
John 3:36	He who believes in the Son has eternal life ...
John 5:24	... he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life ...
John 6:40	... everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life ...
John 6:47	Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life.
John 11:25-26	He who believes in Me shall live even if he dies
John 20:31	... but these have been written that ... believing you may have life in His name
Acts 2:37-38	... Repent, and let each of you be baptized ... for the forgiveness of your sins ...*
Acts 3:19	Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away ...*
Acts 10:43	... everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.
Acts 16:31	Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved ...
Acts 19:4	John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him ...
Rom. 1;16	... for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.
Rom. 3:22	... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe ...
Rom. 4:3	... ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS ...
Rom. 6:4	... buried with Him through baptism into death ... Christ was raised from the dead
Rom. 10:9	... confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart ...
Gal. 3:6	... Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS ...
Gal. 3:22	... the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe ...
Eph. 2:8-9	For by grace you have been saved through faith ... not as a result of works ...
1 Tim. 1:16	... as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life ...
James 2:23	AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS ...
1 Pet 1:9	... obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls ...
1 Pet. 3:21	... now saves us - baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh ...
1 John 3:23	And this is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ ...

Passage	What Is Required To Become A Christian?			
	Believe	Repent	Confess	Baptize
Mark 1:15	✓			
Luke 8:12	✓			
John 1:12	✓			
3:16	✓			
3:36	✓			
5:24	✓			
6:40	✓			
11:25	✓			
20:31	✓			
Acts 2:38	-	✓	These are present as the results of true belief.	✓
16:31	✓			
19:4	✓	✓		✓
Rom. 3:22	✓			
4:3	✓			
10:9	✓		✓	
Gal. 3:3-9	✓			
3:22	✓			
Eph. 2:8-9	✓			
1 Tim. 1:16	✓			
James 2:23	✓			
1 John 2:23	✓			

to sin. Notice that baptism is always connected to cleansing from sin. Then when we come up out of the water, it is symbolic of our new life.

1 Peter 3:21. The last passage occurs after a discussion about Noah and his family being saved by the ark from death by drowning.

... There is also an antitype which now saves us - baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (NKJV). *1 Pet. 3:21*

The Holy Spirit is quick to say that the baptism He is referring to does not wash away dirt - it is not water. He is referring to a baptism that is symbolic of a clean conscience before God. This is a strange thought to us and seems to be unimportant, but scripture says the type of conscience we have indicates our eternal destiny. False teachers have a "seared conscience (1 Tim. 4:2)." According to Acts 24:16; Titus 1:15; Heb. 9:9, 14; 10:22; 13:18, the conscience convicts of sinful or ungodly motives and desires. What saves

us? 1 Timothy 1:19 states that a bad conscience indicates an individual is going to hell. So just as the ark saved Noah, a good conscience "now saves" us. The Greek tense of "saves" implies we are being saved now - it is not a future event. We are being saved right now. Baptism in this passage is symbolic of new spiritual life.

PASSAGES ABOUT SALVATION. The salvation of our souls is one of the most important truths from God to us. It would be a disaster if God was inconsistent about what we must do to be saved. There are at least twenty-four passages in the New Testament dealing with salvation. Of these twenty-four passages, twenty of them say that believing is required for salvation. Only two of the twenty-four passages seem to imply that repentance plus baptism is necessary. One passage connects baptism and confessing Jesus with your mouth as required to be saved.

The Holy Spirit has made it clear that believing in Jesus is all that is required to have your sins forgiven and go to heaven. The other conditions are indicators of true faith.

CONCLUSION. Is baptism required for salvation? The answer is no! It is commanded by the Holy Spirit as an act of

symbolic death from your sins and of your decision to live a new life committed to Jesus Christ.