

A Biblical Study of Baptism

While Christian baptism has been observed in various ways throughout the centuries, examining the Scriptures helps us recalibrate the essential meaning and practice of baptism during Christ's life and the early existence of the church. Use these passages and this study guide to explore the Biblical stories and teachings about baptism. While the selected passages are not exhaustive, they will help you discover the purpose and importance of baptism.

Central Idea: *Baptism is an ordinance of the Lord, and His Church, by which those who have repented and come to faith express their union with Christ in His death and resurrection, by being publically immersed in water in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is a sign of belonging to Christ, of being connected to His Body – the church, and is a visible expression of the passing away of the old polluted life and the revealing of new life in Christ.*

Key Verses

1. Read the story of Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist, **Matthew 3:1-17**.

- a. Why was John the Baptist baptizing people in the Jordan?
- b. Why did he rebuke the religious leaders for coming?
- c. Why was John reluctant to baptize Jesus?
- d. What answer did Jesus give to John?
- e. What was the significance of God's voice from heaven over the event?

2. The Book of Acts is an excellent history lesson on the practice of baptism in the early church. In each passage, note a) who was baptized, b) where they were baptized, c) how soon after conversion they were baptized.

- a. Acts 2:41
- b. Acts 8:26-40
- c. Acts 9:17-18
- d. Acts 16:27-34

3. The disciples waited in the upper room and the Holy Spirit descended upon them giving them power to proclaim the Gospel message. Peter immediately addresses a crowd of Jews in Jerusalem who are visiting from all over the world for the Jewish observance of Passover. Read **Acts 2:14-41** paying special attention to 37-41.

- a. How did the people respond to the message?
- b. Why did Peter emphasize repentance as an important part of faith?
- c. How many were baptized that day?

4. Read Romans **6:3-7**.

- a. How does baptism connect us to Christ?
- b. Why are death and life such important baptism concepts?
- c. What is baptism announcing to the believer, the church, the world?

5. Read **Galatians 3:26-29**.

- a. What does it mean to be “clothed with Christ?”
- b. How does baptism denote “belonging” to Christ, and heirs by adoption?

6. Paul describes a spiritual baptism that unifies all Christians into Christ. Physical baptism is announcing this spiritual reality. Read **I Corinthians 12:13** and **Ephesians 4:4-5**.

- a. Why is “one Spirit” and “one Body” so important?
- b. Why are baptism and Spirit so closely tied together?

7. Jesus gives His disciples final instructions before ascending to heaven. He commands His followers to “make disciples of all nations.” Read **Matthew 28:18-20**.

- a. What role does baptism play in “making disciples”?

Reading: *The Importance of Believer's Baptism*

Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is a public act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Savior and the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is one of two church ordinances, baptism and communion, practiced in evangelical churches.

The word translated "to baptize" in the Greek manuscripts is *baptizo*, which means "to dip, plunge, submerge, or immerse." In common Greek usage, it sometimes referred to a cloth that had been baptized into a liquid dye solution. It also referred to a ship that was completely sunk or submerged. Baptism in the New Testament was related to the ministry of both John the Baptist and of Jesus. John's baptism was symbolic of one's repentance from sin and of willingness to participate in the kingdom of God (Matt. 3:6-8; Luke 3:3-16). John's baptism was preparing people for what Christ would complete.

Jesus submitted to John's baptism (Matt. 3:16) not because He needed repentance from His sins (the Scriptures repeatedly declare that Christ lived a perfect and sinless life), but to authenticate John's ministry, to set an example for His followers, and to dedicate Himself publicly to His redemptive ministry. In so doing Jesus symbolized His death, burial, and resurrection.

Baptism was a religious practice of Jewish people before the arrival of Christ. Jewish people entered a *micvah*, a buried cistern of water, in order to become ceremonially clean prior to worship at the temple. John's baptism extended the idea of purification not just by entering water but by repenting of sin and pursuing a new life. The baptism of Christ announces that a new life of holiness is imparted spiritually, and in increasing measure experientially, to the child of God (Colossians 2:12-13).

Baptism followed faith in the Scriptures. People believed in Christ and almost immediately were baptized. There are no instances in the Scriptures in which people were baptized prior to a profession of faith.

Baptism was a public announcement that a person had found Jesus Christ and was now imparted with a new Spirit and blessings from God. New life and new community are central. The new believer has forsaken the old life and received a new life. She has also become an important member of Body of Christ, giving and receiving for the building up of the community of faith (Ephesians 4:16)

Most passages in the Bible indicate that people were immersed in water to be baptized. For instance, Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch found a body of water along the road and "went down into the water and Philip baptized him" (Acts 9:38). Yet the manner of baptism seems less important than the symbolic act of a person submitting in humility to the work of God in their life. It is Christ who actually completes the baptism of the person connecting them to Himself and to His Body, which is the church.

Reading Study Questions

1. Why was baptism in the Bible such a public act?
2. How does the literal meaning of the word **baptizo** influence our understanding of baptism?
3. What are the benefits of being baptized shortly after exercising faith in Christ?
4. What would New Testament writers say about a person who is a Christian but does not feel the need to be baptized?
5. Summarize in your own words why baptism is important.

Going Deeper

Shelley, Bruce. *Why Baptism?* Intersity Press, 1987.

Cottrell, Jack. *Baptism a Biblical Study*. College Press Publishing Company, 1990.