

120 How important is baptism?

It's a question people have debated for centuries—but what happens when we set aside traditions and simply follow the biblical evidence?

Scripture connects baptism with forgiveness, salvation, entering Christ, receiving new life, and becoming part of His body.

In this episode, we examine five passages that directly connect baptism with salvation and ask a challenging question: Can we find a single passage where salvation comes before baptism?

The answer may cause you to look at baptism—and your own response to Jesus—very differently.

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Two beginning observations

1. Everything that God expects a person to do to accept his gift of salvation by grace through faith is not found in any one verse in the Bible

John 3:16 and Hebrews 11:6 teach us that faith is necessary to please God and receive salvation. There's no mention in these verses of repentance, confession, or baptism.

In Acts 17:30, 31, Paul preached that all men everywhere are expected to repent. That will influence judgment day. Repentance and its blessings are connected to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. These verses do not contain the expectation of faith, confession that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, or baptism.

In Romans 10:9, 10, we read that belief in the resurrection of Christ from the dead and confession of the Lord Jesus are necessary for salvation. He did not include repentance in this passage, which is expected of all men everywhere, or baptism.

Jesus commanded the apostles to preach in Mark 16:16 that a person must believe and be baptized to be saved. He did not include repentance or confession in that verse.

2. When the Holy Spirit inspired men to write that a certain response is necessary, it is necessary. There may be other expectations included in other passages, but this command cannot be omitted.

Jesus said in John 3:18 that a person who does not believe in him is condemned already. No one can ignore that and be saved. There may be other things expected, but faith cannot be rejected.

Jesus repeated the same warning twice in Luke 13:3, 5. Anyone who refuses or neglects to repent will perish. We learned that repentance is necessary. There may be other things expected, but repentance cannot be rejected.

Jesus agrees with Paul's teaching about the necessity for confession in Matthew 10:32, 33. Confession of Jesus before men is necessary. There may be other things that are expected, but confession cannot be rejected.

Jesus commissioned his apostles as they preach the gospel, to command people to believe and be baptized to be saved in Mark 16:16. As we have seen, other things are expected such as repentance and confession, but faith and baptism cannot be rejected.

But which comes first, baptism or salvation?

It's true that the entire plan of salvation isn't found in any one passage of scripture. However, there are five passages that mention baptism and salvation. Let's read those and see which comes first in each passage, baptism or salvation.

Mark 16:16

In this one verse, which comes first: baptism or salvation? Many people reply by saying belief comes first. That is correct. We've already noticed what Jesus said in John 3:18 that a person who does not believe is condemned already.

A person must believe. But after having faith in Jesus, which comes first, baptism or salvation? In this one verse Jesus places belief and baptism before salvation. But someone observes, Jesus said, "but he who does not believe will be condemned." He didn't say he who is not baptized will be condemned. As we have noted above, when an expectation of obedience is specified, that is necessary. A person who does not believe cannot be baptized because faith comes before baptism. The person is condemned already who does not believe.

In this one passage, Jesus places baptism before salvation.

Acts 2:38

In this one passage, which comes first, baptism or salvation? And someone may observe that repentance comes first. And that is correct. We have noted before that Jesus said twice, unless a person repents that person will perish. And after a person has believed and repented, in this one verse which comes after repentance, baptism or remission of sins? In this one verse baptism comes before remission of sins.

Acts 22:16

In this verse which comes first, baptism or washing away sins? In this one verse baptism precedes washing away sins.

Romans 6:4

In this verse, which comes first, baptism or walking in newness of life? In this one verse, baptism precedes newness of life. One is baptized into the death of Christ. It was in his death that he shed his blood. We encounter his blood when we are baptized into his death. A dead person is buried, not a live person. Newness of life comes after the burial and resurrection.

1 Peter 3:21

In this verse, which comes first, baptism or salvation? In this one verse, baptism comes before salvation and is said to save us. In view of this scripture, can one conclude that baptism does **not** save us?

We've read five scriptures. where both baptism and salvation, or its equivalent — remission of sins, washing away sins, and newness of life — are found in the same verse. In each one, baptism precedes salvation. Can we find any verse where salvation precedes baptism?

Why should a person be baptized? What are the purposes?

1. **To follow Jesus' example.** Although he could not be baptized for the remission of sins because he never sinned, Jesus thought it was necessary to do everything that God commanded. Matthew 3:13-15
2. **To obey the gospel.** When people believed the gospel in the New Testament, baptism was the expected response. There are no examples in the book of Acts of believers postponing baptism. Acts 2:41; Acts 16:30-34; Acts 18:8

3. **Because Jesus commanded it.** Jesus made baptism part of the Great Commission. A person is baptized because Christ, the Lord, instructed His followers to do so. Mark 16:16
4. **For the forgiveness of sins.** Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16
5. **To receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.** Acts 2:38
6. **To be united with Christ.** Romans 6:3, 4
7. **To put on Christ.** Galatians 3:27
8. **To enter Christ.** Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27
 1. This is important because all spiritual blessings are in Christ. Ephesians 1:3
9. **To become part of Christ's body.** 1 Corinthians 12:13
10. **As an appeal to God for a clean conscience.** 1 Peter 3:21
11. **To begin a new life.** Romans 6:4

One striking feature of the New Testament is the immediacy of baptism. When people came to faith, they were baptized without prolonged delay. There's no example in the New Testament where a person who obeyed the gospel ever ate a bite or drank a drop or slept a wink between the time they heard the gospel and when they were baptized.

The emphasis is not on earning salvation by a work but on responding in faith in obedience to God's gracious offer through Jesus Christ. The person being baptized is not doing a work but submitting to a command which the Lord gave for all who want to be saved.

Questions

How many of these purposes does a person have to know and completely understand to be obedient to Jesus and receive the benefits of obeying him?

How many of these purposes does a person have to misunderstand to need to be rebaptized?

Who makes that decision?