

**BAPTISM – ITS MEANING AND TEACHING**

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The closing words of the Lord Jesus to the eleven disciples on the Galilean mountain, whose identification is not specified (although it could well have been Mount Hermon), are all-important for all time.

‘And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ...” (Matt.28:18-19).

This is the Lord’s mandate to his apostles to teach and carry out the practice of baptism. This booklet endeavours to explore its relevance, taking a broadly chronological approach to the subject. We begin with the Old Testament background.

## CHAPTER 2: OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The book of Exodus provides the first example of the importance of water as a cleansing and purifying agent for those who would engage in God's service in his dwelling-place of a past day, the tabernacle. Even the garments of the people of Israel had to be thoroughly washed in their preparation for the Lord's appearing before his people in the cloud of his presence, when descending into their midst. When Aaron, the brother of Moses and high priest of Israel, and his sons were getting ready to begin their priestly duties, number one priority for them was to be bathed in water, from head to foot, before putting on special clothing. God's instruction was clear:

'Then you shall bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the tent of meeting and shall wash them with water and put on Aaron the holy garments. And you shall anoint him and consecrate him, that he may serve me as priest' (Ex.40:12-13).

The many animals sacrificed required certain parts of their bodies to be washed. Moreover, in their daily responsibilities the priestly family, and Moses also when appearing before the Lord, were to wash their hands and feet at what was called 'the laver' or 'basin'. It was a very large bowl constructed of brass and containing water, and they had to wash their hands and feet in it, before approaching the altar upon which animals were slain as an offering to the Lord (see Ex.19:9-10, 14; 40:7,12-13,30-32; Lev.16:4,24,26,28). Not only Moses, his brother Aaron and his

sons, but also the Levites who had ancillary duties in tabernacle service, assisting the priests in various tasks, likewise had to go through the process of bodily cleansing before discharging their responsibilities (see Num.8:6-7,15,18-21).

It should be noted that while in the Old Testament water is seen as an agent of purification, in the New Testament, although the element is applied in certain instances in the context of the soul's salvation, for example in Ephesians 5:26 and Titus 3:5, it is clearly evident that water baptism has nothing to do with salvation; it is something incumbent upon those who have already believed on the Lord Jesus. Taking, for example, the story of Naaman's cleansing in Jordan's river at the command of the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 5), it is interesting to note that the divine record tells us he went down and dipped seven times in the river, and was cured of his leprosy (v.14). This is an illustration of salvation, not water baptism, though the fact that the whole body was immersed in water and not simply wiped with a cloth, is significant in terms of what is required in believers' baptism.

An example of an Old Testament ritual with a New Testament lesson is seen in the once-for-all overall washing of Aaron and his sons, and the daily duty of washing their hands and feet at the laver in the tabernacle prior to their service for the Lord (see Ex.30:18-21). This contains an important truth which is presented in John 13:4-10. There we have indisputably the most wonderful occasion of humility in action found in Scripture when we examine the performance of one of the most menial tasks a servant can render to his master.



On this occasion it is the Lord and Master himself who assumes the lowly servant's role, demonstrating his undying love for those who travelled and remained with him, bearing his reproach, in his three and a half years of service. He takes a basin and towel, washes then dries the feet of his followers, which no doubt were covered with dust and dirt from their journey. Peter protests, as expected, and when realising the Lord's determination to carry out this act, asks for his head and hands likewise to be washed. The lesson taught and learned that evening reveals a wonderful truth. Believing on Jesus as Messiah ensured a true and complete cleansing of life and soul, but frequent recourse to the word of God, which 'water' in Scripture so often symbolises, is also needed for daily preparation of the heart to serve God.

When the Lord says to Peter that the person who is 'bathed' (Greek *louo*, meaning to bathe completely), as Peter was, is already completely clean (Greek *katharos* meaning clean, pure or clear) and needs only wash the feet, he is stating the fact that believing on him as Saviour is a once-for-all act bringing about total regeneration of the soul, while washing (Greek *nipto*, meaning the washing of a part of a body) the feet implies only a part of the body being cleaned and is conveying spiritually the constant requirement of consulting the word of God, along with prayer, for daily cleansing and guidance. What a wonderful, daily, encouragement to try even harder to be obedient to our Master and Lord!

All this serves to emphasise the place that water cleansing had in Israel's days in the wilderness and also when coming to reside in the land of promise. References in Hebrews to 'instruction about washings' (6:2) and 'various washings' (9:10) would, in

the writer's mind, have their foundation in these events found in the Old Testament record. The mention of 'instruction' (Greek *didache*, meaning doctrine) underlines the fact that they are in the divine record as a means of our being instructed and tutored in God's way of how we should serve him.

## CHAPTER 3: NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING – JOHN THE BAPTIST

The first reference to baptism in the New Testament informs us of the early ministry of John the Baptist in the wilderness of Judaea, the location of his work being in harmony with his Spartan way of life, in his unfashionable clothing and very basic diet. His appearing on the scene at this stage was prophesied by Isaiah over seven centuries before Christ came to earth:

‘A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isa.40:3).

His ministry was heaven-authorised and at its core was the necessity for people to repent of their sins and receive as a result God’s forgiveness. By making the effort to come out to see and hear John, they demonstrated the genuineness of their interest, and an acknowledgement of guilt before God:

‘And they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins’ (Matt.3:6).

Note that they were not sprinkled with water drawn from the Jordan, but dipped in the river, which did not have the best of reputations as far as cleanliness was concerned! (See also Matt.3:1-12; Mk.1:2-8; Lk.3:3-17; Jn.1:19-28).

In the many Scriptural references to baptism, the Greek preposition used is properly translated ‘in’ water, not ‘with’ water, so

there is no thought of sprinkling being the method. Additionally, the word in the original language of the New Testament for baptism is '*baptizo*' (Greek) which means 'immersion' or 'submersion'.

The crux of the matter was that by their public confession of sins and consequent baptism, those being baptized gave witness to their desire for God's work of inward cleansing in their hearts. The power of his preaching drew crowds from all over Israel, of which a good element were Pharisees and Sadducees, the leading religious authorities of that day, who had come simply to criticise and condemn. Soldiers of the occupying Roman army and possibly the temple guard, as well as the despised tax collectors who, though Jews, were under the employ of Rome, also came to him. John saw through the charade of the first group mentioned, and rebuked them. Nevertheless many accepted and believed what John had to say. The content of his message was not only the call to repentance, but the importance of believing on the person who would follow him, the Saviour of the world. He would baptize in a deeper and more spiritual way, not just in water, but in the Holy Spirit and fire. We shall explain more of this in Chapter 8.

John's baptism in water of people who came to him repenting of their sins was an exclusive ministry. He was the last in the line of the prophets of the Old Testament with a focused message, viz. announcing the arrival of the Messiah, and the need for people to believe on Jesus. This is different from what we have later in the gospels and epistles where water baptism by immersion follows faith-belief and the reception of the Holy Spirit.

## CHAPTER 4: NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING - THE LORD JESUS: HIS EXAMPLE

The Lord Jesus then comes on to the scene and we are told of him making his way from his home in Nazareth specifically to be baptized by John in the Jordan. Not, obviously, to confess his sins as he was sinless in nature and character, but to set an example for others to follow. When arriving at the Jordan, the principal river in Israel, he declared to John that by doing this God's approval of John's teaching was being validated, and the act was a fulfilment of righteousness.

‘And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt.3:16-17).

The occasion was unique as the Spirit of God descended softly and beautifully in person upon the Lord Jesus, as a dove fluttering to its resting-place. The voice of God the Father from heaven indicated his absolute pleasure in this action of his beloved Son (see also Matt.3:13-15; 21:25; Mk.1:9-11; 11:30; Lk.3:21-22; 20:4-8; Jn.1:29-34).

The apostle John's gospel account tells us that John the Baptist then moved more inland to Aenon near Salim, west of where he had been working in the wilderness, to a location with a plethora

of fountains and streams. Meanwhile the Lord Jesus continued his own ministry of water baptism, although his disciples did the actual baptising. John's disciples, in what amounted to a probable pique of jealousy, then expressed to their teacher and leader their feelings about people moving more away from him and going rather to hear Jesus. John graciously replied that his service was now coming to an end, and that the Lord's would be taking precedence (Jn.3:22-30; 4:1-2).

John's witness to the people of Israel of God's demand for repentance and his penetrating words of testimony to the Christ, were extremely effective, but sadly his service was short-lived. An enraged immoral ruler reacted with venom towards this fearless preacher of righteousness who was unafraid to speak against the fast-declining moral standards of the day, imprisoned him, and on the whim of a seductive and murderous young woman, put him to death by beheading. The Lord Jesus spoke very highly of John as one who was much more than a prophet, declaring faithfully and fervently the whole counsel of God, and saying that, among men born up to that time, there was no one to match him (Lk.7:24-28).

## CHAPTER 5: NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING - THE LORD JESUS: HIS MANDATE

In the eleven disciples' get-together with the Lord on the mountain in Galilee prior to leaving them and returning to heaven, he delegates responsibility to them as his representatives on earth and assures them of his close and constant companionship.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ... And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt.28:19-20).

He has been given all authority to command his apostles to evangelise by going into the world to preach the gospel, thereby causing those who believe not only to receive there and then the gift of eternal life, but also to be brought into the path of discipleship. He then outlines the next step to be taken: baptism in water. The clear meaning of the word as we have seen is complete immersion, nothing less and nothing else. Mention is then made of this action being ‘into (Greek *eis* - meaning motion or direction into) the name (singular, as being the one God) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’.

Mark 16:15-19 would by all accounts appear to describe the very same instructions, though in this passage we have the Lord telling the disciples that the person who believes and is baptized shall be saved; but the one who disbelieves shall be condemned (v.16). This shows that baptism should closely follow belief, al-

though it is clearly not a prerequisite of salvation. It also asserts that it is disbelief that brings condemnation, not a failure to be baptized.

There is a different meaning of the word 'baptism' found in the gospels, as the Lord Jesus also used the term to refer to the way in which he would be treated by men of his day, ultimately leading to the manner of death by which his life would end in this world. So the word itself signifies death, not only as a physical event, but also as we shall see in chapter 7, as a spiritual lesson (see Matt.20:22-23; Mk.10:38-40; Lk.12:50).



## **CHAPTER 6: NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING – PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF WATER BAPTISM IN THE ‘THE ACTS’**

The book of the Acts contains more references to the word ‘baptism’ and its derivatives than any other. First we read of the call of Peter, and those alongside him, to the assembled international crowd of people who had made their way to Jerusalem and were now about to return home. They were to:

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins”  
(Acts 2:38).

Again, like the explanation given by the Lord in Mark’s gospel, this is not saying that water baptism, or any other baptism, accomplishes salvation, rather that repentance and faith would secure their conversion. But baptism in water, as a confirmation of a person’s salvation, and a witness to their decision to follow him as disciples, should be a not-too-distant follow-up action (see also Mk.16:16).

The outcome of the Spirit-filled messages spoken by Peter and the other eleven apostles (now including Matthias who had taken Judas’ place) on the day of Pentecost was the glad acceptance of the gospel by about three thousand people:

‘So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls’  
(Acts 2:41).

They were willingly baptized in water as proof of their faith in Christ. Thereafter they were ‘added’ (or ‘joined’) to those who were already meeting together in testimony to the Lord’s name. This provides a clear example of baptism coming after belief in the Saviour.

A further example of baptism following belief is found if we turn over a few chapters in the Acts to discover a very different scenario from that described above. First of all we read of God working through a man, who is identified as ‘Philip the evangelist’ (Acts 21:8), proclaiming Christ as Saviour and Lord in the city of Samaria. Scores of citizens believed the good news of the gospel and were baptized. Even a well-known sorcerer named Simon, who held tremendous sway over many citizens of the city, was won for Christ, was baptized, and accompanied Philip on his gospel itinerary. The truth of baptism was an integral part of Philip’s mission:

‘... as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ’ (Acts 8:12).

Thus it has to do with the new convert’s step of obedience, after belief, in the will and purpose of God for their life (see also 8:4-5, 12-13). Up to that time, the Spirit had only come upon those who had been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus; that was soon to change.

Then we are introduced in the Acts narrative to no less a person than the Chancellor of Ethiopia, a proselyte to Judaism, who had been in Jerusalem to pay homage to the God of Israel whom he had come to acknowledge in his life. He was crossing the desert

by chariot on the way home, with his head buried in reading the scroll of Isaiah the prophet. He was endlessly and fruitlessly trying to identify the person of whom the prophet had written. Philip, always at the ready, heard an angel speaking and was then directed by the Spirit of God to make his way to the place where the chariot had stopped, and preached Jesus to him. He also spoke about baptism, to which the traveller readily submitted when arriving at a place where there was sufficient water for him to be fully immersed. He said:

“See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” ... and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him’ (Acts 8:36-38).

Next, we have the amazing change in the life of the arch-persecutor of Christians at that time, Saul of Tarsus. He had made it his business, in fact it was no less than his all-consuming passion, like a lion on the hunt for its prey, to once and for all squash this movement that had become publicly known as ‘The Way’ and imprison its proponents and adherents. The Lord Jesus personally intervened, speaking directly to him, transforming his life, and ensuring he was gently placed into the hands of a spiritual giant of a man named Ananias - a certain disciple - who conversed with Saul further, after which he was baptized (Acts 9:1-18).

In Acts chapter 10 we read of Peter’s encounter in Caesarea with the Roman centurion Cornelius and a number of his relatives and close friends. It is recorded that after hearing Peter preach the good news of the gospel, they all received the message by faith, subsequent to which the Holy Spirit came upon all who

believed on the Lord Jesus. This was a cause of amazement to the six believing Jews who had accompanied Peter, as the audience was Gentile. Consequently, the apostle asked if there was any objection to the new converts being baptized there and then; there was none, and they were duly baptized in (Greek *en* meaning 'in the name' or 'with the authority of') the name of Jesus Christ – (see Acts 10:43-48; 11:12-18).

Further on, in chapter 16, we learn of a well-travelled business entrepreneur named Lydia, who called her domestic servants in her home in Philippi, to hear the message spoken by the apostle Paul. She and her household believed and were then baptized (16:14-15).

Whilst Paul and Silas were still in Philippi, a similar reaction was recorded in the case of the prison warder who had considered committing suicide after an earthquake had resulted in cell doors being flung open and prisoners' shackles being burst. However, having heard Paul and Silas speak of Christ, he was stopped in his tracks and instead of taking his own life, he gave his heart to the Lord (Acts 16:25-33).

By contrast, we have the account later on of the occasion when Paul came across about a dozen men who had only known John's baptism and had not heard anything about the Holy Spirit being given. They were required to be baptized again, this time into the name of the Lord Jesus, thereafter receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. This was an exceptional incident for Gentiles, for whom, in all cases, the reception of the Spirit was at the time of belief. So even though some people had been baptized by John the Baptist, and after a period of time had firmly believed in the Lord Jesus

as their only and personal Saviour, they were still required to be baptized again, as previously stated, into the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:1-7).

Finally, in dealing with the matter of water baptism, we come to the expression 'one baptism' which Paul uses in his letter to the church in Ephesus (4:5). Note that the Greek adjective 'one' – *heis* – means one numerically. Thus its setting here would indicate this is no less than water immersion, viewed as a stand-out and stand-alone requirement in the counsel of God, again shown as closely linked to faith in our one and only Lord.

## CHAPTER 7: NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING – THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF BAPTISM

Paul, writing to believers in the church of God in Rome - and delighting to speak of himself as a servant of Jesus Christ, and also as one who possessed apostolic authority in what he said - directs his readers in chapter 6 to the way of life expected of those who have come to know God's abounding grace that has brought freedom from a life of sin. He explains that their experience of being baptized in water, as a public admission and confession of their conversion, has a deeper meaning than simply an act witnessed by others, important though this act of witness is. Going down into the water is symbolic of their being united to Christ in his death. Then being fully submerged in the water is a figure of being buried with him, out of sight to any other person. If we don't get baptized we miss out on experiencing the glorious reality of being spiritually buried with him into (Greek *dia*, meaning through or by) his death. Emerging from the water is our association with him in his resurrection.

'We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life' (Rom.6:4).

This renders death powerless over our 'new' life, so we too, through our baptism, can reckon our bodies as 'alive' to God and no longer dead under the dominion of sin (Rom.6:3-11).

A very similar statement to the truth expounded in Romans 6 is found in Colossians 2:12. Paul's burden and calling was first of all to proclaim the gospel of Christ and although baptism, as we have seen, is closely allied to salvation in evangelism, the apostle was quick to point out to the saints in the church of God in Corinth, where partisanship and division had arisen, that this was his major objective. There is no reason whatsoever for people in a church of God to take sides, elevating those who may be more publicly gifted than others. They had been baptised into (Greek *eis*, meaning motion or direction into) the name of the Lord Jesus, no other. As such their undivided loyalty was to their Lord, and not men (1 Cor.1:11-17).

Further on in his writing to the church, he returns to the deliverance of God's people from the pursuing Egyptian army as evidence of God's appointment of Moses as their leader and saviour (1 Cor.10:1-2). God's presence with them was assured in the pillar (or column) of cloud that went before them during the daytime, and the pillar (or column) of fire by night, but it was through Moses that he spoke to the people and acted. In this incident at the Red Sea, the figure of baptism is underlined by the apostle as an acknowledgement by the believer of the ownership and authority of the Christ as Master and Lord of their life (Ex.13:21-22; 14:13-14, 19-25, 31).

Like any other truth of Scripture being misunderstood and misapplied, baptism became no more than a ritual in some religions, even to the extent that some practised it as a way (in their thinking) of conferring benefit in the afterlife, to those who had died, (1 Cor.15:29).

## **CHAPTER 8: BAPTISM IN THE HOLY SPIRIT AND INTO THE BODY OF CHRIST**

After his resurrection and subsequent manifestation to his disciples the Lord Jesus says to them exactly what John the Baptist said about him, that he would baptize in the Holy Spirit - an inward transaction implemented only by the Lord himself, resulting not only in the permanent residing of the Spirit within the believer's body, but also bringing spiritual power for witness to others of the Saviour's death and resurrection (Acts 1:5, 8).

This is unquestionably different from water baptism. Believing on Christ automatically brings us into an unbreakable spiritual union with him and introduces us at the same time into full membership of his body. We are therefore part of him, seen as 'one with him'. The Lord Jesus alone is the baptizer and the Holy Spirit is the channel used (see Matt.3:11; 1 Cor.12:12-13).

Moreover, in the writer's view, the context of Galatians 3:23-29, with its accentuation on faith-belief being the operating factor in making us sons of God, bears out that 'baptism into Christ' is not water baptism, but a spiritual transaction enabling us to 'put on Christ'. In most other cases, where water baptism is being spoken of, we have the mention of being baptized 'into the name of the Lord Jesus'.



## CHAPTER 9: SO WHY SHOULD I BE BAPTIZED?

It is clear that a new convert is already a disciple at the moment of receiving eternal salvation, by God's grace, through faith in Christ, not after being baptized. The verb 'make' included in Matthew 28:19 suggests a new status for that person. It is the starting point of the Christian life, which is to be one of continual growth, development, and maturity in God's service. The disciple then, in being baptized, is setting out on a journey which should be one of commitment to the Lord Jesus, from which there should be no turning back.

Baptism is, in effect, an outward statement of an inward intent. As a hymn that is often sung at baptisms, especially of young disciples, puts it so simply:

*"I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back;*

*The cross before me, the world behind me, no turning back."*

Gospel Songs 109

Peter, a real out and out follower of the Lord Jesus, as all should be, in his letter, warns his readers to be careful should they encounter opposition and suffer persecution, it should only be on account of doing good and not evil. Disciples are required to live a good manner of life in Christ governed by a clear conscience. He then introduces the wonderful experience on which they can draw when they obeyed the command of the Lord Jesus to be baptized. He analogizes this by the story of Noah's ark as the

means of eight people being saved through the element of water, and being ready and prepared after that experience, to conduct their lives in a way that glorified God. This he relates to the act of baptism which disciples have gone through in obedience to the Lord's desire for his own (1 Pet.3:16-22).

Reminiscing on the day of our baptism is equated to examining and appealing to our conscience before God, having done something that was very special to him, and therefore is a wonderful spur to serving the Lord more effectively, and also a powerful restraint from deserting the disciple path. Truly, we can rightly look back to that moment when we first were immersed in the baptismal waters – whether it was in the sea, river, swimming pool, or a very basic tank of water – as a time when we brought great joy to our God and Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Brian Fullarton*





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