

“Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean.” (Ezek 36:25)

✠ Lecture VII: Baptism in The Holy Book of Acts ✠

The Holy Bible is far from silent on the subject of baptism. Many clear and straightforward verses are spread over the whole range of the New Testament, from the Holy Gospels to the Holy Epistles. In what follows, we shall, by the grace of God, examine the meaning of baptism as recorded in the Holy Book of Acts.

“And Peter said to them, repent and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38-39)

This passage is important because it describes the function of Christian baptism at the point of its very inauguration on the day of Pentecost. It is part of the apostolic instruction to sinners who are asking how they might be saved. It states quite clearly that baptism is the focal point of God’s promises of forgiveness and is a prerequisite for the gift of the Holy Spirit. The audience that heard St. Peter’s sermon was a large group of devout Jews who worshipped God according to the Old Covenant. Undoubtedly, many of them had encountered Lord Jesus and rejected Him thinking they were defending the Law. What they heard from St. Peter, as confirmed by the miraculous manifestation of the Spirit, shook them to the very foundation of their faith. Lord Jesus Christ – whom they sent to His death – was their God-sent, God-exalted Messiah! When this realization dawned upon them, they sensed themselves as sinners exposed to the wrath of God; “They were cut to the heart, and said to St. Peter and the rest of the apostles, men and brethren what shall we do?” (**Acts 2:37**). What shall we do about what? About their burden of sin. St. Peter’s audience now felt a state of lostness and cried for help “what shall we do” to be saved? St. Peter’s statement concerning baptism in **Acts 2:38-39** must be understood against this background. Baptism is at the very heart of his answer to the question about what must be done to be saved. St. Peter’s first instruction was that they should repent and the only other condition given is baptism. Since **Mk 16:16** lists baptism as a condition for salvation and **Jn 3:5** gives it as a condition for entrance into the Kingdom of God, we should not be surprised that it is presented in **Acts 2:38-39** as a condition for the forgiveness of sins as well as for receiving the Holy Spirit. In fact it would have been surprising if St. Peter had not mentioned water baptism in his answer. This leads to a final consideration relative to the conditions specified in **Acts 2:38**, namely, why is **faith** not included here. We could infer from the question in (**v 37**) and the reply in (**v 38**) that it was not necessary to specify faith since those who heard the message and were cut to the heart by it already believed. This is why they asked for further instructions on what to do next. This may be compared with a similar situation when the Philippian jailer asked basically the same question to St. Paul, “What must I do to be saved?” (**Acts 16:30**). This man, a pagan, had not as yet had the benefit of hearing a message about Lord Jesus Christ. Thus St. Paul’s reply focused on the foundational requirement, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved” (**Acts 16:31**). This instruction was not meant to be comprehensive and all-inclusive, it was just an opening statement immediately followed by more teaching; “Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him” (**Acts 16:32**). Though neither repentance nor baptism is specifically mentioned, we can infer that they were included in this “word of the Lord”. This is surely the case with baptism, since “immediately he and all his family were baptized” (**Acts 16:33**). Similarly, we can consider St. Peter’s instruction in **Acts 2:38** to have been determined by the level of response already achieved by his hearer. Since a measure of faith was already evidenced by their question, there was no need to mention it specifically. In this connection, one other point may be noted; if salvation were by faith alone, what was the need then for further instructions? What was the need to baptize 3000 persons on one day? Why didn’t St. Peter say to them, “since you have believed and were cut to your hearts, the matter is over, you have been saved”? In summary, then, the conditions for receiving salvation as mentioned in **Acts 2:38-39** are **Repentance** and **Baptism**, plus an **implied faith**.

“And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins calling on the name of the Lord.” (Acts 22:16)

Ananias’ instruction to Saul includes two imperatives, “be baptized” & “wash away your sins”. This last item is the crucial one. What does it mean to wash away sins? It is equivalent to the forgiveness of sins as discussed in **Acts 2:38** above. This is accomplished only by the application of the blood of Lord Jesus Christ to our souls, “The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin” (**1 Jn 1:7**). When Ananias says, “Get your sins washed away”, he is simply saying, “Get your sins forgiven”. The significant point for our purpose is the close connection between baptism and the washing away of sins. The most natural understanding is that the former is somehow the occasion or the condition of the latter. This is true for several reasons. First, this view is consistent with other New Testament teaching about baptism and salvation in general and with its teaching about baptism and forgiveness in particular. It is in effect the exact equivalent of St. Peter’s instructions above. “Be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins,” (**Acts 2:38**) means the very same thing as “be baptized and wash away your sins” (**Acts 22:16**). Second, the very fact that Saul is instructed with an **imperative** to wash away his sins shows that it must be the result of baptism. As noted above, the only means of washing sins away is the blood of Lord Jesus Christ. All would surely agree that only the Lord Himself could apply His blood to our souls. That is to say, the act of washing away of sins is an act of God and not the act of any human being; it is a spiritual act accomplished by divine power alone. It is impossible for Saul or anyone else literally to wash away his own sins. What sense does it make, then, for Saul to be told, “wash away your sins”? How could he possibly do such a thing? Here is the answer: There was no way that he could do this himself unless the washing away of sins was dependant on something he could do, namely, submit to Christian baptism. This shows that baptism is a vital part of the grace system itself and should not be regarded as just a human work of obedience. The close connection between baptism and washing helps us understand the baptismal content of other New Testament references to washing:

- “But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of God.” (**1 Cor 6:11**)
- “Our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” (**Heb 10:22**)
- “As Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for her, that He may sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word.” (**Eph 5:25-26**)
- “According to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.” (**Titus 3:5**)

‡ **FAQ:**

Q5: Is there contradiction between the baptismal references in the Holy Book of Acts and Mt 28:19 since they do not mention that baptism was in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit?

A5: There is no contradiction because when the Holy Book of Acts mentions that someone was baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ” (**Acts 2:38**), “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (**Acts 8:16**) or “in the name of the Lord” (**Acts 10:48**), it simply means that these people were baptized with the baptism that Lord Jesus Christ instituted which is basically “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (**Mt 28:19**)

* This lecture is adapted from ‘*Baptism A Biblical Study*’ by Jack Cottrell.