



What Is Baptism?

“Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19, NLT)

Jesus gave one final command to his disciples before ascending to heaven: “Go and make disciples of all nations and baptize them.” Why? Going to all nations and making disciples would, of course, spread the Good News (the gospel) quickly, but why baptize? What is so important about baptism that all his followers should do it?

Looking back through the centuries, the church has obediently practiced the ordinance of baptism (a religious ceremony). However, through the years some controversy developed about how to do it, when to do it and what it means. As you read stories and verses about baptism in Scripture, be like the Bereans when Paul and Silas taught them about Jesus. The Bible says they were “open-minded” and “*searched the Scriptures day after day to see if they were really teaching the truth.*” (Acts 17:11, NLT) You may also want to talk to your parents, pastor, priest or youth minister. Baptism is not an option for a believer; it is a command to follow in loving obedience to Jesus.

The meaning of baptism

What does the word “baptism” mean? The English word comes from the Greek word *baptizo*, which means, “to dip” or “to immerse.” The Greeks used it to describe the dyeing of a garment, or the drawing of water by dipping a vessel into another. However, some theologians believe the word only implies the water must be in close contact with the person, sprinkling or dipping, rather than immersing.¹ In the New Testament accounts, it seems that immersion may have been the primary method followed by the early Christians. As soon as a believer expressed a personal faith in Jesus, baptism followed immediately as a witness to their faith and identification with Jesus. Sometimes, whole families were baptized at the same time. (Acts 16:33) Baptism does not save you; faith in the Lord Jesus Christ saves you. “*For if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*” (Romans 10:9, NLT)

New Testament examples

Exciting examples reveal how the first disciples obeyed Jesus’ command. After Jesus ascended to heaven, Peter preached his first sermon. The Holy Spirit moved in the hearts of 3000 people who believed in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord and were baptized.

What a day! Imagine beginning a church (First Church of Jerusalem) with 3000 people!
(Read Acts 2:41-42)

Luke tells a fascinating “baptism” story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40. One day an angel spoke to Philip the evangelist: “At noon go south down the desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza.” He obeyed and soon saw a man in a carriage riding down the road, reading aloud from the book by the prophet Isaiah. The Holy Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and walk beside the carriage.” When he did, he asked the eunuch, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The eunuch replied, “I have no one to explain it to me.”

Philip, beginning with the Isaiah passage, shared with him the Good News about Jesus. As the eunuch listened, his heart responded. He understood he was sinful and believed Jesus had died for him and forgiven his sins. When he saw a body of water, he asked, “Why can’t I be baptized?” They stopped, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of God suddenly took Philip away. He found himself in Azotus, a city completely out of the desert and on the seacoast!

A Sign of identification

If baptism is not necessary for salvation, why is it so important and meaningful? First, in obedience to Jesus’ command, you are announcing to a witness or witnesses that you have received Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. As a new believer, you identify yourself with Jesus before your parents, school friends and church members. It is an outward sign of an inner change in your heart. You are saying to your world, “I have decided to follow Jesus! I am a new person now in God’s family!”

The symbolism of baptism

Second, water baptism beautifully pictures the Holy Spirit’s work of placing you into God’s family. John the Baptist predicted that when Jesus came he would baptize with the Holy Spirit. The Bible says, “*But we have all been baptized into Christ’s body by one Spirit, and we have all received the same Spirit.*” (1 Corinthians 12:13b, NLT) The moment you believed, the Holy Spirit immersed you into the body of Jesus and made you one with him. Paul told the Colossians, “*For this is the secret: Christ lives in you, and this is your assurance that you will share in his glory.*” (Colossians 1:27b, NLT) The Apostle John said, “*All who proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God have God living in them, and they live in God.*” (1 John 4:15, NLT)

How did God do this? In order to make a new person, God had to do something with the old. Paul says that by a supernatural divine miracle, you participated in Christ’s death on the cross, his burial and his resurrection. He asked the Romans:

Or have you forgotten that when we became Christians and were baptized [spiritually immersed] to become one with Christ Jesus, we died with him? For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ

was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we may also live new lives. (Romans 6:3-4, NLT)

Paul goes on to say that your “old sinful self was crucified with Christ, and now you are free from the power of sin!” You are still able to sin, but you have the power of Jesus to refuse! How precious are these truths! When you go into the water, you demonstrate your death and burial to your old sinful self. When you come up, you demonstrate your resurrection into a new life. You are a new person, and you want the world to know!

Baptize in his name

There is one other precious truth! Jesus instructed his disciples to “baptize in the *name* of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19, NLT) To baptize “in the name” indicates that the baptized person is clearly bound to, or has become the property of, the one in whose name he is baptized.² Is not that a beautiful picture demonstrating that when you believed, you became God’s child?

Attitude Check:

- Does your attitude toward baptism reflect that of Christ’s?

Explore:

- Read Romans 6:1-11. Circle the words died, dead, death, crucified, buried and raised. Write in your journal what this means to you.

Talking with God:

- Dear Father, thank you for supernaturally making me a new person. Give me understanding and direction about baptism. I want to be obedient to your will.

¹ Unger’s Bible Dictionary, Merrill F. Unger, Moody Press, 1966, p.122

² The Expanded Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, Bethany House Publishing, 1984, p.89