

Is Baptism Necessary for Salvation?

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Videos: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyclnkMsQdo&feature=player_embedded
by [Matt Slick](#)

One of the most nagging questions in Christianity is whether or not baptism is necessary for salvation. The answer is a simple, "No, water baptism is not necessary for salvation." But you might ask, "If the answer is no, then why are there verses that say things like '...baptism that now saves you...' ([1 Pet. 3:21](#)) and '...Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins...' ([Acts 2:38](#))?" These are good questions and they deserve a good answer, so we will look at these verses later. But for now, the reason baptism is not necessary for salvation is because we are justified by faith ([Rom. 5:1](#); [Eph. 2:8](#)), not by faith and a ceremony ([Rom. 4:1-11](#)). You see, a religious ceremony is a set of activities or forms performed by someone. In the Bible circumcision was a ceremony where one person performed a religious rite on another person. Likewise, baptism is also a ceremony where one person performs a religious rite on another person. But, we are saved by faith alone and anything else we do, including ceremonies, will not help.

If we are saved by faith, then we are saved by faith when we believe, not when we get baptized, otherwise we are not saved by faith. Furthermore, if baptism is necessary for salvation then anyone who receives Christ on his deathbed in a hospital and who also believes Jesus is God in the flesh, who died and rose from the dead for his sins, etc., would go to hell if he doesn't get baptized before he died. This would mean that we were not justified by faith because if we were, then the person would be saved. Also, if baptism is necessary for salvation, then all babies who die go to hell since they weren't baptized. Remember, when someone says that baptism is necessary, there can be no exceptions -- otherwise it isn't necessary.

Now, in order to more thoroughly look at this issue, I need to lay a foundation of proper theology, and then I'll address some of those verses that are commonly used to support the idea that baptism is necessary for salvation.

God Works Covenantally

First, you need to understand that God works covenantally. A covenant is a pact or agreement between two or more parties. The New Testament and Old Testament are New and Old Covenants. The word "testament" comes from the Latin testamentum which means covenant. So, the Bible is a covenant document. If you do not understand covenant you cannot understand, in totality, the issue of baptism because baptism is a covenant sign.

If you do not think that God works covenantally then look at [Hebrews 13:20](#) which says, "Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant,..." "The Eternal Covenant is the covenant between the Father and the Son before the creation of the world, whereby the Father would give to the Son those whom the Father had chosen. That is why Jesus says things like, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away," ([John 6:37](#)). And, "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day," ([John 6:39](#)). And, "I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours," ([John 17:9](#)).

If you fail to understand that God works covenantally and that He uses signs as manifestations of his covenants (rainbow, circumcision, communion, etc.) then you will **not** be able to understand where baptism fits in God's covenant system.

Second, you need to know what baptism is. It is a ceremony that represents an outward representation of an inward reality. For example, it represents the reality of the inward washing of Christ's blood upon the soul. That is why it is used in different ways. It is said to represent the death of the person ([Rom. 6:3-5](#)), the union of that person with Christ ([Gal. 3:27](#)), the cleansing of that person's sins ([Acts 22:16](#)), the identification with the one "baptized into" as when the Israelites were baptized into Moses ([1 Cor. 10:2](#)), and being united in one church ([1 Cor. 12:13](#)). Also, baptism is one of the signs and seals of the Covenant of Grace that was instituted by Jesus.

The Covenant of Grace is the covenant between God and Mankind where God promises to Mankind eternal life. It is based upon the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and the condition is faith in Jesus Christ. As the Communion Supper replaced Passover, baptism, in like manner, replaces circumcision. "They represent the same spiritual blessings that were symbolized by circumcision and Passover in the old dispensation" (Berkhoff, Lewis, Systematic Theology, 1988, p. 620). Circumcision was the initiatory rite into the Abrahamic covenant; it did not save. A covenant is a pact or agreement between two or more parties and that is exactly what the Abrahamic covenant was. God said to Abraham, "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you," ([Genesis 17:7](#)). God later instructed Abraham to circumcise not only every adult male, but also eight day old male infants as a sign of the covenant ([Gen. 17:9-13](#)). If the children were not circumcised, they were not considered to be under the promissory Abrahamic covenant. This is why Moses' wife circumcised her son and threw the foreskin at Moses' feet ([Ex. 4:24-25](#)). She knew the importance of the covenant between God and her children. But at the same time we must understand that circumcision did not guarantee salvation to all who received it. It was a rite meant only for the people of God, who were born into the family of God (who were then the Jews).

An important question here is how is it possible for an infant to be entered into a covenant with God. There could be a lot of different answers given but the point remains: it was done; infants were entered into a covenant relationship with God -- through their parents.

In the New Testament, circumcision is mentioned many times. But with respect to this topic it is specifically mentioned in [Col. 2:11-12](#): "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead." In these verses, baptism and circumcision are related. Baptism replaces the Old Testament circumcision because 1) there was a New Covenant in the communion supper ([Luke 22:20](#)), and 2) in circumcision there was the shedding of blood, but in baptism no blood is shed. This is because the blood of Christ has been shed and circumcision, which ultimately represented the shed blood of Christ in his covenant work of redemption, was a foreshadowing of Christ's work.

If you understand that baptism is a covenant sign, then you can see that it is a representation of the reality of Christ circumcising our hearts ([Rom. 2:29](#); [Col. 2:11-12](#)). It is our outward proclamation of the inward spiritual blessing of regeneration. It comes after faith which is a gift of God ([Rom. 12:3](#)) and the work of God ([John 6:28](#)).

Third, the Bible says that it is the gospel that saves. "By this gospel you are saved..." ([1 Cor. 15:2](#)). Also, [Rom. 1:16](#) says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." Neither of these verses, which tell us what saves us, includes any mention of baptism.

What is the Gospel?

It is clearly the gospel that saves us, but what exactly is the gospel? That too is revealed to us in the Bible. It is found in [1 Cor. 15:1-4](#): "Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to

you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." The gospel is defined as the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus for our sins. Baptism is not mentioned here.

Paul said that he came to preach the gospel, not to baptize: "I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name. (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel..." ([1 Cor. 1:14-17](#)). If baptism is necessary for salvation, then why did Paul downplay it and even exclude it from the description of what is required for salvation? It is because baptism is not necessary for salvation.

Additionally, in Acts, Peter was preaching the gospel, people got saved, and then they were baptized. [Acts 10:44-48](#) says, "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.' So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days." These people were saved. The gift of the Holy Spirit was on the Gentiles and they were speaking in tongues. This is significant because tongues is a gift given to believers (see [1 Cor. 14:1-5](#)). Also, unbelievers do not praise God. They cannot because praise to the true God is a deep spiritual matter that is foreign to the unsaved ([1 Cor. 2:14](#)). Therefore, the ones in Acts 10 who are speaking in tongues and praising God are definitely saved, and they are saved before they are baptized. This simply is not an exception. It is a reality.

Let's Suppose...

Another way of making this clear is to use an illustration. Let's suppose that a person, under the conviction of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8), believed in Jesus as his savior (Rom. [10:9-10](#); [Titus 2:13](#)), and has received Christ ([John 1:12](#)) as Savior. Is that person saved? Of course he is. Let's further suppose that this person confesses his sinfulness, cries out in repentance to the Lord, and receives Jesus as Savior and then walks across the street to get baptized at a local church. In the middle of the road he gets hit by a car and is killed. Does he go to heaven or hell? If he goes to heaven then baptism is not necessary for salvation. If he goes to hell, then trusting in Jesus, by faith, is not enough for salvation. Doesn't that go against the Scriptures that say that salvation is a free gift ([Rom. 6:23](#)) received by faith ([Eph. 2:8-9](#))?

Saying that baptism is necessary for salvation is dangerous because it is saying that there is something we must do to complete salvation. That is wrong! See [Gal. 2:21](#); [5:4](#).

All right, so this sounds reasonable. But still, what about those verses that seem to say that baptism is part of salvation? I will address those now, but because this subject can become quite lengthy, in fact sufficient for a book in itself, I will only address a few verses and then only briefly.

Baptism Verses

John 3:5, "Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.'"

Some say that water here means baptism, but that is unlikely since Christian baptism hadn't yet been instituted. If this verse did mean baptism, then the only kind that it could have been at that point was the baptism of repentance administered by John the Baptist ([Mark 1:4](#)). If that is so, then

baptism is not necessary for salvation because the baptism of repentance is no longer practiced.

It is my opinion that the water spoken of here means the water of the womb referring to the natural birth process. Jesus said in verse three that Nicodemus needed to be born "again." This meant that he had been born once -- through his mother's womb. Nicodemus responds with a statement about how he cannot enter again into his mother's womb to be born. Then Jesus says that he must be born of water and the Spirit. Then in verse 6 He says that "flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." The context seems to be discussing the contrast between the natural and the spiritual birth. Water, therefore, could easily be interpreted there to mean the natural birth process.

I would like to add that there are scholars who agree with the position and some who do not. Some believe that the water refers to the Word of God, the Bible, and others claim it means the Holy Spirit. You decide for yourself.

Acts 2:38, "Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

This verse is often used to say that baptism is part of salvation, but we know from other scriptures that it is not, lest there be a contradiction. What is going on here is simply that repentance and forgiveness of sins are connected. In the Greek, "repent" is in the plural and so is "your" of "your sins." They are meant to be understood as being related to each other. It is like saying, "All of you repent, each of you get baptized, and all of you will receive forgiveness." Repentance is a mark of salvation because it is granted by God ([2 Tim. 2:25](#)) and is given to believers only. In this context, only the regenerated, repentant person is to be baptized. Baptism is the manifestation of the repentance, that gift from God, that is the sign of the circumcised heart. That is why it says, "repent and be baptized."

Also, please notice that there is no mention of faith in [Acts 2:38](#). If this verse is a description of what is necessary for salvation, then why is faith not mentioned? Simply saying it is implied isn't good enough. Peter is not teaching a formula for salvation, but for covenant obedience, which is why the next verse says that the promise is for their children as well.

1 Pet. 3:21, "and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also -- not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

This is the only verse that says that baptism saves, but the NIV translation of the verse is unfortunate. A better translation is found in the NASB which says, "and corresponding to that, baptism now saves you." The key word in this section is the Greek *antitupon*. It means "copy," "type," "corresponding to," "a thing resembling another," "its counterpart," etc. Baptism is a representation, a copy, a type of something else. The question is "Of what is it a type?" or "Baptism corresponds to what?" The answer is found in the previous verse, verse 20: "who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. ²¹And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you," (NASB).

Some think that the baptism corresponds to the Ark because it was the Ark that saved them, not the floodwaters. This is a possibility, but one of the problems is that this interpretation does not seem to stand grammatically since the antecedent of Baptism is most probably in reference to the water, not the Ark.

But, water did not save Noah. This is why Peter excludes the issue of water baptism being the thing that saves us because he says, "not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God." Peter says that it is not the application of water that saves us but a pledge of the good conscience. Therefore, baptism here most probably represents the breaking away of the old sinful life and entrance into the new life with Christ -- in the same way that the flood waters in Noah's time was the destruction of the sinful way and, once through it, known as entering into the

new way. Also, Peter says that the baptism is an appeal of a good conscience before God. Notice that this is dealing with faith. It seems that Peter is defining real baptism as the act of faith.

Acts 22:16, "And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name."

Is the washing away of sins done by baptism, the representation of the circumcised heart ([Col. 2:11-12](#)) which means you are already saved, or is it by the blood of Christ ([Heb. 9:14](#); [Rom. 5:9](#); [Eph. 1:7](#))? Obviously it is the blood of Jesus and the washing here refers to the calling on Jesus' name.

Rom. 6:4, "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."

Because the believer is so closely united to Christ it is said that the symbol of baptism is our death, burial, and resurrection. Obviously we did not die -- unless, of course, it is a figurative usage. And that is what it is here. The figure of baptism represents the reality of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. It is a covenant sign for us. Remember, a covenant sign represents the covenant. The covenant sign of baptism represents the covenant of grace which is that covenant between God and the Christian where we receive the grace of God through the person of Christ by means of his sacrifice.

Titus 3:5, "he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."

The washing of rebirth can only be that washing of the blood of Christ that cleanses us. It is not the symbol that saves, but the reality. The reality is the blood of Christ.

Gal. 3:27, "for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."

This is speaking of the believer's union with Christ. It is an identification with, a joining to, a proclamation of loyalty to, etc. In [1 Cor. 10:2](#) the Israelites were baptized into Moses. That means they were closely identified with him and his purpose. The same thing is meant here.

Conclusion

Baptism is not necessary for salvation. It is the initiatory sign and seal into the covenant of grace. As circumcision referred to the cutting away of sin and to a change of heart ([Deut. 10:16](#); [30:6](#); [Jer. 4:4](#); [9:25,26](#); [Ezk.44:7,9](#)) baptism refers to the washing away of sin ([Acts 2:38](#); [1 Pet. 3:21](#); [Tit. 3:5](#)) and to spiritual renewal ([Rom. 6:4](#); [Col. 2:11-12](#)). The circumcision of the heart is signified by the circumcision of the flesh, that is, baptism ([Col. 2:11-12](#)).

One last thought: If someone maintains that baptism is necessary for salvation, is he adding a work, his own, to the finished work of Christ? If the answer is yes, then that person would be in terrible risk of not being saved. If the answer is no, then why is baptism maintained as being necessary the same way as the Jews maintained that works were necessary?