

Wednesday, March 31, 2010 - Only Baptism washes away sins

I received many e-mails in the past week from those who had lost loved ones, sharing with me their experiences from that extremely painful time in their life. I appreciate you trusting me with your stories.

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The design of water baptism in the New Testament is unquestionably to allow for the sinner's sins to be removed by the blood of Jesus. This purpose is variously described as "to be saved" (Mark 16:16), "for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38), to "put on Christ" (Galatians 3:27), to "enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5), to "wash away your sins" (Acts 22:16), to place one "into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13) and "into Christ" (Romans 6:3). These are parallel expressions that identify the same design.

In an effort to avoid the clear introduction of such verses, some theologians have invented the concept that water baptism is a post-salvation action that follows the forgiveness of sins. Christendom, almost in its entirety, insists that remission of sin is imparted to the sinner at the very moment the sinner "believes" (i.e., accepts Jesus as personal Savior). This reception of Christ is an internal, mostly intellectual/mental decision in which the individual makes a genuine commitment to receive Jesus as Lord.

In his book *How to be Born Again*, Billy Graham expressed the viewpoint espoused by the bulk of Christendom: "All you have to do to be born again is to repent of your sins and believe in the Lord Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior" (1977, p. 156). He stated further: "Faith is trust, an act of commitment, in which I open the door of my heart to Him" (p. 160); "It means a single, individual relinquishment of mind and heart toward the one person, Jesus Christ" (p. 161); "Conversion occurs when we repent and place our faith in Christ" (p. 162). Near the close of his book, Graham summarized the prevailing view of when forgiveness occurs:

Make it happen now... If you are willing to repent for your sins and to receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you can do it now. At

this moment you can either bow your head or get on your knees and say this little prayer which I have used with thousands of persons on every continent: O God, I acknowledge that I have sinned against You. I am sorry for my sins. I am willing to turn from my sins. I openly receive and acknowledge Jesus Christ as my Savior. I confess Him as Lord. From this moment on I want to live for Him and serve Him. In Jesus' name. Amen... If you are willing to make this decision and have received Jesus Christ as your own Lord and Savior, then you have become a child of God in whom Jesus Christ dwells... You are born again.

Mr. Graham leaves no doubt as to his view of when forgiveness of sins occurs, and that it occurs before and without water baptism.

Max Lucado, expressed the same viewpoint in his book, "He did This Just for You". He states: Would you let him save you? This is the most important decision you will ever make. Why don't you give your heart to him right now? Admit your need. Agree with his work. Accept his gift. Go to God in prayer and tell him, I am a sinner in need of grace. I believe that Jesus died for me on the cross. I accept your offer of salvation. It's a simply prayer with eternal results

Lucado then followed this statement with a "response page" that provided the reader with the opportunity to make the decision that he (Lucado) has just advocated. The page, titled "Your Response," includes the statement, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of the Living God. I want him to be the Lord of my life," and is followed by two blank lines, one for the reader to sign his or her name, and the other to record the date.

Most within Christendom believe that salvation occurs prior to water baptism. The Protestant world has insisted that water baptism is a secondary and subsequent action to salvation. But if this is the case, what then is the purpose of baptism?

Various religionists have maintained that it serves as "an outward sign of an inward grace." That is, since a person already has received the saving grace of God by which sins have been cleansed, baptism serves the purpose of providing an outward demonstration or public declaration that the person has already been saved.

The claim is that baptism is a symbol—a visible expression of the forgiveness already received at the point of faith.

The Bible NEVER articulates this unbiblical concept. It is the figment of someone's vivid imagination that has been taken up and repeated so often that it "sounds biblical," even when it is not.

When Ananias prodded Paul to "arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16), he said nothing about an alleged symbolic (versus actual) cleansing or post-forgiveness washing. He uttered not one word that would lead the unbiased reader to even remotely conclude that Paul's sins were washed away before he was baptized in water.

Matt. 28:18-20 - "And Jesus came to them and spake unto them, saying, All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth. Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world"

This is Matthew's account of the Great Commission. It constitutes the marching order of the Lord's church from Pentecost until the sound of the trump ends the world. Its phrases are loaded with meaning. Christ says "All authority" hath been given unto him in heaven and on earth. This is a comprehensive statement to denote the full extent of his authority. "All authority" in the Greek text means "the power of rule or government (the power of him whose will and commands must be submitted to by others and obeyed, generally translated authority)."

Christ will reign till he hath put all his enemies under his feet and then turn things back to the Father (I Cor. 15:25-28). All the powers of heaven and earth are in Jesus' hand to do his bidding without question or pause. The disciples are to realize the power that is behind them as they go forth.

This is a marvelously clear and simple statement of the Great Commission. No honest person should have any real problem in understanding that Jesus has here taught that both believing (having

faith) and being baptized are necessary to the salvation which is offered to all men through Christ (Matthew 11:28-30; John 3:16).

Acts 2:1-41 shows us that, in obedience to Christ's instructions given in the Great Commission, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, on the day of Pentecost the apostles preached for the very first time the gospel of Christ as a law in force.

While all of the apostles preached on that first day only the sermon of Peter is recorded in the New Testament. In that sermon, Peter gave proof that the Jews (to whom he was speaking) had crucified, not a mere human being that falsely claimed to be the Messiah, but the very Son of God, the Christ.

In closing what can be termed the evidential part of his sermon, Peter said, in Acts 2:22-23 "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death" Continuing on in verse 36, Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

Peter's sermon convinced thousands of Jews; they came to realize that they were guilty of the terrible sin of crucifying the Christ (Messiah). Out of that conviction, they said unto Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?"

What were they asking? They were asking to be told what they must do in order to have their sins forgiven.

It is clear that, in spite of the fact that, at the time they asked the question, they were already believers in Jesus Christ, they were not yet saved; they were still in their sins! Men are not saved at the point of faith.

What did Peter tell them to do? Did he say, "Since you are already believers, you have nothing to do, you are already saved"? No. Both Peter and his audience knew that they (the audience) were not

saved. So Peter (guided by the Holy Spirit) told these believers beginning in verse 38, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call. And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation. Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them."

All should easily understand the meaning of Peter's reply to their question. He simply tells these lost believers that they must (1) repent and (2) be baptized so that their sins will be forgiven.

In spite of the simplicity of Peter's answer to such a simple question, there are many people now living who reject the truth that penitent believers are to be baptized (immersed in water) in order to be saved by the blood of Christ (Eph. 1:7). But, in order to deny this necessity, they must reject the obvious truth of Acts 2:38.

In Acts 8:26-40, we read how the Spirit of God instructed Philip to approach a non-Christian from Ethiopia, a man of great authority under Candace, queen of the Ethiopians.

When Philip came near the Ethiopian eunuch, he sat beside him, and, beginning at Isaiah 53, "preached Jesus to him" (vs. 35).

The very next verse, however, indicates that Philip's preaching of "Jesus" must have included preaching on the importance of baptism, for the Bible indicates that the eunuch asked, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?" (vs. 36). From this one question, we learn that Philip had to have instructed the eunuch previously concerning the necessity of water baptism.

In Romans 6:3-7 we are told, "Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be

in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin."

When the believing, penitent non-Christian allows him or herself to be lowered into the watery grave of baptism, a parallel to Christ's redemptive work is taking place. Baptism is into Christ's death because that is where He shed His blood on our behalf. The atoning activity of Christ was achieved in His death, burial, and resurrection. Consequently, the alien sinner taps into that redemptive power in the act of water immersion.

The "newness of life" follows—not precedes—baptism (vs. 6). The "old man of sin," the "body of sin," is eliminated in the waters of baptism. Being immersed in water—"buried in baptism" (vs. 4)—is equivalent to "you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered" (vs. 17). Only then, i.e., in the act of emulating Jesus' atonement in the waters of baptism, is one "set free from sin" (vs. 18).

To summarize, notice that seven significant achievements occur at the point of water immersion: (1) baptized into Christ; (2) baptized into Christ's death; (3) newness of life; (4) united in His death; (5) old man/body of sin crucified/done away; (6) no longer slaves of sin; and (7) freed from sin.

Those who will deny baptism point to scriptures such as:

Eph. 2:8-9 which says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

Acts 16:31 that states, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household."

I suppose that a person could draw the conclusion that faith is all that is necessary for salvation if all you read is those verses or if that was all the Bible had to say on the subject. But the fact of the matter is that the Bible has much to say on the subject of salvation, and it

should be clear that baptism is necessary for salvation as we look at God's plan as it is set forth in the New Testament.

Consider the conversion of the apostle Paul (or Saul of tarsus) in Acts 9:1-20. Paul was baptized (Acts 9:18), like the Philippian Jailer (Acts 16:33), but many people believe that it was only because he was saved already. The people of the New Testament period would have had little trouble visualizing the full account of Paul's conversion beyond the details given in Acts 9.

If one is saved by faith alone (i.e., he believes on the Lord Jesus Christ and prays to God for the forgiveness of his sins), then we must conclude that all, including the apostle Paul, are saved in this way.

But let us look closely at Paul's conversion in all of the accounts.

In Acts 9, Paul encountered our risen Lord and was blinded in the process (pretty solid grounds for believing); he went three days without sight and neither ate nor drank (Jesus said Paul was praying during that time, v.11); and then he was visited by Ananias, whom Jesus directed, who restored his sight and who probably was the one to baptize him. With Acts 9 standing alone, we might conclude that Paul was saved, forgiven of sins, before he was baptized.

We can be thankful, though, that additional details of Paul's conversion are given in Acts 22:6-16 which forbid a "faith only" doctrine. This passage reads, "Now it happened, as I journeyed and came near Damascus at about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? So I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting. And those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me. So I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do. And since I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of those who were with me, I came into Damascus. Then a certain Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there, came to me; and he stood and said to me,

'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And at that same hour I looked up at him. Then he said, 'The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth. For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.'

Did Ananias, who was sent by the Lord, misunderstand God's plan of salvation? I think not! If Paul was saved, forgiven of his sins, when he believed in Jesus (and there is no doubt in my mind that he believed), then why did he need to have his sins washed away?

1 Peter 3:21 says "baptism now saves you--not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience--through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

Salvation is dependent upon and accomplished by means of the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross: His death, burial, and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). Likewise, immersion must be preceded by faith, repentance, and confession of the deity of Christ. Baptism is the way prescribed by the Lord to rid ourselves of those past sins.

Consider also John 3:3-7 where we are told, "Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'"

There is no doubt that Jesus and His apostles taught the essentiality of being immersed in water for salvation.

After Jesus commissioned His apostles to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature," He stated that "he who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:15-16; Matthew 28:19).



The Jews who had murdered Christ, and to whom Peter spoke on the day of Pentecost when he ushered in the Christian age, were told: “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). Before becoming a Christian, Saul of Tarsus was commanded to “arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16).

The biblical solution to the problem of soul-damning sin is that the person who has heard the Gospel, who has believed its message, who has repented of past sins, and who has confessed Christ as Lord must then—in order to receive remission (forgiveness) of sins—be baptized.

One reason why some religious people do not feel that baptism in water is a prerequisite for salvation is because “it doesn’t make any sense.” Why would God demand that a sinner be immersed in water in order to receive the abundant amount of heavenly blessings found “in Christ?” My response is simply, it DOES NOT MATTER! Regardless of whether God’s instructions seem sensible to us or not, God expects His commands to be obeyed.

Today, if a sinner wants to receive “the victory through...Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:57), the Scriptures are clear: In addition to confessing faith in Christ and repenting of his sins (John 8:24; Romans 10:9-10; Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38), he must be baptized (Mark 16:16; 1 Peter 3:21). For people to reject the command to be immersed in water simply because they feel that baptism and eternal salvation are totally unrelated, is as wrong as it would have been for Moses, the Israelites, and Naaman to reject God’s commands years ago (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Contrary to the belief of some, a person who desires to become a Christian does not have to know the whole Bible thoroughly before he takes action. Nor is there a need to have every question imaginable answered. The Ethiopian eunuch heard one Christ-centered lesson from Philip before asking, “What hinders me from being baptized”

The three thousand on Pentecost heard only one Gospel sermon before accepting the grace of God and obeying the plan of salvation (Acts 2:41). They did not wait around for years, thinking they were not knowledgeable enough to be followers of Christ. Rather, they were convinced of their sins (Acts 2:37), heard the Gospel, believed it, and obeyed it

Baptism is only a part, though a necessary part, of our submission to God's way of salvation. We NEVER earn or merit that salvation; it is BY GOD'S GRACE that we are saved (we do not deserve it, but He offers it to us) THROUGH FAITH (God says, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins," Acts 2:38; we believe it; we do it; and then GOD saves us BY HIS GRACE through the precious shed blood of His son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ).

One final thing, if Acts 2:38 stated, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for ONE MILLION DOLLARS...", is there any doubt people would understand that baptism is a command to be obeyed before receiving the money?

I thought not.