

DISCOVERY

BIBLE STUDY COURSE

Special Study: Understanding Baptism

When Jesus was about thirty years old, He was baptized by John

“to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:13–17; Luke 3:21–23).

Later, just before Jesus ascended back to heaven, He told His

disciples,

All authority has been given to me, in heaven and on earth. 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, teaching them to observe everything that I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen (Matthew 28:18–20).

Thus, Jesus began His public ministry by being baptized, and ended His public ministry by commanding His disciples to carry the message of baptism to the world. The word “baptism” in its various forms occurs ninety-two times in the New Testament. This purpose of this study is to help students understand the basic elements of this important Christian ordinance.



LOOKING BACK...

The Bible tells the story of God’s love for us and His desire to save us from our sin...

There is objective evidence proving that the Bible is the Word of God...

God’s Word is authoritative, giving spiritual direction for those desiring to serve God...

The New Covenant began with Jesus’ death and teaches us what to believe and how to live...

We have all sinned and need the forgiveness offered only through Jesus’ sacrifice...

➤ **Baptism: Its Action**

What outward action is involved in Bible baptism? This is the first question we will seek to answer. In considering this question, we should note that churches of today have employed three different methods of baptism: sprinkling, pouring, and immersion. Therefore, Webster's dictionary (an English dictionary reflecting our modern society's vocabulary) naturally will define baptism according to these three methods. By so doing, Webster's dictionary is not making a theological statement about what Bible baptism is, but is making a statement about how Americans understand and use the word "baptism." Therefore, the answer to our question must come from Greek lexicons (the New Testament was written in Greek), biblical evidence, and historical evidence.

The Lexical Evidence. Words have meaning. If words did not convey meaning, they would be useless as a medium of communication. What is the meaning of the Greek word rendered "baptism" in our Bibles? Evidence from five respected lexicons follows.

- Thayer, "to dip repeatedly, to immerge, submerge; to cleanse by dipping or submerging, to wash, to make clean with water."
- Bauer and Gingrich, "dip, immerse, mid. dip oneself, wash (in non-Christian lit. also 'plunge, sink, drench, overwhelm."
- Kittel, "to dip in or under," "to dye," "to immerse," "to sink," "to drown," "to bathe," "wash." The NT uses **baptisma** only in the literal sense, e.g., "to dip" (Lk. 16:24), "to dye" (Rev. 19:13), and **baptizo** only in a cultic sense, mostly "to baptize."
- Liddell and Scott, "to dip in or under water."
- Vine's, **baptisma**, baptism, consisting of the processes of immersion, submersion and emergence (from **bapto**, to dip).

Any number of lexicons could be selected to make the point. The Greek words **baptizo** (verb) and **baptisma** (noun) are rendered in our English Bibles as "to baptize" and "baptism" respectively. However, this is not a translation, but a transliteration. In other words, the translators have opted not to translate these Greek words and instead

have reproduced the Greek letters to form a new English word. The basic translation of these words would be “to dip, submerge, immerse” and “immersion” respectively. In no lexicon, biblical or classical, are the definitions of these words rendered “to sprinkle” or “to pour.” Therefore, since words have meaning and since the Holy Spirit chose consistently to use Greek words meaning “to immerse” in reference to spiritual cleansing, our first inclination is to conclude that New Testament baptism involves immersion (or submersion).

The Biblical Evidence. Lexical evidence is important because words have meaning—if the Holy Spirit wished to convey the idea of sprinkling or pouring, there were certainly plenty of words in the Greek vocabulary to accomplish this. The fact that He chose a Greek word meaning immersion is significant. However, within any context, a word may take on a meaning slightly different than the basic (lexical) meaning of the word. Therefore, in addition to considering word definitions, we must consider textual and contextual evidence that may have a bearing on the action involved in baptism.

There are two passages in the New Testament in which baptisms are described in sufficient detail so as to indicate the action involved. The first is the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:13–17; Mark 1:8–9). In this case, the action involved in the baptism required Jesus to go down into the water, for “as soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water.” The second example is the baptism of the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26–38). In this case also, the action involved in the baptism required both Philip (the baptizer) and the Ethiopian to walk down into the water: “And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. Now when they came up out of the water...” (vv. 38–39a). In each case, baptism required both the baptizer and the baptizee to go down into the water and come up out of the water, thus fitting the lexical definition of the Greek word for “baptism.” Neither sprinkling nor pouring requires either the baptizer or the baptizee to go down into the water.

John 3:23 reads, “Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there. And they came and were baptized.” One of the factors involved in John selecting Aenon as the place to baptize was the fact that there was plenty of water there. Neither sprinkling nor pouring require a great deal of water; thus, it

would make no sense for the Holy Spirit to make a point of John's site-selection being a place that had plenty of water unless immersion was taking place.

In two passages, Paul describes baptism as a "burial."

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 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 (Romans 6:3-4).

...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 (Colossians 2:12).

Neither sprinkling nor pouring fit the picture of a burial. If someone or something is buried, it is covered up by or submerged within another element. Immersion does fit the figure of a burial, for the believer is buried for a short time beneath the water, completely submerged. In Romans 6:3-4, Paul compares our baptism to Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection—we are baptized into His death by being buried in baptism just as He was buried in the earth and by rising from our watery grave to live a new life just as Jesus arose from the grave through the glory of the Father.

The biblical evidence suggests that the word "baptism," meaning "immersion," conveys the very message intended by the Holy Spirit. The evidence that can be gained by Scripture indicates that believers of the first century were, indeed, immersed in obedience to God's will. Further, there is no scriptural evidence suggesting otherwise.

The Historical Evidence. The evidence noted above is most important in ascertaining the action involved in baptism. However, as an additional source of information, the following quotations are offered from early church writers on the subject of baptism.

For these words imply, Blessed are they who, placing their trust in the cross, have gone down into the water; for, says He, they shall receive their reward in due time: then He declares, I will recompense them (Barnabas, XI; A.D. 100).

This meaneth, that we indeed descend into the water full of sins and defilement, but come up, bearing fruit in our heart, having the fear [of God] and trust in Jesus in our spirit (Barnabas, XI; A.D. 100).

In baptism are fulfilled the pledges of our covenant with God; burial and death, resurrection and life; and these take place all at once. For when we immerse our heads in the water, the old man is buried as in a tomb below, and wholly sunk forever; then as we raised them again, the new man rises in its stead. As it is easy for us to dip and to lift our heads again, so it is easy for God to bury the old man, and whew forth the new (Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXV.iii.5; p. 211).

I heard, sir, some teachers maintain that there is no other repentance than that which takes place, when we descended into the water and received remission of our former sins." He said to me, "That was sound doctrine which you heard; for that is really the case (Hermas, II.4.iii; ca. A.D. 160).

While it is evident that sprinkling was practiced sporadically as early as the fourth century in cases where believers were bedfast, it is equally evident that the accepted and commonly practiced form of baptism was immersion until the thirteenth century. The following quote regarding baptism is from the Catholic Dictionary and is intentionally noted here because Catholics first began the practice of sprinkling and continue to employ such to this day.

The Scripture makes it clear enough that water is to be used, but it is not so plain at first sight that the sprinkling or pouring of water will suffice. In Apostolic times, the body of the baptized person was immersed, for St. Paul looks on this immersion as typifying burial with Christ, and speaks of baptism as a bath [Rom. vi.4; Eph. v.26]. Immersion still prevails among the Copts and Nestorians, and for many ages baptism was so given among the Latins also, for even St. Thomas, in the thirteenth century, speaks of baptism by immersion as the common practice of his time. Still the rubric of the Roman Ritual, which states that baptism can be validly given by immersion, infusion, or aspersion, is fully justified by tradition (**Catholic Dictionary**, p. 60).

Therefore, the historical evidence confirms what we have learned from the Scriptures—early Christians understood that baptism was immersion. Sprinkling and pouring were not accepted officially as viable substitutes for immersion until 1311 when the Council of Ravenna allowed free choice between immersion and sprinkling. But such council decisions cannot change the clear teaching of Scripture.

➤ **Baptism: Its Element**

We now turn our attention to the element in which believers are to be baptized (immersed). There are five passages in the New Testament that instruct us in this matter. They read as follows:

Now as they went down the road, they came to some water: and the eunuch said, "See, here is water: What hinders me from being baptized? Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water; and he baptized him (Acts 8:36–38).

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 (Acts 10:47–48, NIV).

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:25–27).

Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (Hebrews 10:22).

In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, 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 (1 Peter 3:20b–21, NIV).

In addition to the preceding passages specifically naming water as the element in which believers are to be baptized, Acts 22:16 implies the baptismal element by using the word “wash,” an action that normally involves water: “And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.”

How then are we to understand references in Scripture to “Holy Spirit baptism”? John the Baptizer promised that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matthew 3:11). Three years later, just before ascending back to heaven, Jesus instructed His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they had been baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5–8). From these passages, some have concluded that all Christians should expect to be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

These two passages contain a promise that included baptism with the Holy Spirit. In the first passage, the recipients of the promise are not named and therefore could include anyone. However, in the second passage, Jesus specifically names His chosen apostles as the recipients of this promise. These men did, in fact, receive a baptism by the Holy Spirit a few days later (Acts 2:1–4, 17, 33). When the gospel was first announced to the Gentiles, God signified their acceptance by the same sign, i.e., the Gentiles present were baptized by the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44–46; 11:15–17). Interestingly, both Jesus (Acts 1:5) and Peter (Acts 11:16) point out that these baptisms by the Holy Spirit marked the fulfillment of John’s promise in Matthew 3:11. Further, we may infer from Peter’s words in Acts 11:15–17 that no one else had been baptized by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the baptism of the Holy Spirit was a promise fulfilled in a few chosen people inviting, first, the Jew and, later, the Gentile to the kingdom of God. On these occasions, the baptism was administered by heaven with no action required on the part of the recipients.

Baptism by the Holy Spirit may be contrasted to water baptism as follows:

- Water baptism is a command; baptism with the Holy Spirit was a promise.
- Water baptism requires the obedience of the recipient; baptism with the Holy Spirit required no obedience. (One cannot obey a promise.)
- Water baptism is to be administered by humans; baptism with the Holy Spirit was administered by heaven.
- Water baptism results in receiving specific blessings; baptism with the Holy Spirit did not result in any specified blessing.

There is no evidence that anyone else ever received the baptism by the Holy Spirit. When Paul wrote to the Ephesians, he declared, “[There is] one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5). That “one baptism” is the only baptism commanded in Scripture (Acts 2:38; 22:16), the only baptism to be preached to the whole world (Matthew 28:19–20), and the only baptism through which we can receive the salvation from our sins (Acts 2:38; 1 Peter 3:21).

➤ **Baptism: Its Candidates**

In this section of our study, we will consider the question, “Who should be immersed in water?” First, consider the following passages of Scripture.

- **Matthew 28:18–20.** Jesus commanded His apostles to baptize those who had been taught the gospel.
- **Mark 16:15–16.** Jesus commanded His apostles to baptize those who believed the gospel.
- **Acts 2:38.** Peter commanded believers to repent before being baptized.
- **Acts 2:41.** Those who received Peter’s words of salvation were baptized.
- **1 Peter 3:21.** Baptism is the response of a properly prepared conscience.

These and other passages of Scripture show that the proper candidates for baptism are those who have heard the Word, believe it, have been convicted by it, and who want to yield themselves to God’s service. This naturally rules out infants and the mentally deficient, for they are not able to learn, understand, believe, repent, and accountably yield themselves to God’s service.

Second, the purpose of baptism is to comply with God’s will and thus receive the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21). Therefore, only those who have actually sinned and are aware of their guilt before God are candidates for baptism. While we have “all sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), not all are aware of their guilt before God or are willing to acknowledge such guilt. Paul wrote: “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death” (2 Corinthians 7:10).

Some have assumed that baptism in the New Testament replaces circumcision in the Old Testament. Consequently, since infants Old Testament were circumcised under the Old Testament, they have concluded that infants should be baptized under the Old Testament. Consider, however, the following important distinctions:

- Circumcision was limited to males; baptism is for both males and females (Galatians 3:26–28).
- Circumcision was limited to Israelites and proselytes; baptism is for people of every nation (Galatians 3:26–28).
- Circumcision did not require faith, repentance, or a personal decision; baptism must be preceded by hearing, believing, and submitting to the message of the New Covenant.
- One was an Israelite before circumcision; one becomes a Christian after baptism.
- Circumcision was an outward sign that one belonged to the nation of Israel; baptism is not an identifying sign at all.

In light of the foregoing evidence, baptism does not correspond with circumcision, nor do the New Testament Scriptures ever identify baptism with circumcision. New Testament baptism is designed for believing adults who recognize their guilt of sin.

➤ **Baptism: Its Purpose**

There are seven passages of Scripture in the New Testament that describe the purpose of baptism. Please take the time to read each one carefully. In each passage, the stated purpose is italicized.

He who believes and is baptized *will be saved*; but he who does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:16).

Then Peter said to them, 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* (Acts 2:38).

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).

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 (Romans 6:3–4).

For by one Spirit we were all baptized *into one body*—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13).

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized *into Christ have put on Christ* (Galatians 3:26–27).

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 (1 Peter 3:21, NIV).

From these seven passages of Scripture, we can conclude that baptism is designed to accomplish the following goals:

- to save us from our sins,
- to allow us to receive the forgiveness of our sins,
- to put us in contact with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus,
- to allow us begin a new life,
- to allow us to be a part of the body of Christ (the church, Ephesians 1:22–23),
- to allow us to be in Christ and clothed by Him.

Students should note that baptism is not designed to change the mind (this is accomplished by hearing the message of the New Covenant and believing it), nor is it designed to change our behavior (this is accomplished by turning our backs on sin and committing our lives to godliness through repentance). Rather, baptism is designed to produce a change in our relationship with God. Before baptism, we are outside of Christ, separated from His atoning sacrifice, dying in our sin, and in dire need of forgiveness. After baptism, we are in Christ, a beneficiary of His atoning sacrifice, freed from sin's bondage, and given new life. Our relationship with God is forever changed.

IN CHRIST...

The following blessings are available only to those who are "in Christ."

- **All Spiritual Blessings (Ephesians 1:3)**
- **No Condemnation (Romans 8:1)**
- **Salvation (2 Timothy 2:10; Acts 4:12)**
- **Forgiveness (Romans 6:3–4, 17–18)**
- **New Life (Romans 6:4, 11; 2 Corinthians 5:17)**
- **The Love of God (Romans 8:39)**

How can we get into Christ? The Scriptures only provide one answer—baptism:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ (Galatians 3:26–27).

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 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 (Romans 6:3–4).

➤ **Salvation By Works?**

The power for such a change lies not in the water, nor in our own deeds or goodness. Rather, this change comes through the power of God working through those who submit to heaven's will.

Paul beautifully states, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9). Grace is unmerited, or unearned, favor. We are not saved by our own goodness or our own deeds. We can never do anything so as to put God in our debt or in any respect earn our salvation. Salvation is a gift from God (Romans 6:23).

However, does this mean that we need do nothing in order to make ourselves eligible for God's gift? Of course not. In many passages of Scripture in the New Testament, God promises to give His blessings to those who submit to His will. To further illustrate, let us consider some of the great people of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11.

By faith Noah built an ark to save his family (v. 7). Question: Was Noah saved by grace through faith, or by his own works? Of course he was saved by God's grace. However, Noah had to submit to God's will (by building an ark) in order to be eligible for God's grace.

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went (v. 8). Question: Was Abraham blessed because of God's grace or because of his own works? Of course the blessings Abraham received were by God's grace. However, Abraham had to submit to God's will (by obeying God's command to move to Canaan) in order to be eligible for God's grace.

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice (v. 17). Question: Was Abraham justified by his faith or by his own works (cf. Romans 4:1-3)? Of course he was justified by his faith. However, Abraham had to submit to God's instruction (by being willing to sacrifice his son) in order to be eligible for God's blessing.

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned (v. 29). Question: Were the Israelites saved by grace through faith or by their own works? Of course they were saved by God's

grace. However, the Israelites had to submit to God's will (by being willing to cross the Red Sea) in order to be eligible for God's grace.

By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days (v. 30). Question: Were the Israelites able to conquer Jericho by God's grace or by their own works? Of course the Israelites conquered Jericho by means of God's grace. However, they had to submit to God's will (by obeying His command to march around the city a number of times) in order to be eligible for God's grace.

God's blessings consistently go to those who are willing to submit to His will, and most of the time this submission has required some act of obedience on the part of man. Let us consider baptism. By submitting to God's will in baptism we are not earning our salvation or attempting to create a system of salvation based on our own works. We are merely complying with God's clear commands in the New Testament that ask us to submit in this manner. James wrote: "You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone" (James 2:24).

➤ **Conclusion**

Christian baptism involves the immersion in water of rational, believing adults who desire to commit themselves to God's service under the New Covenant. For those who choose to so commit themselves, God provides the forgiveness of sins, a wonderful, gracious gift made available only through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Do you love God? If so, the only way you can demonstrate your love is through submission to Him (John 14:15; 1 John 5:3). Do you have faith in God and His Word? If so, the only way you demonstrate your faith is through submission to Him (James 2:14-26). Won't you commit your life to Him today? All it takes is a decision.

Questions and Answers

1. What is the basic meaning of the Greek word translated “baptism” mean?

2. The baptisms recorded in the New Testament describe the individuals going down into the water. What does this imply about the action of baptism?

3. Two passages describe baptism as a burial. What does this imply about the action of baptism? _____
4. When did the Roman Catholic Church begin accepting sprinkling in place of immersion for baptism? _____
5. In the five passages that describe the element in which one is to be immersed, what element is involved? _____
6. What was the purpose of Holy Spirit baptism? _____

7. According to the Scriptures, who are fit candidates for baptism?

8. According to the Scriptures, what are some of the purposes of baptism?

9. What are some of the blessings available to those who have been “baptized into Christ?” _____

10. In light of the blessings found “in Christ,” and in light of the fact that one can only get into Christ through baptism, can one be saved without being baptized?

11. Did the people of faith listed in Hebrews 11 have to do anything in order to be recipients of God’s blessings? _____

Thought Questions

1. In what ways do sprinkling or pouring not fit the description of baptism found in the Bible?
2. How does Holy Spirit baptism differ from the command to be baptized in water?
3. Why is a baby not a fit candidate for New Testament baptism?

Your Questions

In the space below, write down any personal notes or questions that you had while reading through this lesson.

CHARTING THE COURSE

Do you still have questions about baptism? Would you like to learn more about Christ and His Church?

If so, please request additional study material. We will be happy help you in any way possible in your pursuit to understand and apply the truths taught in God's Word.