

1 Peter 3:21-22: Baptism and Salvation

"21 Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

OUTLINE:

What does baptism mean
Can baptism save me
What am I doing when I get baptized
What is the power that really saves me

INTRODUCTION

'Does baptism save?', is the question that is forced upon us from the text before us. In these verses we have words which seem to say that baptism saves; "baptism that corresponds to this now saves you.' One of the clear Biblical teachings that came out of the Reformation, under the teaching of men like Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, is that we are saved by grace through faith, not works. Were they wrong, are we in fact saved by grace through the work of baptism? Can those who have never been baptized be saved? These are some of the questions that we have to face. Now I am a Baptist pastor, and we are a Baptist Church, perhaps we would feel threatened by verses like these, and like other people rather overlook them, because they challenge us too deeply. This would be a wrong response. We should never be afraid of any text in the Bible, our primary allegiance is to God, not our denominations or upbringing. If the Bible teaches that baptism saves, then we should all believe it, but if it teaches that we are saved by faith, then we must believe that. God's word is our authority, therefore it behoves us to find out what the Bible says about baptism and salvation.

The text before us deals with two details regarding baptism, and two issues regarding salvation, we will deal with them chronologically, as they appear in the text. Firstly, we will look at the meaning of baptism, then the issue of baptism and salvation, then we will look at what the act of baptism actually is, and finally what power really saves us.

What does baptism mean?

Peter begins the verses before us with the words, "Baptism, which corresponds to this." In the context we have one of the most difficult texts in the NT, but basically Peter has been speaking to his hearers about the death of Christ, and the Spirit of Christ active in Noah's ministry of preaching before the flood (2 Pet 2:5). Peter carrying on with his thought about the flood, tells us that the waters of the flood are a type of baptism. Not meaning a variety of baptism, but rather that the waters of the flood have the same message as the waters of baptism. This verse is then hinting at what baptism means.

The waters of the flood were waters of judgement, when God flooded the earth he did it in judgement to punish the wicked. Jesus too suffered God's judgement upon sin, he was not submerged in water, but in death and a grave. When we are baptised, we are showing that we have died for sin, in Christ's death, and that we have risen to new life, in his life. The wages of sin is death, sin cannot be paid for without death. Well when you became a believer in Christ, God gave you a certified death certificate, Christ's! When you were

baptized you were demonstrating that you, or rather Christ as your representative, have died the death that the law requires to pay for sin.

The waters of baptism also symbolise a deliverance as Noah was delivered with His family from judgement. And exiting the waters of baptism symbolizes that you, or rather Christ as your representative, have risen from the dead to new life. Baptism speaks of the judgement of death being paid for, and new life following. By baptism you are saying that everything that Christ has done has been done for you. In theological terms we say that Baptism demonstrates your union with Christ. This is what Paul is talking about in Romans 6:3-4 (ESV), "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." To this we can add that the meaning of being totally drowned by judgement waters or death, is best demonstrated by full immersion not sprinkling, or crossing a baptismal candidate.

So baptism is declaring that a judgement has taken place in the life of the one who is being baptised, and that new life is in the one who is being baptised. This is rich and assuring. Have you believed in Christ and been baptised? Then realise that your baptism is a reminder to you that all your sins have been paid for at the cross. When Martin Luther was tempted by satan to remember his sins, he would rebuke the devil by reminding him that he is baptised. In other words, his sins have been paid for by Christ.

This raises another question, when is it that we die to sin, when we believe or when we are baptised? When is it that we receive new life, when we believe or when we are baptised? This brings us to our second point.

Can baptism save me?

The next part of verse 21 appears to say that baptism does save. What we need to do now is two things. Firstly, we need to look at what the whole of the NT teaches about salvation, and secondly, we need to examine the immediate context to see if this interpretation is supported.

Let me disclose an important assumption as we proceed. God's word is a unity, it does not contradict itself. Given the diversity of authors whose personalities and knowledge of language was not by passed to reveal. You will have apparent tensions in the text. It might appear that Paul and James contradict each other on the issue of salvation by faith alone. But with deeper investigation and the process of building our doctrine on those passages that speak the clearest we can resolve these difficulties. On the one hand there are many texts that tell us that we are saved by faith, such as Romans 3:22 (ESV), "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:". And Galatians 3:14 (ESV), "so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith." And the well known John 3:16 (ESV), "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." So either the Bible contradicts itself, or there is another way of harmonizing these texts. Before we attempt this harmonization, lets see if we can find any other texts that appear to teach that baptism saves. Acts 2:38 (ESV), "And Peter said to them, "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." Acts 22:16 (ESV), "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.'" What do we make of these apparently different teachings?

The answer lies in answering the question of what we look back to as the point of our decision to believe and follow Christ. We live in a world after Billy Graham, and the altar call

system which has been active in the Church for only about 200 years. But in Biblical times you would not think back to the point that you walked down the aisle, or when you prayed the sinners prayer. In the book of Acts those who wanted to become Christians showed this by being baptized. So when the Biblical authors refer back to their conversions they do not speak of sinners prayers or altar calls but their baptisms. The act of believing, repenting, committing, calling on the name of the Lord, becoming a member of the Church were all rolled into one event, baptism. One's baptism, and ones commitment to become a Christian were seen as the same event. Unlike our modern day practice people were baptized the same day they believed (Acts 2:41, 8:46, etc.). The Bible blurs the difference between the time of ones baptism, and ones salvation. However when one goes looking for specific answers about how we are saved or the meaning of baptism, we then realize this phenomenon in Scripture. We would distinguish them in this way. Baptism was seen as the occasion but not the instrument whereby we are saved. Faith is seen as the instrument whereby we receive the gift of justifying righteousness. The calling upon Christ as Saviour, the commitment of repentance and the act of being baptised were often linked in time.

This of course raises the issue of our practice of baptism, you may have noticed that we do not baptise immediately, there are often baptismal classes before a candidate is baptised, is this wrong? Yes, and no. The trouble is we do not know what baptism means, in Christ's time, everyone who was a Jew knew that baptism was a commitment of joining a new religion, and indicated that one was cleansed. One would have been a Hindu, or a Muslim, until you were baptised. Baptism is the beginning of your new life, and your break with the old. In the 21st Century we do not have this understanding, and so need to be taught it's relevance before we do it. It is true however that baptism is not seen as important as the Bible sees it, and as the early Christians treated it. We think it is optional, and it is not. To put off or refuse the commandment of baptism is sin, for sin is to disobey God's commands.

So we have applied the first test and seen that the teaching of the whole NT does not teach that Baptism saves, now we need to look at the context of chapter 3 in Peter. The context itself tells us that baptism is not a magic act that washes away sin, Peter says, "not the removal of dirt from the body". It is not some sort of spiritual bath that cleanses us, to have this view of baptism is incorrect. The Sacramental view of baptism held by the Roman Catholics, High Anglicans, and the Greek Orthodox Church, is wrong, those who have this view of baptism having the ability to cleanse, Peter denies that this is what baptism does.

So if baptism does not save, and it is not a spiritual bath what is baptism? We turn to our next point to answer this question.

What am I doing when I get baptised

Peter tells us that we are offering "an appeal to God for a good conscience." There is a difference of opinion on what this means. On the one hand the word appeal can be translated pledge, and then in that instance reminds us of the commitments of repentance and obedience we sign up for in our baptisms. Or it could be an appeal to God, a prayer, a request for Him to save and cleanse us. Both contribute to our understanding and are true. I feel hard pressed to choose between them so let me say a little about both.

A pledge is a promise or commitment that is made in answer to questions. So when you got married and you were asked do you, and you said 'I do', you made a pledge. You committed yourself to love each other through thick and thin. When I baptise I like to baptise after I have asked for a confession of faith, so I will say something like, "Do you

confess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, and do you promise to serve him for the rest of your life”, and the candidate will answer, “I do”. That is a pledge.

Now Peter tells us that, specifically, the pledge is one of a clean conscience. What does this mean? This means that you are going to live a life, obviously depending upon his grace, free of sin. That as far as you can see you have avoided sin and done everything that you can to serve God in the right manner. To have a clean conscience is to be unaware of any deliberate sin on your part. This is a pledge that we are right in making, for God is perfect and expects us to be perfect, as holy as he is. He cannot drop his standards. We will fall short of this mark, but the grace of God forgives and enables us, but it is most important that we do not move the goal line. Some people will think that because we are sinners who are incapable of perfection that we should make it easier on ourselves, and set up a new standard of holiness that allows for little sins and compromises. This is not what we are pledging ourselves to when we get baptised. We are committing ourselves to being absolutely free from sin, as Christ was free from sin.

This commitment of baptism is not a second commitment that a Christian makes, it is part and parcel with the decision to repent and cling to Christ. Some may think that they are ready to believe but not ready to be baptised, there is no difference, for when Christ calls upon you to make him your Lord, and leave your sins, that are damning you behind you have to make a total break with sin from that point. Baptism is not the place where you make your decision to leave sin in the grave, conversion is. No Christian should be putting off this public pledge of allegiance to Christ, it goes together with conversion. If you feel that you are not letting go of sins and do not feel ready to do so, and are therefore putting off baptism, then you need to question whether you have believed in Christ at all, for he calls for a total break with sin at the point of believing. Faith and repentance are not separate issues, they stand and fall together.

This raises the issue of babies. Babies cannot make a pledge to live with a clear conscience, it is obvious that baptism in Peter’s mind is for those who are able to make such a promise.

An appeal for a clean conscience could also be viewed as that time when you humbled yourself before God and on account of Christ’s work asked for forgiveness and pardon. You asked for a forgiveness that would not only remove the guilt of your sins but a forgiveness that would sink so deep into your understanding that your very conscience would feel cleansed. In other words, this would be understood as the sinners prayer of the first century believer, a prayer that was joined with and expressed by one’s baptism.

Once again this is something an infant cannot do.

What is the power that really saves me

Peter goes on to tell us that it is not baptism, but the resurrection of Christ that saves us. “It saves you by the resurrection of Christ.” Baptism points back to the time Peter’s readers received Christ, and joined the Church. But what actually saved them was not the water but the Holy Spirit giving us the new life of Christ’s resurrection. Christ was resurrected from the dead with a never dying life, when we were born again, it was this never dying life that was put within us. Baptism symbolizes Christ rising from the dead, and us rising with him, we now live because he lives. The source of our new life does not come from water, works, clergy, ceremony, or anything but the resurrection of Christ. This power is applied to us by the Holy Spirit. The Eternal never-dying, resurrection life of Christ is within us. This is what Paul prays we will see and fully grasp in Ephes. 1:18-21 (ESV) “having the eyes of your

hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.” Do you think that the power God exerted in raising Jesus three day dead body from life was great? Do you think that the power exerted to transform his earthly body into a never dying body was great? Do you think God withheld any inch of power that was needed when it concerned his own son? Well this is the same unreserved, sufficient power that God applies to you when you are born again, that same resurrection power is the power that is breathed into us granting us new life. Thank God for resurrection Sunday for without it we would not be saved. Just as nothing can kill Christ, so nothing can kill us, praise God!

Verse 22 shows us that his power will never be overthrown for Christ is resurrected, not to be put to death again, but to reign, “who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.” The message to Peter’s hearers is clear, you have eternal life, and no roman authority can overthrow Christ, your life is secure, even if you are put to death for the faith.

Today we are having a baptism that is a little different to others. We are baptising James Ben Canaan who was previously baptised in Gloriavale, but who feels it is right for him to be baptised in truth as he was not a believer the last time he was baptised. Let me explore a few of these peculiarities before we close this message. The question of rebaptising has a long history in the church and reflection upon it is very helpful.

The early saw a few early cults and heretics following the practice of rebaptism, and this was usually to some error that they held to. The trouble is that the beliefs about baptism which the orthodox believed were also faulty and so we will see error on both sides. In the early days of Christianity there was strong persecution and sometimes Christians would deny the faith, report other believers, and even offer incense to idols. When the persecutions died down they would seek to be restored to the church. There were differences of opinion on this. Some believed that the Christians had to be rebaptised. This was of course rejected by the early church. The reason for the rebaptism was the lingering teaching of the Shepherd of Hermas who taught that there was only forgiveness of one sin after baptism. This of course is an error. And the church responded by saying that baptism left an indelible mark on the soul and so need not be repeated. This is a right practice driven by a wrong theology.

Later on the rebaptism controversy arose again with the Donatists. This group believed that if a bishop had compromised in a persecution that those bishops and priests that he had ordained were not ordained and therefore all their baptisms and sacraments had no effect to save. Any bishops ordained by these traitors had to be rebaptised. This was a discussion that the theological giant Augustine weighed in on, and the discussion was polarised between two errors. On the one hand you had the Donatists whose view can be summarised as *ex opere operantis*, which means from the work of the worker; and Augustine whose view can be summarised as *ex opere operato*, from the working of the work. It was held by Augustine that even if a bishop was in mortal sin if the Trinitarian formula was correctly pronounced, the infant was properly baptised, and never needed rebaptism. It was universally agreed that Arians who had been part of a cult who had denied the faith and were not believers at all would need to be rebaptised.

By the time of the Reformation when certain Christians arose who challenged the teaching of infant baptism, they were branded with the name of Anabaptists, or rebaptisers, this was

a slur for every group that did ever rebaptise in the early church had been refuted by a council.

I today am a Baptist and look over this history and want to show how I believe the bible teaches we are to baptise. We have seen from our exposition today that the wording of the bible can lead to confusing salvation with baptism. So we look at our forefathers in the faith and understand their errors. They would think things like the one baptising might be important and could pollute the process of salvation if they were sinners, or that the act properly performed would be blessed by God anyway. With hindsight we claim that they both got it wrong, and failed to see the place of faith in salvation and the relation of salvation to baptism. Their sacramental view of baptism, their belief in infant baptism, and the lack of clarity on the doctrine of sola fide, faith alone would lead to these problems. Today we can say that faith alone is the way by which we are saved, but that this would have occurred on the occasion of one's baptism in its public form. For this reason we say that any baptism administered to infants is not a true baptism in the first place and therefore any repeat when a person comes to faith later is not a rebaptism but a first baptism.

Now coming to the matter of accepting Gloriavale baptisms. We do not view GV as the early church would have seen the Arians. As a group they are mixed, some having entered into GV from true conversion experiences outside GV. There are those who have a true understanding of the gospel. There are those who have a true yet weak faith. There are those saved who have no assurance of salvation due to the legalistic teaching and perfectionism of GV. And of course there will be those who embracing the errors are not saved as they trust in their own works and not Christ. For this reason we do not have a formula towards those who leave GV. It will depend on the individual consciences of the people who come out. GV does not baptise babies, but they do baptise children while they are quite young, before some even have a basic grasp of the gospel. For our purposes we ask one question. Did you trust in Jesus as your Saviour when you were baptised? It is possible to have a weak and even uninformed faith at a young age. The Spirit however has worked to draw you to Christ and you get baptised. There will be some who believed young, then get a bit lost and then later on get a clearer view of the gospel and have an overwhelming experience of assurance, historically many Christians have confused this experience of clarity and assurance for salvation. We only ask whether you think you were a believer when you were baptised and leave it to your conscience to help us decide whether we should baptise you.

We have looked at several intricacies of the doctrine of baptism, but now we want to know how we can apply it.

Firstly, viewing baptism correctly will save us from trusting in anyone but Christ for salvation. We will not fall prey to those views that see baptism as having it's own power.

Secondly, if anyone is not baptized I hope that you see that you must be, it is sin to disobey even one of God's commandments.

Thirdly, those who are Christians and have been baptised, are you living up to your pledge of living according to a clean conscience, are there areas of sin that you are justifying, or overlooking, do you need to spring clean your conscience? And renew that pledge that you made at your baptism.

Fourthly, we have affirmed the two Baptist distinctives that baptism is only for believers, those who are able to make a pledge, and that baptism is a full body washing, by immersion, and not just a little sprinkle.

Fifthly, we can take courage from the fact that the life we have is as never dying as Christ. We have no need to fear that the devil, or anything can overcome the life we now have, even death.