

Baptism: What's the point?

Sermon 3– Baptism and Salvation

Passages: Acts 2:36–42
Mark 16:14–18

Today we want to ask the question, “**Is salvation dependent on baptism?**” In other words, “Must a person be baptised to be saved?”

You know, if you try to get an answer to this question from the internet, you will soon discover there are two camps: On one hand, there are those who say that baptism doesn't matter... that you can be saved without getting baptised. Others will passionately argue that baptism is essential before you can be saved.

And, you know what? Both groups argue from the Bible! They both use the “proof-text” method of argumentation. That is, both groups answer this question of baptism and salvation by quoting the Scriptures. Both groups draw on the Bible to support their particular view.

So...who's right?

Well, the trouble is that **both groups are right!** The Bible actually says **both** of these things: Some verses say that you don't need be baptised to be saved. Others make it clear that you need to be baptised to be saved.

Let me show you!

First, here are some verses that say we are saved without baptism.

- John 3:16 – “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son so that whoever believes on Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

- Acts 10:43—“All the prophets testify... that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”
- Acts 16:31—Paul says to the Philippian jailer, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved...”
- Romans 1:16 - “The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.”
- Romans 5:1,2 - “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”
- Ephesians 2:8 - “By grace are you saved through faith...”
- **We could go on!**

But, there are other passages which seem to say the exact opposite! They seem to be saying that you need to be baptised in order to be saved.

- Acts 22-- On the road to Damascus, although Paul saw Jesus and believed in him, was he saved? Not if you take into account what Ananias said to him! In verse 16, Ananias says to Paul, “**And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.**” (22:16). For some reason, Paul’s salvation was tied to his baptism.
- Mark 16:15,16—“**He who believes and is baptized shall be saved.**” It seems that both faith and baptism are essential parts of salvation. If you take away either faith or baptism, you no longer have salvation.
- Acts 2:38-- As a result of the first gospel sermon, sinners asked what to do about their sins. Peter said, “**Repent and be baptized for the remission of sins.**” Once again, salvation...the remission/washing away of sins... accompanies baptism.
- Matthew 28:18-19—“All authority has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, **baptising them** in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit...”

As I said, these verses seem to indicate a close relationship between baptism and a person's salvation. So, who is correct? Do we need baptism for salvation or not? Is the Bible contradicting itself?

Not at all! You see, **the issue is not so much about baptism as it is about our understanding of salvation!**

So, let's start by defining salvation— What is it?

The first thing to recognise is that, sometimes, biblical salvation is described as an event. In much the same way that we can be saved from a burning house, an overturned car, a raging river or any other dangerous predicament from which one cannot deliver ourselves, so too, biblical salvation is about being delivered from a very dangerous predicament! For example, God saves us from the stupidity of our own self-destructive lifestyles. Jesus saves us from the self-inflicted pathways that are leading us to death! He saved us from the grip of Satan and his lies. This is salvation!

And, of course, this salvation comes as a free gift from God. There is absolutely nothing that we do to merit or earn it. Salvation is by God's grace—it is the completely unmerited pardon of one's sins. Salvation means that, unless God intervened in grace through the blood of His Son, you and I could never know His salvation. We have been saved.

In this sense, baptism has nothing to do with salvation! I am not saved by baptism. I am only saved by Jesus! He is my Saviour! He has rescued me from sin and death, from my own self-destruction and from Satan's snare.

But... salvation has a second meaning. It can also mean "to be healed or preserved". In other words, there is an **ongoing aspect** to salvation. It is based in a relational connection to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as I ask God to continue to work in my life. It is with this sense of the word in mind that the Apostle Paul

encouraged the Philippians to **“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for God is at work in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure”** (Phil. 2:13) In other words, I am being saved as I allow the work of God to engulf me and embrace me and change me. I am being saved as I allow God to heal me and plant in me His new life. I am being saved as I give in/submit to God’s love. It is a salvation that is at work in the present.

Of course, there is also a future sense to our salvation as we focus on the day when Jesus will return to **save us** by bringing us into His renewed heavens and earth. It was with this future aspect of salvation in mind that Jesus said, **“But he that shall endure to the end shall be saved”** (Matt. 24:13). That is our final salvation.

My point is that **salvation takes place in three dimensions:** past, present and future. We have been saved...we are being saved...and we will be saved!

It is essential for us to keep these three dimensions in mind when we talk about the connection between baptism and salvation. You see, as far as our past is concerned, no one needs baptism to be saved. Jesus has done it all. He died for our sins. He was raised for our justification. Salvation is totally by His grace. It is a gift of God. And so we say, with absolute confidence, **“I have been saved!”** ...and **without** baptism! As we turn to look to the past and what He has done for us, that’s exactly what we see—it is all of God, all of grace!

However, when we talk about our salvation in the present, we must see it as an on-going relationship with the One who saved us. As I said, we had nothing to do with the past—Jesus saved us without even asking us. But in the present, salvation continues only as we engage with the Lord Jesus in our healing and on-going deliverance. Salvation has become a relational thing. It’s about an on-going response to His love and grace.

This is why, in so many verses, we find ‘**grace**’ and ‘**faith**’ together. **Grace** refers to God’s unmerited action of saving us in Christ while **faith** refers to the appropriation of that historic action. Look at Ephesians 2:9–10-- “**It is by grace that we are saved** (historic action of God in Christ) **through faith** (present response) ...**and this is not of yourselves; it is a gift of God lest anyone should boast.**”

Some passages even go so far as to say that **obedience** is essential to salvation.

- Hebrews 5:9 – “**Jesus is the author of eternal salvation** (past action) **to all who obey Him** (present response).
- 1 Peter 1:22,23 – “Now that you have purified yourselves by **obeying** the truth...” But I thought God purified us in Christ’s death? Yes...but we appropriate it through obedience in the present.
- Matthew 7:21–27—Jesus says, “Not everyone who calls me Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven but only he who **does** the will of my Father in heaven.” We appropriate His salvation through obedience.

Consider some of God’s acts of salvation in the Old Testament. Ask yourself...

- Noah – Was he saved before he obeyed? Yes! God called him and made a promise to him. However, he appropriated his salvation through obedience. He would not have been saved if he had not obeyed!
- Abraham – Was the Promised Land already Abraham’s before he set out from Ur? Yes. But he appropriated it as he obeyed God and went to the place God eventually showed him.

- Israel at Jericho – Was Jericho already defeated before Israel began to march around its walls? Yes. But it was through obedience to God’s commands that Israel appropriated their victory.
- Consider the bronze serpent that Moses made to spare Israel from death. Were the people saved by God’s grace? Yes! But they had to appropriate it by obedience – they had to look at the serpent to be saved. (John uses this to illustrate salvation by Jesus Christ. He is lifted up and our salvation is won. However, we are called to appropriate it by looking on Him by faith.

In every case, it was God who saved. But people entered His salvation through obedient faith.

And that’s why baptism is essential! Baptism is one of those acts of responding to the one who, 2000 years ago, died for us on the cross. In our baptism, we are saying ‘yes’ to the one who has already done all that is necessary to save us. **It’s, what we might call, the Relational Appropriation of our Salvation.** It’s an important part of our on-going relationship with our Saviour.

And that’s why the Bible can say two things that look contradictory. On one hand, it can say, “**Christ has saved you... all by Himself**”. There is nothing you can add to that historic fact. On the other hand, the Bible can also say that “**you are not saved unless you respond (and keep on responding) to Him in faith, through baptism, and obedience, and perseverance, and good works, and Christian fellowship, prayer, ...etc.**”

That’s clearly the reason why, in the Bible, people never postponed baptism. Always, as soon as someone believed the gospel and repented, **they were immediately baptized!**

Acts 2:41 – "That day" 3000 were baptized.

Acts 8:36 – "What hinders me from being baptized?"

Acts 9:18 – "Immediately ... he arose and was baptized"

Acts 16:33 – "...the same hour of the night ... immediately he and all his family were baptized"

Conclusion: Is baptism necessary to be saved? No...not from an historic perspective. The triune God has done it all. However, from the perspective of our engagement, participation and on-going relationship with the triune God, baptism is part and parcel of following and being united with him, appropriating his salvation in the present!

That's why Jesus, in Mark 16:16, says, **"Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."**

That's also why Peter, in Acts 2:38, says **"Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."**

When you go back to the church fathers, you will also see that Tertullian was a big fan of baptism. He said--"Without baptism, salvation is attainable by none" (Baptism 1 [A.D. 203]). Origen also understood this! "It is not possible to receive forgiveness of sins without baptism" (Exhortation to the Martyrs 30 [A.D. 235]). Cyril of Jerusalem also knew the important place of baptism--"If any man does not receive baptism, he does not have salvation." (Catechetical Lectures 3:10 [A.D. 350]).

They all understood that God alone saves us...but that baptism is our relational appropriation of that salvation.

Let's pray.