

A New Beginning



The following notes contain some of the material presented in the series "Is God for Real?"

Have you ever wanted to start all over again? Ever wished you could begin a brand-new page and erase all the mistakes of the past? In a sense God wants us to have that experience every morning. In Lamentations 3:23 God reminds us that His mercies to us are new every morning. However, there is another kind of new beginning that God has provided for us. A way in which we can start again and acknowledge the joining of our life to God and to the plans He has for us. It is called baptism, and the New Testament has quite a lot to say about it.

If we were to go today to a dozen different churches and ask them about baptism we might get a dozen different answers. For instance, some churches teach that a person can be baptised by someone pouring water over their head. Other churches might say that sprinkling water is the way it should be done. Others teach that baptism is conferred by salt, or oil, and still others will baptise you by mail or even over the phone! So, what does the Bible teach on this subject? Is there a biblical method of baptism?

In Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, which today is in modern Turkey, we read, 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism,' (Ephesians 4:5). Here Paul identifies that there is one baptism with which all Christians should be familiar. Of course, Paul himself had been baptised, once he had accepted Jesus Christ as his personal saviour, (Acts 9:18), and he spent the rest of his life encouraging others to do likewise. But how was baptism performed? What actually happened? To answer these questions, we will first go to the baptism of Jesus Himself. The baptism of Jesus features in all four of the gospel accounts of His life and teachings. In Matthew 3:16-17 we read, 'When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."' This verse reveals several things to us that can help us to understand what happens to an individual at baptism. First, it tells us that after Jesus was baptised He 'came up,' 'from the water.' This means that He must have gone down into the water to begin with. Secondly, He received the Holy Spirit. People who are baptised are given the Holy Spirit to empower them to live Godly lives. Thirdly, He was declared to be a child of God. Again, when a person is baptised they join the family of God in a special sense. Fourthly, after baptism Jesus began His ministry. Likewise, baptism for the believer is the beginning of an exciting journey, walking and working in partnership with God.

Another thing we notice in the accounts of baptism in the Bible is that Baptism requires a significant amount of water. In Mark 1:9 we read that Jesus was baptised by John in the Jordan. So, Jesus was baptised in a river. Furthermore, the gospel of John tells us that John the Baptist was baptising people in another river, 'because there was much water there,' (John 3:23). In another encounter, the evangelist Philip met the treasurer of Ethiopia on the road to Gaza, and after studying the Bible together, baptised him in water. The water must have been significantly deep because the Bible says that they both went down into the water, (Acts 8:36-39). This is not surprising when we understand the origin and meaning of the word 'baptism.' In Greek the word 'baptizo' means to dip, to immerse, to plunge under. So, baptism in the early church was performed by plunging believers beneath the water. We could go to many ancient sites in Bible lands where

the ruins of large baptistery's can still be found. Likewise, in Europe there are many Old churches with large baptistries built into them where baptism by immersion was once practised.

So, what happened? Why did the method of baptism change? The simple answer is that during the Dark Ages the church decided it was just simpler and more convenient to sprinkle or pour water instead. Some churches today have even dispensed with baptism altogether. When we alter the biblical method, we miss much of the teaching and symbolism of Baptism. Romans 6:3-4 teaches us that baptism is symbolic of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. In baptism we die to the old life of sin, we are buried beneath the water, and we rise to a new life in Christ. This method of baptism is the only one practised in the Bible and is a beautiful memorial of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So how important is baptism? Is it really necessary? When Jesus spoke to His disciples for the last time, just before ascending to heaven, He instructed them to go and make disciples, and baptise them, (Matthew 28:19). This is precisely what they did. In Acts 2:38 we find Peter preaching, '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.' After his appeal 3,000 people were baptised! Jesus Himself had told one of the religious leaders that he must be born again or he wouldn't enter the kingdom of God, and part of that meant being born of the water, or baptism, (John 3:3-5). Furthermore, at the end of Mark's gospel Jesus says to His followers, 'whoever believes and is baptised will be saved,' (Mark 16:16). So, for Jesus and the disciples the commitment of baptism was very important.

So what steps does a person need to take to be ready for baptism? From a biblical standpoint a person needs to: 1. Understand the teachings of Jesus, 2. Believe in Jesus Christ as personal saviour, and 3. Confess all sins and repent. When we consider these three conditions we realise that infants would have difficulty meeting these conditions. Infants cannot understand, they can't yet believe, and can't confess or repent. So, the decision to be baptised must be made by a mature person, someone who understands the commitment that they are making. There are no infant baptisms recorded in the Bible.

When Jesus was baptised, He said it was fitting to fulfil all righteousness, (Matthew 3:1). Jesus was not baptised to have His own sins forgiven. He had none. Jesus credits His baptism to those who cannot be baptised, such as infants, those who are too sick to be baptised, or those who may be in prison and who are not permitted to get baptised. Thus, by faith, Jesus righteousness covers them. But notice Jesus was baptised for those who could not, not for those who would not. If we want to follow Christ, and be part of His kingdom, then we should commit ourselves to Him through baptism.

Is there any biblical record of someone being baptised more than once? Yes, there is. In Acts 19 Paul encounters some Ephesian believers in God. After talking with them he discovered that there were significant gaps in their understanding, and after discussion they were re-baptised, (Acts 19:1-5). Rebaptism might be considered necessary when a person has become aware of new important biblical truths, or if that individual had turned their back on Christ and returned to a life of sin. Rebaptism provides an opportunity to recommit one's life to the Lord. May each one of us give our lives fully to God, so that He can work with us, and through us to grow His kingdom, until Christ returns.

If you would like to know more about this subject, or others in the series, 'Is God for Real?' then please contact one of our staff and they will be happy to help you.