

# BAPTISM: A BIBLICAL LOOK

This guide is intended for people who are considering the most important decision of their lives: whether to follow Jesus on the “narrow path” that leads to life (Matthew 7:13-14). Following Jesus is not easy, and it is certainly the road less traveled. It will mean sacrifice, putting others’ needs before your own, and allowing God to shape and mold you into who he created you to be. This narrow path will at times seem lonely, and difficult, and daunting. But it does indeed *lead to real, abundant life*. It leads to truth and hope and freedom and wholeness.

In many ways, baptism is the marker moment in our faith. Certainly many important thoughts and experiences lead up to baptism for most people, but our baptism is when we publicly announce our decision to “jump in” and follow Jesus for the rest of our lives, in the process inviting our new brothers and sisters in Christ to walk with us, encourage us, and hold us accountable to our decision.

Baptism is, in a sense, the starting gun for the marathon that is following Jesus for a lifetime. At times folks talk about baptism as if it’s the ending point, as if the person being baptized has in some sense arrived – completing a journey from the land of the lost sinner to the land of the saved saint. But baptism is when we join God’s family, adopted as his child and redeemed from our sin. And it is when we begin a lifelong journey of following Jesus and submitting to him as the Lord of our lives.

Yet baptism is more than just the beginning of our Christian faith, for something wonderful and mysterious happens when we are baptized into Christ Jesus. The Bible tells us through baptism we identify with Jesus in his death and resurrection. In a sense we are buried with Christ, allowing our sin to die with him, and we are raised with Christ to new life, cleansed and forgiven through him. So while baptism is not the finish line of our faith, the Bible insists God does something powerful and important in and through our baptism.

For the rest of this guide, we will look at some of the most important elements of baptism. Hopefully this will give you a firm grasp on what baptism is all about, and will provide clarity and excitement as you make this crucial and beautiful step.

# IMPORTANT ELEMENTS OF BAPTISM

Let us turn our attention to four of the most crucial elements of baptism. While we metaphorically turn baptism over in our hands, let's look at its different angles and meanings. We will hit on some of the major passages in the Bible that are the basis of what we know and believe about baptism.

## **Element 1 – Baptism is a part of the salvation process.**

Baptism does not gain our salvation in any sense; indeed, no action or effort can save us. We are only saved by the grace of God and the sacrifice of Jesus.

Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Saving is not in our power but only in God's. He is the only one who can save, and salvation is *always* a gift. It is never transactional: I do this, so I am guaranteed that God will do that. It doesn't work like that. God saves,, and he has offered salvation to *everyone*.

Though everyone has been offered salvation, of course we play a role in accepting the gift. Throughout the Bible we see a clear pattern of what accepting the gift and receiving God's salvation looks like. It doesn't look exactly the same for every person at every time, but there are several aspects of the salvation process that were (and are) always present.

One piece is **belief**. To accept God's gift of salvation, we must believe God is who he says he is (as articulated in the Bible), and we must believe he sent his Son Jesus to teach us, lead us, die for us, and be raised to new life for us. It may be quite a process for many to work through the facts and the history and get to a place of belief or faith. But this is obviously a crucial part of the salvation process.

Mark 16:16

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

Acts 16: 29-31

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.”

Matthew 16:13-18

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

A second dynamic is **repentance**, which means to turn from the wrong direction we’ve been heading and go in a new direction. It means to choose to stop sinful thought patterns, words, and deeds and chart a new course toward purity and holy living. Of course we will struggle against sin for life, so repentance is an ongoing part of our Christian faith. But as part of the salvation process, there must be an initial choice to repent: to turn from sin and choose to live our life God’s way.

Acts 2:36-40

“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Peter replied, “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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

A third aspect is **confession**, where we state before others (particularly our new Christian brothers and sisters) that we are sinners in need of salvation, and that we trust God to save us through Christ. Romans 10:9-10 says,

“If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.”

Paul in this passage seems to be saying that both internal belief and external confession are important parts of the process. We are not each saved in our own individual bubbles; we are saved individually but as a part of a community of believers called the Church. Part of following Jesus is joining this family of believers, so confessing to each other and following Jesus in the context of community is very important.

A fourth piece is **baptism**. We are of course digging into more of baptism’s meaning in this guide, but as part of this discussion I’ll just say that baptism was *always* part of the salvation process in the New Testament’s account of the early church. Folks simply were not saved without being baptized. Sometimes this happened right at the beginning (Acts 8:26-38) and sometimes the other elements happened first (Acts 10), but regardless of the order, baptism was always a part. Baptism is a physical rite that has spiritual power; it is both a symbol of what has occurred in the life of the new Christian

(dying with Christ to their sin and being raised with him to new life) and in some mysterious way actually enables us to be unified with Christ in his death and resurrection.

A final component is **receiving the Holy Spirit**. This is of course also very mysterious, as the Holy Spirit lives within us and cannot be documented or tested. The best way to understand the Holy Spirit is that it is God's Spirit that lives within us, guiding us and encouraging us and reminding us of truth. This is also always a part of the salvation experience in the New Testament, though it looks drastically different from one person to another, and follows no rules as far as timing or order. God can bestow his Spirit on people when and how he chooses, and as a Christian we might not notice anything different about us, or any moment when we receive the Spirit. But Jesus himself promised to give us the Spirit, to empower us and guide us (Acts 1:4-5, Acts 1:7-8, John 14:15-31).

## **Element 2 – Baptism is an act of (willful) obedience.**

After Jesus was crucified, his followers were utterly crushed. All they had built their lives on seemed to be swept out from under them. And then God did the impossible, raising Jesus from the dead and breathing new life into his wrecked body! Those first followers of Jesus would never be the same; they became unstoppable, first hand witnesses to God's unlimited power. Their worldview was turned completely on its head, and they no longer feared death. God used them to do amazing things and spread the good news about Jesus all over the world.

Right after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the disciples were in Jerusalem, at the center of Jewish power and authority. Peter stood up and addressed a large crowd, many of whom had likely seen Jesus crucified, and he shared with them all that had happened. He told them the truth about Jesus – even though these folks were instrumental in his death, he was no longer dead! He explained he was the long-awaited Messiah, the Savior of the world! When these folks heard his words, Acts 2:37 says they were “cut to the heart” and asked Peter and the other disciples, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter responded with these words:

“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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:38-39).

These are beautiful words, and they make it clear right from the beginning the earliest followers of Jesus taught that Jesus' death and resurrection had the power to save *everyone*, even the people who killed him! They make it clear baptism is not a side act, separate to actual salvation; rather, it is a crucial part of identifying with Christ and becoming his disciple. To follow Jesus we must believe, repent, confess, and be baptized.

Jesus himself was baptized (Matthew 3:13-17). Clearly it wasn't the same type of baptism, since he didn't have anything to repent of, but it is clear God was pleased with this action. It seems to have been Jesus' way of humbly submitting to his Father and his will, from the start of his ministry. There is certainly something in the act of baptism that shows great humility; it is yielding our will and our very bodies to the control of another as we lay back in the water.

In the end, we are baptized because it is what we are asked to do. Baptism is an act of obedience. Listen to what Jesus instructs the disciples right before he leaves earth in Matthew 28:18-20.

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.  
**19** Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

We baptize and we are baptized because it is what followers of Jesus do. It is an act of *willful* obedience, because to follow Jesus is not a choice that can be made for you. That is why we don't baptize infants. To follow Jesus and submit our lives to him, we must know what we're doing and make the choice to obey and follow and serve him.

**Element 3 – Baptism is a public proclamation of our faith, and of our joining the family of believers.**

Weddings can be complicated. Many people, not wanting the drama that might accompany their wedding, come to the correct conclusion their union is about the *marriage* and not the *wedding*. So they elope. They avoid all of the unwanted drama and get straight to the marriage without the hassle of the wedding.

That is certainly understandable, even if that decision means they are missing out on the beauty of celebrating a momentous choice and occasion with those closest to them. Though weddings can be difficult and complicated, at their core they are a beautiful opportunity to celebrate. We don't celebrate with each other enough!

The act of baptism is very similar to a wedding. Just like you can't be married without the vows (whether you elope or have a large wedding), you can't be a Christian without being baptized. And just like a wedding is a way of publically committing to your new spouse, to love and cherish them for life, baptism is our public commitment to following Christ for life. It is our public acceptance of his gift of salvation, and it is our formal joining of the family of believers. And it ought to be a celebration!

I can believe and repent and accept Christ in the quiet of my own home, and this private commitment is certainly very important. But there must also be a public acceptance of Christ, of confessing my need for him and my faith in him and my commitment to follow him. As I do, I also publically join the family of believers. Because of this, there is an understanding among the body of Christ that the one being baptized is now our brother or sister – one we have a responsibility to encourage and care for and hold accountable.

#### **Element 4 – In our baptism we identify with and are unified with Christ in his death and resurrection.**

This is perhaps the most important element of baptism. It is why baptism more than a physical rite one can give or take. It is why baptism goes beyond being merely a physical symbol of a spiritual reality. The Bible tells us although baptism is physical, it is also spiritual. It mysteriously unites us with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection.

Paul confronts this issue in his letter to the Romans. He is in the middle of a discussion about God's grace, and how it has no limits to cover sin. God's grace is greater than all sin! He then asks a hypothetical question to open chapter 6, saying,

“What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” He responds with something like “Definitely, absolutely NOT!” It is translated “By no means!” And then he says, “We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? 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 6:2-4).

This beautifully represents what happens in our baptism. As we stand in the water, we are what the Bible calls our “old self” (Romans 6:6). We have sinned against God and gone our own way, and we need to be forgiven and cleansed and healed. As we lay down into the water, we are united with Christ in his death. The old self is crucified with Christ. In another Biblical analogy, we are told we have “taken off” the old self with its practices and have “put on” the new self,

Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. (Colossians 3:9-10).

It's like our old, sinful self is a set of clothing we leave behind there in the water. It is buried with Christ. As we rise up out of the water, we are united to Christ in his resurrection. We too are given a new life, a fresh start. We have been cleansed from our past sin and freed to live a new, Spirit-filled life!

2 Corinthians 5:17 says,

“This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!” This is seen and experienced most clearly in our baptism, and this is what makes it so *beautiful*. It doesn't mean we will no longer struggle, or that sin is now eradicated from our lives forever. Unfortunately we are not “home” yet, in the presence of God, where sin is no more. We still live in a fallen world and must continue our struggle against sin until that day. But we are free from the bondage of sin, and we have God's power within us to resist it. And though our newfound freedom should make us run from sin, when we do sin, God's grace has no limits to renew and restore us again and again.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Now that we have looked at some of the most important elements of baptism, it is important to pause and take inventory of your own heart. Ponder and write in the answers to the questions below, as you consider whether you might be ready to make the crucial decision to follow Christ.

- Our sin separates us from God and leads to hopelessness and despair. Romans 6:23 says, “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” We are on the road to death, and through Christ God offers us forgiveness and freedom and salvation. What ways outside of Christ have you tried to find hope and joy and meaning? Have any of them worked?

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- Making the choice to accept Christ is saying, “My ways haven’t worked. I need you and want to live my life your way, God.” Are you ready to say that to God? Why or why not?

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- Submitting to Christ as the Lord of your life is a humble posture. It means we no longer put our desires first, but rather we put pleasing God first. We choose to honor him with our choices, even when it’s hard. What do you think will be hardest about this for you?

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- Before making the decision to follow Christ, what view did you have of yourself, or others, or life itself? How did you view your past, or your future? How have those views changed since you have started this journey toward following Christ?

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- Sin messes everything up, but the Bible says that God didn't sit back and fume about it. He decided to respond to my sin and yours by coming to earth and pouring out his own life for us (John 3:16). How does this make you feel about God? How do you want to respond to such love and grace?

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- Is anything holding you back from making the decision to follow Christ? Is anything holding you back from believing, repenting, confessing, or being baptized? If so, what?

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- When did you first realize your need for God, and for healing and forgiveness and a new life?

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- What should change about a person who becomes a Christ follower? What changes do you anticipate happening in your life (or what has already started changing) as you start following Christ?

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- Are there changes you are nervous about making, or feel uncertain that you'll be able to make? If so, what? Who could you ask for help in those situations, since you will not be following Christ alone but will be joining a family of believers? Are there ways we as a church can help?

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- What questions do you still have? List them here and seek out guidance from a Christian you trust, or someone in leadership here at CCC.

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## DETAILS IF YOU'RE READY TO "JUMP IN"

If you have worked through this guide and feel ready and excited to jump in and make the decision to follow Christ in baptism, here are some common questions and answers you should be aware of.

- Who can baptize you? Any baptized Christian believer can baptize you. If you have a friend, small group leader, or loved one you want to baptize you, that is great. Many people choose to ask someone who has been influential in their spiritual journey to baptize them. If no one comes to mind, someone on staff here at CCC would be glad to baptize you as well!
- What should I wear? We recommend that you wear your bathing suit. Ladies should wear shorts and a dark T-shirt over their suit, and gentlemen should wear a dark T-shirt over theirs. Please also bring a towel to dry off with and some flip flops.
- When can I be baptized? We can schedule your baptism anytime. During a service, after a service, during the week, whenever makes the most sense.

Other questions? Make sure to send us an e-mail ([baptism@communitycc.net](mailto:baptism@communitycc.net)) or give us a call (410-933-8330) and we will try to answer any questions you might have! We hope this guide has been helpful as you consider this crucial and wonderful decision to follow Christ!