

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Actions speak louder than words: Baptism

The subject of baptism in the Bible can be divided into three areas:

- Baptism in the Old Testament,
- Baptism by John the Baptist, and
- Christian Baptism.

Baptism in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament there is no specific mention of baptism. However the New Testament does refer to events in the Old Testament when commenting on baptism. Paul writes of baptism in regard to the crossing of the Red Sea when, under the direction of Moses, the children of Israel escaped death at the hands of the Egyptians: "our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Corinthians 10:1-2).

Peter refers to Noah and his family as being "saved through water" and this corresponding to baptism in 1 Peter 3:20-21.

Naaman is the one person who was baptised in the Old Testament in a similar way to how it is described in the New Testament; only 2 Kings 5:14 tells us he dipped himself seven times in the Jordan. The journey of Noah's ark (genesis 6:1-9:17), the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:31) and Naaman's experience (2 Kings 5:1-19) all refer to salvation by passing through water, which we will come to later.

In Hebrews 6:2 we read of, "the doctrine of baptisms." And in Hebrews 9:10, "various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation". 'The time of reformation' was, as Hebrews 9:11 explains, until Christ came. These baptisms referred to the Jewish ritual washings not baptism as described in the New Testament.

Baptism by John the Baptist

In Mark 1:4 we read that, "John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins." He preached to the crowds who emerged from Jerusalem, Judea and the region around Jordan (Matthew 3:1-6). His powerful ministry led to multitudes of Jewish people being baptised, confessing their sins and living righteous lives whilst they looked for the coming Messiah.

This makes the baptism of Jesus so remarkable. "Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. And John tried to prevent Him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?' But Jesus answered and said to him, 'Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.' Then he allowed Him. 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'" (Matthew 3:13-17).

Jesus began His public ministry by being baptised. To any onlooker Jesus would have looked like another young Jewish man responding to John's preaching by confessing his sins and entering the waters of baptism. Indeed John was astounded when the Lord came to him to be baptised (Matthew 3:14). The characteristics of the baptism of Jesus are beautiful illustrations of His work of salvation. His perfection is recognised by John (Matthew 3:14). He comes as the great Substitute. He figuratively enters the water as going into death and burial and He emerges from the water as a picture of resurrection. Heaven then responds to this act of obedience to God's will: the Holy Spirit descends to rest upon the Saviour and the Father bears witness to who Jesus is, the Son of God. At the ascension of the Lord the heavens were opened to receive Him into glory and subsequently the Holy Spirit came down at Pentecost on the basis of this glorification. "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (John 7:38-39).

God uses the baptism of His Son to confirm who He was and what He was about to do.

We should not pass on before emphasising the far-reaching effects of the ministry of John the Baptist. In the book of Acts we see just how powerful his ministry was. It went far beyond the borders of Israel. For example in Acts 18 we read, "Now a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John. So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:24-26).

In the following chapter we read, "And it happened, while Apollos was at Corinth, that Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples he said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' So they said to him, 'We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.' And he said to them, 'Into what then were you baptized?' So they said, 'Into John's baptism.' Then Paul said, 'John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.' When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. Now the men were about twelve in all" (Acts 19:1-7).

These incidents demonstrate the extent to which John the Baptist's preaching and ministry of baptism had prepared the way for the Christian Gospel.

John the Baptist preached the baptism of repentance, and during the ministry of Christ, before the cross, some people were baptised by the disciples of Jesus. "Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptised more disciples than John (though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples), He left Judea and departed again to Galilee" (John 4:1-3).

Christian Baptism

At the very end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus told His disciples, "'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' Amen" (Matthew 28:19-20). At Pentecost, when Peter preached to the crowds, he said, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38). Throughout the Acts of the Apostles reference is made to the baptism of Christians.

It is evident that the early Christians were baptised by full immersion. Jesus was baptised in this way, "When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water" (Matthew 3:16). And, as we saw a few moments ago, the disciples of Jesus baptised in the same way (see John 4:2). There is no reason to suggest this mode of baptising believers changed.

The examples we have quoted from the New Testament clearly indicate that when someone believed in the Lord Jesus they were baptised. The households of Lydia (Acts 16:15) and the Philippian jailor (Acts 16:33) are mentioned in Acts 16. The inference is given that the members of Lydia's household believed. In the case of the Philippian jailor it is said his whole family had come to believe in God.

This morning I am presenting believer's baptism as clearly described in the New Testament. In doing so I should say that infant baptism is the most common form of baptism practised in Christianity. This is when a child is baptised, usually by the sprinkling of water upon them. It does not involve the active participation of the person as with believer's baptism described above. In the reformed tradition, infant baptism is intended to symbolise a claim upon the child's life by God and His people. Such a claim does not ensure the salvation of the baptised but rather follows the biblical tradition of God's calling people to Himself and that the hope of salvation is not found within the abilities or effectiveness of the child baptised but within God Himself. One of the earliest examples of this practice is the theologian Origen of Alexandria who was baptised as an infant in 180 AD. When this form of baptism became widespread is uncertain.

Paul, in Romans 6:3-4, gives the meaning of baptism. "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. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin" (Romans 6:3-6).

When we are baptised it symbolises that we died in Christ and we are raised in Him. We died to sin and the fallen state of man and we are alive to God in the resurrected Christ. We are enabled to live in the newness of life we have in Christ. It is an illustration of the end of the old life and the beginning of the new one.

Old Testament events help us to understand this. When the children of Israel crossed the Red Sea they escaped death and were saved to walk with God into the Promised Land. In the same way through the death of Christ we have been saved to live for God by the power of the life we have in the risen Saviour.

Later the children of Israel crossed the Jordan (Joshua 3:1-17). The Jordan is a unique river. Its Hebrew name is Nehar haYarden and it means "the Descender". The river is 251 kilometres (156 miles) long and flows from its tributaries in the regions of Mount Hermon and Mount Lebanon into the Dead Sea. The river drops rapidly in a 75 kilometre run from its source to Lake Hula, which is slightly above sea level. From this lake, it drops much more in the 25 kilometres down to the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee is 211 metres below sea level. It is the lowest freshwater lake in the world and the second lowest lake in the world after the Dead Sea, a saltwater lake. In the last section the river meanders until it enters the Dead Sea, 422 metres below sea level. The Dead Sea has no outlet.

As an aside, I remember visiting the Sea of Galilee twelve years ago. My guide got me on a boat trip with a Roman Catholic party. It was a beautiful day and in the middle of the lake the Roman Catholic priest gave a talk about the Lake of Galilee. He described the waters come down from the mountains into the Sea of Galilee and flowing out into the fertile Jordan Valley. But when the waters reach the Dead Sea they stop. There is no outlet. He compared the two lakes to our lives. The Sea of Galilee received and gave, whereas the Dead Sea only receives. It does not give. We can choose to live selfless or selfish lives. God blesses us so we can be a blessing.

You can see by its descent to the Dead Sea why the River Jordan would be associated with death. Many Christians think of crossing the Jordan as a picture of dying and entering heaven. But if we turn to Joshua 4:1-24, which records what followed the crossing of the Jordan by the children of Israel, there are some interesting features we need to consider. God told Joshua to take twelve stones out of the River Jordan and set them up in Gilgal (Joshua 4:3). Joshua also set up twelve stones in the River Jordan, "And the children of Israel did so, just as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones from the midst of the Jordan, as the LORD had spoken to Joshua, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel, and carried them over with them to the place where they lodged, and laid them down there. Then Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests who bore the ark of the covenant stood; and they are there to this day" (Joshua 4:8-9).

Later in Joshua 4:19-24 we read, "Now the people came up from the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they camped in Gilgal on the east border of Jericho. And those twelve stones which they took out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal. Then he spoke to the children of Israel, saying: 'When your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, "What are these stones?" then you shall let your children know, saying, "Israel crossed over this Jordan on dry land"; for the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you had crossed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which He dried up before us until we had crossed over, that all the peoples of the earth may know the hand of the LORD, that it is mighty, that you may fear the LORD your God forever.'"

The crossing of the River Jordan and the setting up of the stones both in the river and at Gilgal was first of all a perpetual reminder of God bringing His people safely into the Promised Land. The illustrations used are also helpful in understanding the meaning of baptism. The stones erected in the River Jordan and at Gilgal signified the crossing - giving us life-based figures of death and resurrection. The stones in the Jordan can be seen as a picture of the believer dying with Christ. Paul writes of this in Colossians 2:20, "Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations."

Also, the stones at Gilgal can be seen as a picture of being raised with Him. Paul's goes on to write of this aspect in Colossians 3:1-4. "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory."

We can always look back to baptism as a simple picture, at the outset of our Christian faith, of passing from death into life through Christ and how His life empowers us to live for God until Christ returns.

Baptism is individual and in the New Testament it marked the beginning of a Christian's life of faith.

We see this at Pentecost, "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?' 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 2:37-38).

We see it with the Ethiopian Eunuch, "So the eunuch answered Philip and said, 'I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?' Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. 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?'" (Acts 8:34-36).

It was true of Lydia, "Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.' So she persuaded us" (Acts 16:14-15).

And it was also true of the Philippian Jailor, "Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized. Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household" (Acts 16:32-34).

Paul even re-baptised the believers in Ephesus, "And he said to them, 'Into what then were you baptized?' So they said, 'Into John's baptism.' Then Paul said, 'John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.' When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 19:1-5).

As we have seen, Jesus commanded His disciples to baptise disciples in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' Amen" (Matthew 28:19-20). It doing so He emphasises that the new life has new relationships with our Father in heaven, our living Saviour, the Son of God, and the indwelling Holy Spirit who links us to heaven and empowers us on earth. This is taught by Paul in Ephesians 4:4-6, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all."

Peter also explains that baptism is the answer of a good conscience toward God. "There is also an antitype which now saves us - baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ..." (1 Peter 3:21) It would be difficult to see how the answer of a good conscience toward God could be anything other than by faith.

Peter in Acts 2 taught baptism in relation to the forgiveness of sins. Ananias was sent by God to Saul, and Paul recalls his words to him, "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). The act of being baptised does not wash away our sins or give life but it is a physical expression and confession of the Christian's part in Christ's death. In Paul's words we are, "baptized unto His [Christ's] death". Baptism has been described as an outward expression of an inward work. The act of being baptised takes us into the water, a picture of death. "We were buried with Him through baptism into death" (Romans 6:3-4). It also brings out of the water, a picture of life: "...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 6:4). Now that life is hidden with Christ in God and through the power of the Holy Spirit is expressed in our daily lives.

Several months ago one of my granddaughters was baptised. The early Christians were baptised in rivers and pools which, in the main, were very public places. Our granddaughter was baptised with a friend in a local swimming pool. It was a very special occasion attended by her friends, family friends, neighbours and Christians. When we were organising the baptism we were pleased to hear it was not an uncommon event for the leisure centre. Some would find it uncomfortable to come into a church but not so much so into a public place. The early Christians had openness when expressing their living faith in Christ even when, for some of them, baptism cost them dearly.

This morning may we look back to the day we were baptised and remember with thanksgiving all that Christ has for us, is doing in us now, and the hope He has given us for the future. If you are believer who has never been baptised, you still have time to demonstrate what Christ has done in your life through this beautiful symbol.

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