



## WHAT EXACTLY IS CHRISTIAN BAPTISM?

We have discovered that if we want to become like the Lord Jesus Christ, starting to live like him now and becoming wholly like him when he comes again, we have to be baptised. We have also worked out that we need to have a saving faith if we are to become right with God, being *“justified by faith”*.

The apostle Paul spends the whole of Romans chapter 6 describing what baptism is intended to achieve, just as in chapter 4 he explained the importance of saving faith. Our search to understand the Bible has already demonstrated the importance of analysing a particular passage and then being able to see that teaching within the framework of the Bible as a whole, allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture. So let’s put those techniques to work again.

### ❖ Romans 6

What exactly does Paul tell us about baptism in this chapter? Try reading it yourself and jotting down the things you discover, then compare that with the list below.

- 1 Making a clean break with sin requires that we must have *“died to sin”* (6:2);
- 2 We do this in symbol when we are baptized into Christ, for in that way we are *“baptized into his death”* – burial in water is the way in which, in symbol, we are *“buried therefore with him by baptism into death”* (6:4);
- 3 Baptism marks the end of the old life and the start of a new life for it symbolises more than just a death. It means that *“just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life”* (6:4);
- 4 It is therefore an act of union and unity with both Father and Son (6:5) and a declaration that we no longer want to be *“enslaved to sin”* (6:6), but want to be *“free from sin”* (6:7);
- 5 It is a work of faith – *“if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him”* (6:8), based on our knowledge of *“the standard of teaching to which you were committed”* (6:17);
- 6 It requires a complete change of mind and attitude from that with which we are born – a willingness to *“obey from the heart the things”* we learn about from God’s Word (6:11,17,19);
- 7 It marks a change of allegiance and loyalty as befits those who become God’s children. For, from baptism on, believers are to *“present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness”* (6:13);
- 8 This means a new start in life now – a new quality of life with God now, and in the age to come *“the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (6:23).

### ❖ First Century Practice

If baptism really is as important as Paul reckons in this chapter, and he clearly believes it to be so, we should find that it is the universal practice of all First Century believers. If we see what they said about it and what they did, then we will be able to base our practices on a firm foundation of original faith. There were examples of people coming through water to a new life in the Old Testament, notably Noah and his family coming through the flood. Israel escaping from Egypt through the Red Sea; and there are occasions when the priests had to be washed all over before entering into consecrated service.<sup>2</sup> But it is the New Testament that initiates baptism to mark a new start for Jews and Gentiles alike.

### ❖ John the Baptist

Right at the start of the New Testament, in the gospel accounts, we read of a man who was *“sent from God”* (John 1:6). John the Baptist was of the priestly line and could have ministered at the temple in Jerusalem. Instead he lived in the wilderness and appealed to the faithful in Israel to come out to him and be baptized in the River Jordan. It is the first thing that Mark records in his account of the gospel:

*“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’ **John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.**”*

***And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins*** (Mark 1:1-5).

John had come, just as the prophets had foretold (Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 being the two Scriptures quoted), as a forerunner of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. His message was that the people of Israel needed “*forgiveness of sins*” and that was a huge challenge to the existing religious system. They had their magnificent temple in Jerusalem, an extensive priesthood, sacrifices were offered continually and all the feasts were kept. But they needed something different and John invited them to repent and be baptized.

Repentance is an act of turning away from sin and going in the opposite direction. As we have seen, we are born with a natural tendency to go our own way, not in God’s direction. Repentance means turning around and going towards Him – just like point 6 in our analysis of Romans chapter 6. Watch for it and you will see that repentance often accompanies baptism; the two go together. The very first message that Jesus preached when he began his ministry was: “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” (Matthew 4:17).

People flocked to hear John’s message and to be baptized in the River Jordan, for his was a challenging message, to live lives that were right in the sight of God and to wash away their sins by immersion in the Jordan. We know that he practised immersion in water because of an incidental comment in the gospel of John, where we are told that: “*John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized*” (John 3:23).

It is always the case in the New Testament that people who were baptized were immersed; sprinkling or pouring water on an infant or an adult were not practised at that time and have no Scriptural basis whatsoever. There is one other significant detail that confirms that John took those being baptized into the River Jordan, rather than just standing on the riverbank.

### ❖ **Jesus was Baptized**

One day the Lord Jesus came to the Jordan to be baptized by his cousin John. We do not really know how much contact they had over the years. The families lived miles apart, but they might have met at the various feasts in Jerusalem or on family occasions. John knew enough about Jesus to stand in awe of him, for he protested that, if anyone was to be baptized, it should be him, not Jesus, which caused Jesus to say something which is relevant to all of us:

*“Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.’ Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’”* (Matthew 3:13-17).

Clearly what Jesus had done was pleasing to God, as the voice from heaven made clear. The physical event is carefully recorded in that the Lord went “*up from the water*” afterwards, so he had evidently been in the Jordan, not on the riverbank, when John baptized him. But the crucial saying for us is this. Jesus said that baptism is something we all need if we are to “*fulfil all righteousness*”. It was something for “*us*”, not just for him, and if he needed it – with such a wonderful character – how much more do we?

Jesus had no sins which needed forgiveness of course and therefore no need to repent, but he was keen to do anything and everything that showed his willing obedience. God was initiating a new means of approach to Himself, through baptism, so Jesus was baptized as well to show us that way. In doing so, he endorsed John’s work and his methods by encouraging others to be baptized, for the record says that:

*“Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing ... Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), he left Judea and departed again for Galilee”* (John 3:22; 4:1-3).

John’s work was coming to an end and that of Jesus was beginning, for John was soon to be imprisoned and later executed. As opposition to the Lord’s ministry also began to grow and as he neared the time when he must die as a sacrifice for sin, the Lord used one phrase which indicates how he viewed baptism – as an act of dying to self and pledging to live wholly to God. He said:

*“I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!”* (Luke 12:50).

For him the death on the cross would be what his baptism had pointed forward to. In the Jordan he had publicly pledged to die to self and now, in Jerusalem, he would literally fulfil that pledge. And he would not be alone when that happened.

## ❖ Dying with Christ

Paul used symbolic language when he said, in Romans 6, that *“we have died with Christ”* in the waters of baptism. But one man literally died with Christ; he was the thief who was crucified with him and who made a remarkable confession of faith in the most challenging circumstances.

Some people say that the thief on the cross demonstrates that you don't have to be baptized to be saved because, they say, he wasn't baptized. In reality nobody knows whether he was or not. He may well have been baptized earlier by John or by the disciples of Jesus and the indications are that he probably had been, for he knew and believed a huge amount about the person and work of Jesus. But that is not the real point here.

This man actually died alongside Christ – the only man ever to have died like this. Hence his death was like an act of baptism in itself. It was also accompanied by repentance and by a most remarkable declaration of what he believed, at a time when many of the followers of Jesus had lost their faith or seriously doubted that Jesus really was the Messiah.

Think about the things this man said to his companion about Jesus and bear in mind that every utterance would have taken tremendous effort given his physical position on the cross:

*“One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.’ And he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ And he said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise”* (Luke 23:39-43).

You should be practised enough by now to be able to pick out the key statements he made, to see their importance:

- ✓ *He feared God;*
- ✓ *He accepted that his death was deserved, that it was a just outcome for his life of sin, whatever that entailed;*
- ✓ *He knew that Jesus was sinless – that “he has done nothing wrong”, itself a clear indication that he had encountered Jesus before or had enquired about him;*
- ✓ *He petitioned Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom, so he believed Jesus to be a king, he knew about the coming kingdom of God, and*
- ✓ *He believed that Jesus would yet reign as king, although Jesus was then dying on a cross. So the thief also believed in resurrection.*

That was a truly remarkable confession at such a time, one that was wholly deserving of the assurance the Lord Jesus now gave him, that he would indeed be in his kingdom – *“in Paradise”*. That statement of Jesus has sometimes caused some confusion in that Jesus was in the grave for three days and nights before his resurrection, so how could the thief and Jesus be together that day? Because the word *“Paradise”* just means a garden, some people think that Jesus was just saying to the thief that they would both be in a garden somewhere later that day, buried together! That really is a desperate interpretation. But what do the words really mean?

Bible translators have done an excellent job on the whole and we are really fortunate nowadays to have such a range of different versions available, even though we only need one version to understand the Bible for ourselves. Almost any of the available translations will be satisfactory if we apply a disciplined approach to our Bible reading and thinking. This, however, is one of those places where some translators have slipped up through not understanding the real importance of what Jesus said; for the punctuation they insert in the English rendering is misleading. There is no punctuation in the original Greek, so its placement is a matter of interpretation. Here's how the saying of Jesus *should* read, for it was a most solemn and binding promise:

*“Truly, I say to you today, you will be with me in Paradise”.*

Just before he died, Moses sought to impress upon his listeners the importance of what God was doing with them and the seriousness of their calling as the people of God. Time and again he emphasized what he was saying by using the word *“today”*, or *“this day”*. Here's just one example, but the footnote gives many more for you to follow up:

*“If you act corruptly by making a carved image in the form of anything, and by doing what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, so as to provoke him to anger, **I call heaven and earth to witness against you today**, that you will soon utterly perish from the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess”* (Deuteronomy 4:25,26).

Jesus was using the same sort of language when he stressed to the repentant thief that indeed it was the case (*"I say to you today"*) that he will be there in God's Kingdom after Jesus has raised him from the dead. There was no doubt about that whatsoever!

### ❖ **What Jesus Taught**

On two occasions the Lord Jesus spoke about the vital need of those who wanted salvation to submit to the act of baptism. One night a member of the Jewish establishment visited him and acknowledged that the miraculous works Jesus was doing showed that he came from God and was working with God. Jesus responded by challenging this learned man in these terms:

*"Truly, truly, I say to you, **unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.**" Nicodemus said to him, 'How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, '**Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.** That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born again." The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit'" (John 3:3-8).*

It was terminology that was not entirely new to Nicodemus. As a member of the Jewish Council he knew only too well that when a Gentile was being admitted into the Jewish faith he had to submit to ritual washing by immersion in water. The Rabbis said that the result was that he emerged like a new-born babe! Now he was being told that to enter the kingdom of God everybody needed to be reborn in two ways:

- *There must be a rebirth by water – this means baptism by immersion, for we have already seen how Paul in Romans 6 describes the outcome as the start of a new life in Christ;*
- *There must be a spiritual renewal – birth of the Spirit – the transformation of a person's life from within, to accompany the outward act. We shall look at that in more detail as we advance in our study of Romans.*

Nicodemus did not abandon his position or his Jewish beliefs there and then, although he became a secret follower of Jesus and, in due course, made his position public. So he was evidently impressed with the insight Jesus gave him that night.

It was the risen Christ who charged his disciples to go and baptize in these words:

*"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, **baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:18-20);*

*"And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. **Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved**, but whoever does not believe will be condemned'" (Mark 16:15,16).*

Notice the important references to *"teaching"* and *"believing"* – both things that have to come before baptism, for whenever a baptism takes place it is always preceded by teaching.

### ❖ **"What Shall We Do?"**

Within a few weeks of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ his followers were out on the streets of Jerusalem doing what he commanded. They preached the great news that Jesus was alive, that his death had been a gracious act of God, as well as a demonstration of human wickedness, and that it was now possible to come to God through him.

The apostle Peter was one of the foremost preachers and two of his early messages can be read in summary form in Acts chapters 2 and 3. Peter explained that Jesus Christ – the promised offspring of Eve, Abraham and David – had made available the long-awaited blessing for all nations:

*"All the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these days. You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, '**And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.**' God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness" (Acts 3:24-26).*

They could be turned away from their sins, which is what they would earnestly desire if they had truly repented of their previous conduct, and could be blessed with life, instead of being under the curse of sin and death. But what must they do to be saved? That cry, in one form or another, is to be heard several times through the Acts of the Apostles. For example, when Peter had preached in Jerusalem that was what the crowd asked him:

*“Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘**Brothers, what shall we do?**’ 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. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.**’ And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this crooked generation.’ **So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls**” (Acts 2:37-41).*

First he instructed them about the purpose of God centred in the Lord Jesus, then he encouraged his hearers to repent and be baptized. And they were. It was a remarkable response to the teaching of Jesus, a huge encouragement to the apostles, and it is also deeply instructive for us. Believers’ baptism is the only true way into the Christian church and it must be a response to a saving faith, one based on proper understanding of what the Bible teaches. We can never be good enough to gain entry into the Kingdom of God. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, we all need to be born again.

### ❖ Not Good Enough

There were lots of good people in New Testament times, as we count goodness, people who had made the worship of God a major preoccupation. There was Cornelius, for example, a Roman centurion who was: *“a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God”* (Acts 10:2). He needed instruction in the things of God, so Peter was sent to help him, after which he and *“all who heard the word”* were baptized (Acts 10:44-48).

There was an Ethiopian, a Jewish proselyte, who was so keen on the Word of God that he was reading his Scriptures in the chariot as he made his way back home from Jerusalem. The apostle Philip further instructed him, after which the record says:

*“As they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?’ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and **they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him**” (Acts 8:36-38).*

There was a jailor in Philippi who once imprisoned the apostle Paul and his companion Silas only to discover that it was the best thing he had ever done! That night an earthquake occurred and the prisoners who could have escaped chose not to. That so impressed the jailor that he:

*“Called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, ‘**Sirs, what must I do to be saved?**’ And they said, ‘**Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.**’ And 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 wounds; **and he was baptized at once, he and all his family.** Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God” (Acts 16:29-34).*



His household would have consisted of slaves and servants as well as members of his family. The inspired writer Luke paints a very happy picture of a company of adults being taught *“the word of the Lord”* and then being baptized. When Paul left Philippi he left at least one household of believers behind.

### ❖ Saul the Pharisee

One man’s conversion is so important to the development of First Century Christianity that it appears three times in the Acts account. He was a good man, according to his understanding. Much later he catalogued his spiritual credentials and reckoned that he had unrivalled qualifications as a conscientious servant of God. It looks as if he had a very promising career before him as an influential Jew in Jerusalem. But he discovered on the road to Damascus that he was by no means good enough for God. Mistakenly he was persecuting the followers of the Lord Jesus, believing them to be blasphemers. Then he encountered the risen Christ:

*“Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ And he said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do’” (Acts 9:3-6).*

He discovered in the most dramatic fashion that his beliefs were utterly mistaken and that he was in fact working against God, not working for Him. He was persecuting the followers of God’s Son! What a mistake to make. And what a complete turnaround was needed if he was to please God. Turn around he most certainly did. Saul the Pharisee became Paul the apostle – one of the most

ardent and dedicated followers of the Lord Jesus. And his understanding increased in leaps and bounds, as we have seen from our study of his Letter to the Romans. But a change of belief was not enough, even for a man as gifted and knowledgeable as the apostle. The immediate follow-up to his experience near Damascus was that he asked:

*“I said, ‘**What shall I do, Lord?**’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Rise, and go into Damascus, and **there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do**’ ”.*

The answer was not long coming, for God sent a believer named Ananias to see him, who said:

*“The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you wait? **Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name**” (Acts 22:10-16).*

It was the same for Paul as it is for each one of us; there is no alternative if we want to enter the kingdom of God. Repentance, Belief and Baptism are the three key requirements for every believer. Without the first two the third is not acceptable to God. There is an incident recorded in the Book of Acts of several people who had been baptized by John the Baptist, perhaps at an early stage in his ministry. It is clear from the record that their knowledge of the gospel was partial – they knew nothing about the Holy Spirit for example.

They were further instructed in the gospel and were baptized again (see Acts 19:1-7). That incident shows that sometimes, if the understanding is inadequate at baptism, a believer should be baptized again, this time with a proper belief. But usually someone should only be baptized once, for to repeat this symbolic death with Christ would make it look as though he needed to die over and over again, and that most certainly is not required. Jesus died “*once for all*”.

#### ❖ **Consistent New Testament Teaching**

It is quite understandable, given his dramatic turnaround from Judaism to Christianity, that the apostle Paul should see baptism as an absolute essential. For him it was the way – the only way – in which his sins could be washed away and his failings be blotted out. But it is not just a removing of sin; it is a conferring of something hugely important. Baptism gives us entry into the family of God.

Paul explains this by first reviewing the fact that without the way of salvation, now opened up by the Father, we would all be prisoners of sin and death. Then he shows how two keys open that prison door to give us release and, marvellously, we are liberated to become children of God and heirs of His gracious promises – all because of belief and baptism:

*“The Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for **in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.** There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. **And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise**” (Galatians 3:22-29).*

This is the passage in Galatians that we looked at earlier, when we followed Paul’s reasoning that Abraham was promised one special offspring, not many, and that the Lord Jesus Christ was that promised descendant (Galatians 3:16). His complete argument is that the Israelites were given a law by which to live, but the people were unable to keep it. Instead of giving them a chance to serve God by demonstrating their obedience, that law imprisoned them. It showed them every day that they were failures before God and made them increasingly dependent upon His mercy and grace. Unless He forgave them, they had no hope of becoming right with him. But, says the apostle, there was still hope because of the promises God had made to Abraham which came before the law given through Moses – more than 400 years before. And it was a designed strategy.

God wanted His people to realise their dependence upon Him and their need of His forgiveness which He was willing to give, provided they came to Him in the way He had prescribed. That way required (a) a saving faith and (b) baptism into Christ – these are the things *we* have to do, which we have encountered time and time again as we have been getting to understand the Bible. But now Paul adds a further thought, which has to do with what we *get*. It’s an idea we haven’t come across before:

*“And if you are Christ’s, **then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise**” (Galatians 3:29).*

Do you remember that Abraham was promised many offspring – as many as the stars of heaven in number? They would be a heavenly or a spiritual family descended from him. By faith and baptism we can become part of that number, members of the family of God and spiritual descendants of

Abraham. He will become our spiritual father:

*“That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to **all his offspring** – not only to the adherent of the law but also to **the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, ‘I have made you the father of many nations’**” (Romans 4:16,17).*

So Christian baptism – believer’s baptism – is the way in which we become heirs of the promises of God, related to the faithful of old who also lived by faith; and we are united with the Lord Jesus, both in his death and in his resurrection. It is the way to start a new life now, and it leads to eternal life in the kingdom of God.

### **Things to Read**

- 📖 Read Acts chapter 9 to find out about the conversion of Saul the Pharisee. As he became Paul the apostle, the writer of the Letter to the Romans, it will give you a good insight into the transformation that came about.
- 📖 Galatians chapter 3 ends by explaining that baptism makes us heirs with Abraham through the Lord Jesus Christ. The whole chapter is well worth reading as it shows the big difference between the Law of Moses and the promises of God, which had already been given to Abraham.

### **Questions to Answer**

- 14.1 What does the apostle Peter say about baptism in 1 Peter 3:18-22? How important does he reckon baptism to be?
- 14.2 Can you find any Bible examples of infants being baptized or christened? What does that teach us? At what age should we be baptized? Why do you think this is so?