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The meaning of...

BAPTISM

To the reader: Keep your Bible beside you. Always read your Bible first, then read these notes. Check the references and read them also. Invite a friend to study with you. You will be blessed.

For thousands of years people have been initiated into their clans or religions or secret societies. Initiation rites are different in every place. For some it takes weeks to prepare the person being initiated. Some initiation ceremonies are painful and some quite dangerous to the health of the person.

When a person is initiated, they do things that allow them to enter a new phase of life or a new role among their people. This gives them a higher standing in their society. Some think of Christian baptism as an initiation, as a move up the ladder of faith. Or what one has to do to enter church membership. And some churches a person cannot take part at holy communion until they have been baptized in water.

THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL

The people of Israel circumcised their boys. But for them it was not an initiation rite. It was a sign of belonging to Jehovah-God.

God told Abram to circumcise all the men in his household as a sign that he and his family would keep the covenant God was making with him (Genesis 17:9-12). Later this became part of the law God gave to Israel.

Circumcision was not an initiation ritual, but a sign that a Hebrew man and his family obeyed God and kept covenant with Him.

What began with Abraham passed over into Jewish society and Judaism. In the time of Jesus, any Gentile who wanted to enter Judaism had to be circumcised.

BAPTISM IN THE BIBLE

Christian baptism is a rite and a symbol, sometimes called a sacrament. A symbol is something that points to something else.

Baptism does not save a person from their sins. It adds no grace apart from the joy it brings to our hearts. However, to obey God is always right and baptism means obedience. When we obey God we are blessed in our spirits and grow in our faith.

In the first century before Christ the Jews adopted a form of proselyte baptism for Gentiles wanting to enter Judaism. People living at the time of Jesus knew what the apostles were talking about when they called on men to 'repent and be baptized' (Acts 2:38). They called people to leave their old life and enter a new life.

TALK ABOUT

1. Is the Christian faith the same as other religions?
2. When Abram circumcised the men of his household, what was it a sign of?
3. Did circumcision change a man's heart?

A CHANGED HEART

Christian baptism points back to a time in a person's life when they trusted Jesus Christ as their Saviour from sin. They had a change of heart and the way they lived changed too. Their baptism pointed to something that had already taken place in their lives.

When Philip was travelling on the desert road, he met an Ethiopian official returning home from Jerusalem. The official was riding in his chariot and reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (Acts 8:32).

Philip joined himself to the chariot. The official asked Philip, "Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" So Philip told him the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus Christ was the One the prophet wrote about 700 years before. The official believed the gospel. When they came to some water, he asked Philip, 'Can I be baptized?' Philip baptized the man and they came up out of the water rejoicing. In the early church baptism followed soon after faith. It pointed to the faith that had already come to the man's heart.

When we turn to God with all our hearts, He joins Himself to us by giving us His Spirit (Ephesians 1:13). Baptism is a picture of our joining with Him and public baptism is a witness to all who are watching.

The act of baptism says to the world, "I am a child of God. I am 100% committed to following Jesus Christ."

TALK ABOUT

1. Why do Christians get baptized?
2. How does a Christian's baptism witness to others?
3. Does baptism make a person right with God?

OLD TESTAMENT TYPES

Three Old Testament types point to baptism as it was practiced in the New Testament Church. (A type is a picture of something else)

1. The flood (1 Peter 3:18-21)
2. The crossing of the Red Sea (1 Corinthians 10:1-4)
3. Circumcision (Colossians 2:11-12)

All three pointed to the New Covenant and its fulfillment in Christ's death on the cross. His was a baptism of judgment.

1. Peter linked the flood of Noah's time with the rite of baptism (1 Peter 3:18-21). Some commentators see 'baptism' as the whole emphasis of Peter's letters. This could be true, for Peter was an evangelist and 'baptism' is an evangelistic word. It tells us that Christ has died and risen again in our place, so that, by faith, we are 'dead and 'alive' again in Him (Romans 6:4,11).

"The essence of baptism is shown not to consist in the cleansing of the body, but in the soul's response to God - "a pledge to God proceeding from a good conscience." And those who are saved are not saved by baptism but "by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21). (The International Bible Commentary)

2. Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, "Our forefathers . . . were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Corinthians 10:2). What did Paul mean?

Israel's forefathers were slaves in Egypt. God sent Moses to tell Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to let the people of Israel go. And God did mighty signs and wonders against Pharaoh to bring about their release (Exodus 6-14). At last Pharaoh told them to go, and Moses led them out of Egypt. God opened a way for them through the Red Sea and they all passed through, and escaped the bondage of Egypt.

Paul said that in this experience their forefathers were joined with their leader, Moses:

a) They were all "under the cloud." The cloud showed Moses and the people the way to go. They had never been that way before. At night it gave them light. And it was always there to protect them (Exodus 14:19,24).

b) "All passed through the sea." The Red Sea hedged them in, but God made a path through the sea "and they all passed over on dry land."

c) So they "were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea." They were one with their leader. What happened to Moses happened to them.

d) "All ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink." They ate manna in the desert. Moses ate it, too (John 4:13-14; 6:33-58).

e) They all had the same things happen to them and the same chance to trust God. They were one body of people.

TALK ABOUT

1. In what ways can we link baptism with the gospel of Jesus Christ?
2. How could the people of Israel being led by Moses through the Red Sea be like a baptism?

CIRCUMCISION AND BAPTISM

To the Jew circumcision was the outward sign that he obeyed the laws of God. It pointed to a man who had cut sin out of his life. (Deuteronomy 10:16; Ezekiel 47:9) A circumcised man kept God's covenant.

Paul said circumcision is a picture of what God does in our hearts in answer to our faith. (Rom 2:28-29)

When a person accepts the death of Christ as his own death, there is a "putting off of the old sinful nature" with all its bad ways (Ephesians 4:22-32). This is circumcision of the heart. The person puts off all that Satan has done and puts on all that Christ has done for us in His death and resurrection.

So baptism is a picture of our old self with its bad ways - the old customs with their heathen practices - buried or cut off - once and for all. Baptism is also a picture of our being raised out of the 'death' of the old life into a glorious union with our Head, even Christ.

Read: Luke 3:21-23 **LUKE'S TESTIMONY**

"In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, 'Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near' (Matthew 3:2). Luke wrote, "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too" (Luke 3:21-22; Isaiah 40:3). This was a very special time and Luke gives us six historical markers that fix this time in the history of the world. (Luke 3:1-6)

God's prophets spoke about John 735 years before he was born. The prophet Isaiah shouted, "prepare a way for the Lord" (Isaiah 40:3). The people listening to him knew that God had promised them a Deliverer, a great Prophet who would come in the name of the Lord.

The people of Israel had copied the ways of their heathen neighbours. The nation needed to repent of their idol worship and backsliding, then God would come and bless them (Jeremiah 15:19).

The prophet's message always reached beyond his own time. And Isaiah's words pointed to the John the Baptist (Isaiah 40:3).

NO PROPHET'S VOICE

No prophet's voice had come to Israel for 400 years. Even the oldest grandfathers had not heard a prophet call the people to repent of their sins. And John was so real! He spoke to men's hearts. They knew they needed God. They were sick with sin and they could not help themselves.

John's words were urgent and he pressed them on his hearers: 'Repent now! Hurry! This is your day to repent. The King is coming and His Kingdom is open for you to come in. You may not have another chance.'

John did not point to himself. He pointed to Jesus Christ. "I baptize with water," John said, "but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8). When men heard God's word spoken through John some believed, others did not.

LUKE'S RECORD. Luke gives us six historical markers to fix the time of John the Baptist's ministry and Jesus' birth in world history: (Luke 3:1-2)

- It was the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius (Caesar = emperor)
- Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, the south of Israel
- Herod was tetrarch of Galilee
 - Herod's brother Philip was tetrarch of Iturca and Traconitis (to northwest of Lebanon) - Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene (a district on the eastern slope of the Lebanon Mountains)

JOHN, THE LAST PROPHET

John the Baptist was the last prophet to call the people of Israel back to God. John's ministry would prepare the hearts of the people to receive their Messiah and His baptism by the Spirit.

We don't know when John left his home and went to live in the desert. The angel told his mother, Elizabeth, "He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth" (Luke 1:41).

People walked many miles to hear John preach. When people repented and confessed their sins John , baptized them. He said, "I baptize you with water for (unto) repentance" (Matthew 3:11). "Unto" can mean 'aim' or 'purpose' and that is what it means here. Mark wrote, "John came, baptizing . . . and preaching a baptism of repentance for (unto or with a view to) the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4).

THE LOVE OF GOD

1. God the Father did not hold back the Son. (John 3:16)
2. Jesus, the Son, offered Himself willingly. (John 10:17-18)
3. He offered Himself through the eternal Spirit. (Hebrews 9:14)

John's baptism was not Christian baptism, for that came later; it was a baptism for repentance. And John pointed men to "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

TALK ABOUT

1. Why did people expect a prophet like John the Baptist?
2. What message did John bring to the people?

Matthew 3:13-17 (Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:7-9) JOHN BAPTIZED JESUS

Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized by John. He did not have to repent, for He had no sin (Heb 4:15). He was baptized "to fulfil all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). This was God's plan and it was right. Jesus would stand with John and be a part of what God was doing through him.

When Jesus came up out of the water, three things happened (Mark 1:9-11).

1. John saw the heavens open.
2. The Spirit came on Jesus "like a dove."
3. And a voice came from heaven: "You are My Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

If John was not sure before, he was sure now. He saw the Holy Spirit, as a dove, rest on Jesus. When God first sent John to baptize, He told him, "When you see the Holy Spirit descending and resting on someone - He is the One you are looking for. He is the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit" (John 1:32-34 TLB).

Jesus joined Himself to that part of Israel that repented of its sins and looked forward to their Messiah.

JOHN'S BAPTISM SEPARATED PEOPLE

John's baptism separated the people. The nation of Israel was in a state of moral decay. The prophet Malachi said these things about Israel:

- a) They asked God, "How have You loved us" (Malachi 1:2)?
- b) They did not honour God. They showed contempt for His name (1:6).
- c) They profaned the Lord's altar (1:12).
- d) They wept and asked "Why does the Lord no longer pay attention to our sacrifices" (2:12-13)
- e) They "wearied the Lord" with their words (2:17).
- f) They turned away from God's decrees (3:7).
- (g) They robbed God (3:8). They said harsh things against the Lord like "It is futile to serve God" (3:13).

A remnant of faithful ones always existed. They were different from the nation as a whole (Malachi 3:16-18). In Christ's day this remnant was seen in Zecharias and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, Simeon, Anna and all who "looked for redemption in Israel" (Luke 2:25).

All who were baptized by John, separated themselves and joined this remnant. In His baptism, Jesus joined with this remnant in Israel and set His approval on John's ministry. He was one with God's prophet. Yet Jesus carried John's ministry far beyond the prophet in meaning and fulfilment. He completed what John only pointed to.

Those who were baptized by John were like men who had been given a promissory note for a debt they could never pay. When they stepped into the water, they agreed that they were guilty and deserved death.

In His baptism Jesus endorsed their note and offered His own life to pay their debt - to the very last penny. His cruel death on the cross was a baptism of wrath (Psalm 42:7). There He took in His own body the sinner's judgment and due. "He bore our sins in His own body on the tree" (2 Corinthians 5:21; Psalm 69:2; Luke 12:50). So Jesus, who had no sin in Himself, bore the sin penalty for all sinners. It was His joy "to fulfil all righteousness" on their behalf (Hebrews 12:2; Psalm 16:2-3).

The "holy ones" in the land were not the self-righteous Pharisees. John called them "a brood of snakes." Nor even the chief priests, but the common people who sensed their deep need of God. They came to John, repented of their sins. John baptized them in the Jordan River and they entered the Kingdom of God (Matthew 21:24-27).

Acts 19:1-5 NEW TESTAMENT BAPTISM

In the early Church the Ephesian 'disciples' were baptized twice. At first they were disciples of John the Baptist and he baptized them. The second time they were baptized "in the name of the Lord Jesus."

The reason for this is explained: "they repented and believed in Jesus" (Acts 19:4). Up to this time they had not "believed in Jesus" but had known only John's baptism unto repentance.

John's baptism could not 'speak' to men of the death of Jesus Christ, but only about their sins and how much they needed to turn back to God. This was in God's plan when He sent John out to preach.

These sinners (including the Pharisees) deserved only death and that is precisely why Jesus had to die. His own baptism was His pledge to die in the place of these sinners.

TALK ABOUT 1. John's baptism looked forward to what great event?

THE APOSTLES BAPTIZED AS JOHN HAD DONE

Christ's disciples "baptized more disciples than John" (John 4:2). We can be sure that they did this only when people repented of their sins. And we believe they baptized in the same manner.

In the New Testament Church, the apostles went on baptizing as they had been taught by John and Jesus. No new method of baptism was introduced or taught.

Romans 6:1-14 (John 17:20-23) DEAD TO SIN - ALIVE IN CHRIST

Christian baptism always follows faith in Jesus Christ. Every baptism should be the testimony of a godly life. Anyone who has not "put off" the things Paul spoke of in his letter to the Ephesians should not be baptized (Eph 4:20-30).

In many Christian groups, baptism is delayed until it is seen that the person has put away his idols and is truly following the commands of God.

"What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase" (Romans 6:1)? Paul answered a wrong idea: that a Christian can go on doing wrong things because God's grace is so great. This wrong idea was a reaction against Jews who held to the law. It came from people who were against the law. They taught that believers could go on living in sin because God would forgive them anyway. Paul answered, "Of course not! Sin's power over us was broken when we became Christians and were baptized to become a part of Jesus Christ" (Romans 6:2-3).

Paul thought of the believer being joined to Jesus Christ, so that:

- a) Christ's death becomes our death to our old ways (Romans 6:1-6).
- b) His resurrection brings us new life in the Spirit (Romans 6:7-10).
- c) We serve Him instead of being "slaves to sin" (Romans 6:6).
- d) We run from sin and live holy lives (James 4:7). God changes me and I change in answer to God's love.

In God's sight, all this happens when we believe. In one act of believing, a Christian gains a personal share in Christ's death (1 Corinthians 12:13). We die to our old ways and "live to God" (6:11; 2 Corinthians 5:17).

TALK ABOUT 1. What is the difference between John's baptism and Christian baptism? 2. Why did Jesus ask John to baptize Him?

BAPTISM POINTS TO DEATH

"We know that our old self was crucified with Him . . ." (Rom 6:6). By faith we reckon ourselves dead (Romans 6:11).

Christ's death must mean death to our sinful past - our old-Adam way of life. "Your old evil desires were nailed to the cross with Jesus . . ." (Romans 6:6 TLB).

The new man is "freed from sin" - his sin-debt has been cancelled by the blood of Jesus (Rom 6:7). From now on he must not let sin not control his actions or make him its slave. Christ is the man's new Master. When the man hears the old sinful self call to him he must say "No! I belong to a new Master and I will serve Him." So we set our hearts to obey Christ.

"Do not let sin reign in your . . . body so that you may obey its evil desires" (Romans 6:12). Say "Yes" to the Holy Spirit and let Him control your desires. "Don't offer the parts of your body to sin . . . offer yourselves to God. Put Jesus on the throne of your heart. Make Him King!

A SIGN OF NEW LIFE

Circumcision was a sign of this cutting off of the old way of life. For the Christian, baptism in water means the same. In Paul's day, a man who believed was baptized by going under the water. This act of baptism followed quickly after the man said he believed in Christ. It was like acting out what God had done in his heart.

The person's body went completely under the water. This was a picture of:

- a) Jesus' death - the believer went into the water (Rom 6:10).
- b) His burial - the believer went under the water,
- c) His resurrection - he came up out of the water.

Paul showed that the Christian life is all about doing what Christ tells us to do in the Gospels. It is a worshipping, doing, growing, serving life. We offer our hands, feet and our minds to God "as instruments of righteousness" (Romans 6:13). The believer can only do this by the power of the Holy Spirit who comes to live in him (Acts 2:38).

TALK ABOUT

1. What does "death to self mean for a Christian? (Mark 8:34)
2. Is the Christian's old nature really dead (Galatians 5:16-17)?
3. What does the word "reckon" mean?
4. Who gives 'new life' to the believer?

THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

Peter preached to a large crowd in Jerusalem. Many believed and asked, "Brothers, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37)

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." (Acts 2:38)

That day three thousand were baptized in water and baptized by the Holy Spirit. They joined the Christian Church.

Many of those who were baptized must have seen Christ crucified. Some may have had a hand in His death. But all agreed:

- a) They were sinners and needed to be saved,
- b) That Jesus was the true Messiah,
- c) That He was put to death unjustly,
- d) He had been raised from the dead.

We preach what Peter preached: That men "repent and be baptized . . . for the forgiveness of sins . . ." (Mark 1:15; Acts 2:38).

In the early Church, baptism was thought of as the first act of faith, after men repented and believed in Christ (Mark 16:15).

WE ARE SAVED BY GRACE ALONE

We are saved by grace. No works on our part are needed. Paul wrote, "You have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Baptism is a witness to our friends and to the world that we are trusting Jesus as our Saviour and Lord. When we believe, we confess with our mouths (Romans 10:9-10). From then on we live a separated life -we die to sin and to the world and to our own desires. We separate ourselves from those who refuse to give up their sinful lives.

The baptized person freely admits:

- a) There is no hope of him overcoming sin in his own strength,
- b) His need to “die daily” to self,
- c) His need to ‘bury’ or turn away from his old ways, his “body of flesh.”
- d) His need to be joined in Christ’s victory. This is his resurrection,
- e) His need to live as a resurrected man (Colossians 2:11-12).

The difference between John’s baptism and Christian baptism is not in the baptism itself, but in the relationship of the baptized person to Jesus Christ. Christian baptism is on the basis of our faith in the death and resurrection of Christ and our fellowship with Him.

John came under the Law. The faith of all Old Testament saints looked forward to the death of Christ. “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised . . . (in Christ), (Hebrews 11:39).

Our faith looks back to Christ’s death and resurrection. We celebrate what has already taken place and what we presently enjoy in fellowship with Him.

TALK ABOUT

1. What must we do to be saved from our sins?
2. Can Christian baptism add anything to what Christ has already done for us?
3. Why, then, should a believer in Christ be baptized?

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