

## Source: <https://thirdmill.org/answers.asp/file/47890>

### Question

Do households in Scripture hold any special meaning? It seems the New Testament teaches household baptism?

### Answer

Every word - every jot and tittle ([Matt. 5:18](#)) - has significance in the Bible. Some ask, that if the New Testament was just dealing with individual belief, then why even add the word "household" into many of the New Testament texts? How prevalent is it that entire households - including even everyone of their servants - are actually saved at the same time? Isn't it normally more sporadic; some are saved, but others are not?

Households in the Bible are an important covenantal theme. The term is used some 132 times in the ESV. Paul mentions Chloe's household in [1 Corinthians 1:11](#) and a few verses later the household of Stephanas in [1 Corinthians 1:16](#). Why such an emphasis on of all things as "households" in the Bible?

We must remember that when we look at the covenants of God, they included *families* ([Gen. 12:3](#); [Isa. 54:10, 13](#); [59:21](#); compare [Acts 2:39](#)) or *households*. We can also add [Isaiah 61:8-9](#); [Jeremiah 32:38-40](#); [Ezekiel 37:25-26](#), and [Zechariah 8:5](#); [10:7, 9](#); [12:10-14](#); [14:17](#). God loves families and emphasizes them in Scripture.

A household principle was not only present in the Abrahamic covenant ([Gen. 17:9-14](#)) but also in the New Covenant in baptism. A household (Greek, *oikos*) baptism principle, with an emphasis on family, children, and even servants, is a huge part of the covenant of God. God's household principle is not seen as abrogated anywhere in the New Covenant.

Although I do not always agree with Dr. Kenneth L. Gentry on every issue, note here what he says of the Old Covenant family unit in "Infant Baptism: A Duty of God's People" (formatting changed for emphasis):

The Bible teaches that God establishes the family as a Creation ordinance of perpetual obligation ([Gen. 1:27-28](#); [2:22-24](#); [Matt. 19:4-6](#)). That the family is of central importance in the Bible is evident upon the following considerations:

(1) Numerous family genealogies are preserved in Scripture, thus demonstrating a concern for the preservation of family lineages (e.g., [Gen. 5](#); [10](#); [Num. 1](#));

(2) Families were considered a high and holy heritage from the Lord ([Psa. 127](#); [128](#); [Isa. 8:18](#));

(3) To be childless is lamentable ([Gen. 25:41](#); [30:1](#); [Exod. 23:26](#); [Deut. 7:14](#); [Psa. 113:9](#); [Jer. 22:30](#));

(4) Responsibilities before God center around family life ([Deut. 6:4ff](#); [Psa. 78:1-8](#); [Prov. 13:22](#); [19:14](#));

(5) Express moral obligations protecting the family are established in the Ten Commandments ([Exod. 20:12, 14, 17](#)).

Consequently, in the Old Testament God all-merciful specifically instituted his gracious covenant with family generations as beneficiaries of the covenant, rather than restricting the covenant to individuals. His mercies and blessings were particularly promised to the families of believers, as in the case of Noah ([Gen. 9:9](#)), Abraham ([Gen. 17:2-7](#)), and others ([Deut. 28:4](#); [Psa. 103:17-18](#); [115:13, 14](#)). Also in keeping with this principle of family solidarity, his chastenings and curses ran in family generations ([Exod. 20:5](#); [Deut. 5:9](#); [Hos. 9:11-17](#)).

In the Old Testament, then, godly families are obliged to recognize two important truths: First, when God's grace claimed a person, God's rule extended over all that that person possessed. For example, in the law of the tithe God claimed the first tenth of one's production as a sign that he had a right to all of it ([Deut. 14:22](#); [Mal. 3:10](#)). Second, when God's grace claimed a person, that person's household was set apart as holy unto the Lord. For example, the children of God's people were forbidden to marry non-believers "for thou art a holy people" ([Deut. 7:1-6](#)). Truly God kept the family central in his gracious dealings with his covenant people in the Old Testament Revelation.

There are five household (*oikos*) baptisms mentioned in the New Testament: Cornelius in Acts 10:48; Lydia in Acts 16:15; the Philippian jailer in Acts 16:31; Crispus in Acts 18:8; and Stephanus in 1 Corinthians 1:16. Some include Gaius too (1 Cor. 1:14; Rom. 16:23).

Looking briefly at the Philippian jailer and his family, we hear only of the faith of the jailer, not his family, which may have had infants too. Yes, his family heard the word and they rejoiced, but only the faith of the jailer himself is seized upon. Why? Following the Old Testament household principle he is the covenant head of the household; because of Abram's faith his whole family including his servants were circumcised (Gen. 17:10-14, 23, 27).

The literal translation of Acts 16:34 reads, "And he rejoiced with all his household, **he having believed** in God." The text uses the singular (he having believed), not the plural in regards to *oikos* baptism. The participle describing the faith of the jailer is masculine singular. The Greek text reveals the household rejoiced with him because *he* had found faith and yet the *whole* household was baptized. This appears to follow the unity of the Abrahamic household principle.

By saying this, the Bible is not saying that everyone baptized was saved; rather, following the Old Covenant, they were each, no matter their age, etc., baptized into the New Covenant based upon the profession of faith of the jailer alone, as he was the covenant head of the household. Again, Gentry comments:

We should note in this regard that many versions mistranslate Acts 16:34. For instance, the King James version reads: "And when he had brought them into his house, he set meat before them, and rejoiced, believing in God with all his house." The New American Standard version has the correct rendering of this verse in a marginal reference at verse 34: "rejoiced greatly with his whole household, having believed in God." The participle phrase "having believed in God" is in the singular form. Thus, it refers only to the jailer: the jailer believes in God; his household rejoices. Yet the whole household is baptized: "And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized" (Acts 16:33). Note, too, that Paul indiscriminately presents the promise in terms expressing the principle of family solidarity: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house" (Acts 16:31; cp. also Acts 11:14).

Prior to this event in the same chapter, Lydia's household baptism is also just as instructive (Acts 16:14-15), as it emphasizes the same point. Luke states that only Lydia believed, but that her household was baptized. As in the case of the jailor above, while this does not necessarily mean there were any infants there, it doesn't necessarily exclude them either. Being a business woman, most assuredly there were probably servants present (cf. Gen. 17:10-14; 23, 27). What is significant is the baptism of the entire household (*oikos*) without mention to anyone else's faith in the household at all! So, this baptism appears to follow the unity of the Abrahamic household principle too.

Bryan Chapell makes an interesting observation in "A Pastor's Case for Infant Baptism":

Just as advocates of infant baptism must deal with the absence of an identified infant being baptized in the New Testament, opponents must face the absence of a command to deny children the covenant sign and seal. As has already been noted, the apostles took great care to emphasize the continuation of the Abrahamic covenant for New Testament believers.

Throughout the 2000-year history of this covenant prior to the beginning of the apostolic church, the people of God had administered the covenant sign to their children. If the apostles truly wanted to change this practice it seems highly improbable that they would not have stated (i.e., commanded) the changes be stated especially since they were all Jewish Christians.

The removal of any sign of the covenant from believers' children would have been an immense change in practice and concept for Jewish families. It is unthinkable after 2000 years of covenant family practice (established since Genesis), that a believing Jewish parent would have known how to interpret a continuing Abrahamic covenant that excluded administering the sign of the covenant to children. As will soon be discussed, the apostles frequently record households being baptized after the head of the home believes in Christ. Consider how such a household head would have reacted when others in the household (including servants and resident relatives) were baptized on the basis of his faith while that man's own children were denied the covenant sign.

The absence of a command to prohibit administering the sign of the covenant to children after 2000 years of such practice weighs significantly against arguments that the apostles only wanted those able to profess their faith to be baptized.

There is a unity to the covenant of grace throughout Scripture. God has always dealt with the family or household unit. "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" ([Acts 2:39](#)).

### **Related Topics:**

[Baptism in 1 Corinthians 10:1-2?](#)

[Explaining Baptism in Children's Language](#)

[Mark 16:16 and baptismal regeneration?](#)



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# THE FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY OF PAUL

ACTS 13:4-14:28

- City
- ← Paul's routes
- Via Sebaste



Paul encounters intense Jewish opposition to the gospel

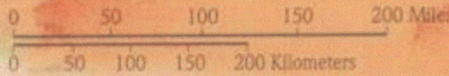
Paul and Barnabas flee Iconium after a plot to kill them

Paul and Barnabas mistaken for gods

Paul continues journey after being stoned in Lystra

The church at Antioch sends Paul and Barnabas on missionary work

Proconsul Sergius Paulus converted





Paul establishes churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea

Paul brought on charges before Gallio

Paul receives vision that encourages him to travel to Macedonia

Paul joins Paul

Paul speaks to the Areopagus

Paul asks Timothy to join him in his work

Paul returns from Jerusalem to plan his next venture

Jerusalem Conference, A.D. 49, (Acts 15:1-36; Gal 2:1-21)

**THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY OF PAUL**  
 ACTS 15:36-18:32

- City
- ▲ Mountain peak
- Via Egnatia
- ⋈ Pass
- Route of Paul and Silas





**THE THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY OF PAUL**  
 ACTS 18:23-21:26

- City
- Site of the Seven Churches of Asia
- ▲ Mountain peak
- Roads

0 100 200 300 Miles  
 0 100 200 300 Kilometers