

How Does Baptism Save?

Introduction: Certain New Testament passages suggest water baptism is related to salvation, but do they teach it's necessary for salvation from hell, or do they teach something else?

Difficult Passage #1: ³⁸ 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 2:38

Popular Solution: Many who reject baptismal regeneration translate “for the remission of sins” as “on account of the remission of sins.” However, while grammatically plausible, the preposition “for” more often indicates purpose or direction, so this solution isn’t especially convincing.

Better Solution: A. The Greek grammar provides another clue: “Repent” is plural, whereas “and let every one of you be baptized...” is singular. So, possibly the second clause is parenthetical, with the meaning expressed thus: Repent [*plural*] for the remission of sins (and let every one [*singular, i.e., each individual who has just repented*] of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ), and you [*plural*] shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

B. Elsewhere the Book of Acts disassociates baptism and salvation:

1. All other mentions of “remission of sins” or “forgiveness of sins” appear apart from baptism (5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18). (Remission and forgiveness are the same Greek word.)
2. Belief/repentance precedes baptism in 8:36-38 (Ethiopian eunuch) and 19:1-5 (conversion of John’s disciples) and occurs apart from baptism in 3:19 (Peter’s sermon at the Temple), 17:30 (Paul’s sermon at the Aeropagus), and 26:20 (Paul’s testimony before King Agrippa).
3. Belief in Jesus and reception of the Holy Spirit sometimes precede baptism (Acts 10:43-46), implying that baptism is for those already saved.

⁴³ To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins. ⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. ⁴⁵ And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.

Conclusion: In Acts, although baptism is associated with repentance/belief, receiving the Holy Spirit, and/or forgiveness/remission of sins, only in Acts 2:38 can it be viewed as a requirement for salvation, and there only if one ignores all other scriptures that teach salvation based on faith alone apart from works.

Difficult Passage #2: Peter states that baptism saves us.

1 Peter 3:18-22: ¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, ¹⁹ by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while *the* ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. ²¹ 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, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him.

Popular Solution: Many interpret baptism as by the Spirit, not water, based on “but made alive by the Spirit” in 3:18. However, this solution has major difficulties:

- A. Here salvation is present tense (“now saves you”) and does not look backward to the conversion experience. Rather, Peter teaches we presently receive “salvation of souls” (1 Peter 1:9) as we pursue a genuine faith return worthy of “praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:7).
- B. The ark saved the “souls” (not the spirits) of Noah and his family. “Soul” depicts individuality and personhood, not spiritual essence.
- C. Noah was a preacher of righteousness (2 Peter 2:5), which presumes he was already spiritually saved before the flood.

Spirit baptism seems unlikely because the example of Noah pictures a salvation that follows justification, i.e., preservation of believers from God’s present (and future) wrath against the ungodly.

Better Solution: A. The letter of 1 Peter is written to encourage suffering believers. Peter says it’s better to suffer because of a good conscience than for wrongdoing.

1 Peter 2:19: ¹⁹ For this *is* commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully.

1 Peter 3:13-17: ¹³ And who *is* he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, *you are* blessed. “*And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled.*” ¹⁵ But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always *be* ready to *give* a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; ¹⁶ having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. ¹⁷ For *it is* better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

Peter explicitly states baptism is “the answer of a good conscience toward God” (1 Peter 3:21), thus connecting baptism with suffering.

- B. Suffering has a refining purpose to achieve the “salvation of souls,” i.e., complete sanctification of our earthly lives.

1 Peter 1:6–9: ⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ that the genuineness of your faith, *being* much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, ⁸ whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see *Him*, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, ⁹ receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls.

- C. Elsewhere in the NT, suffering appears as a mode of baptism.

Matthew 20:20–23: ²⁰ Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. ²¹ And He said to her, “What do you wish?” She said to Him, “Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom.” ²² But Jesus answered and said, “You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They said to Him, “We are able.” ²³ So He said to them, “You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but *it is for those* for whom it is prepared by My Father.”

Conclusion: Just as according to his good conscience Noah was saved by (and from) the flood, our souls are delivered by (and from) a baptism of suffering.

Summary: Water baptism frequently accompanies belief in Jesus but isn’t a requirement for salvation; suffering for conscience’s sake is the only baptism that saves us, and it has nothing to do with water except by way of analogy.