

Lesson 3

They Received the Promise

Acts 2.38-41

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, each 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, as many as the Lord our God will call.” With many other words he testified and strongly urged them, saying, “Be saved from this corrupt generation!” So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand people were added to them.

Introduction

In Acts 2.37 we discover the results of Peter’s sermon. The bold and amazing display of spiritual gifts coupled with Peter’s powerful preaching had its effect, driving many in the crowd to great and deep despair, remorse, and guilt. They were *pierced to the heart*. What Peter preached was true and could not be denied. There was nothing they could do to change what they had done. There was nothing they could do themselves to remove their guilt.

Brothers, what should we do?

Is there a way out of this? How can we escape our fate? How do we get forgiveness for these awful sins? Desperate for deliverance, at that moment, nothing else mattered. They wanted to turn from their sin and turn to God. This is repentance.

What Peter says next reveals the conditions of salvation. Scripture clearly connects a person’s reception of salvation with his meeting of certain basic conditions.

What Peter Told Them to Do

Repent

Repentance is an essential part to any person’s salvation. Jesus said one will not be saved without it: *unless you repent, you will all perish. . .*, Luke 13.3. Repentance involves a change of purpose, where one turns the direction of his or her life around from the walk in darkness to the walk in light. It is a forsaking of sin because it is offensive to God. Repentance is primarily an attitude toward sin. It is the determination to be rid of sin as soon as possible.

Be Baptized

Peter’s call for baptism should not be that surprising, especially considering Jesus’ teaching in Mark 16.16; John 3.3-5; and in the great commission of Matthew 28.19-20. Here Peter couples it with repentance as conditions for receiving forgiveness of sin and receiving the gift of the Spirit.

The Mode of Baptism

Peter's call for baptism would have involved water baptism. There is no other viable option to understand otherwise. His calling for baptism would have sounded very familiar to the audience as it closely resembled that of John the Baptist:

John came baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, Mark 1.4.

John's baptism was clearly understood as water baptism, as he baptized people at the Jordan, Matthew 3.13. "Baptism," means *immersion* and involves a going under water to signify being cleansed from sin by God. It is not the action of dipping or pouring. Words associated with it are "plunging,"⁶ "submerged," "flooded, like a submerged boat,"⁷ "overwhelmed," and "to sink."⁸

Don't Switch the Order

Many of our religious friends have been taught that baptism is an outward sign of an inward grace. They believe that it is a good thing to do, but the urgency with it is gone because they were saved and forgiven of sin at the point of faith. This belief has them thinking they are saved before baptism, which is not the way the New Testament describes salvation. Romans 6.4 however, makes it very clear that the burial in baptism happens *before* a person's resurrection to newness of life. *Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life,* Romans 6.4.

If a person believes they were saved before baptism ... they have placed the resurrection before the burial. *How can they have obeyed the gospel?*

The order is significant. Before a person is buried, he must be dead. This happens through repentance and renunciation of self. Then and only then, is a person ready to be buried in baptism. It is only after the burial takes place that the resurrection to newness of life occurs.

What Repentance and Baptism Bring

Eis or "for"

Among evangelicals there is much controversy regarding the usage of "for" in Acts 2.38. Some insist that "for" means *because of*, i.e., a person is baptized because his or her sins have *already* been forgiven. Such a position missed the context, which must play a role in determining the meaning of the word.

The question of Acts 2.37, *brothers, what must we do?*, must not be forgotten. At that moment, their sins are unforgiven, and they are asking what they must do to receive forgiveness. What must we do to get rid of this guilt? Any answer Peter gives would have been understood as an answer to that question. To receive forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit, one must repent and be baptized. If one does not

⁶ BDAG, p. 164.

⁷ Moulton, James Hope, and George Milligan. *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930, p. 102.

⁸ Abbott-Smith, G. *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922, p. 74.

repent or is not baptized, we may properly conclude that one has not received forgiveness of sin or the gift of the Spirit.

The proper translation the word *eis* is “for,” not “because of.” It is translated in various ways including: “unto,” “in order to,” “in order to have,” “so that,” “with a view to,” and “in relation to.”⁹ The word involves a direction or motion toward something. Repentance and baptism have a purpose¹⁰ or goal.

Let’s talk about these in greater detail:

Forgiveness

It is sometimes understood from this verse that the forgiveness here related only to past sin. The idea is that one’s baptism brings forgiveness for every sin committed up to that point in time, and that person remains in a forgiven situation until he or she sins again. After sin is committed again, the person returns to a state of being lost until repentance or confession is made. This “in and out” of salvation model is not biblical.

Forgiveness and justification go hand in hand, Romans 3.28; 4.6-8. When one is forgiven during the act of baptism, he enters a state of justification and remains therein by continuing faith¹¹ in Jesus’ power to save. Even though a person is not free from the human propensity to sin, he remains free from guilt and condemnation, Romans 8.1.

Jack Cottrell has aptly written:

Baptism is not for the forgiveness of past sins only, but for the forgiveness of sin, *period*. As long as one remains in the relationship to Christ begun at baptism, he is justified or forgiven as the result of what happened in his baptism. Thus all our lives we should remember our baptism, and be encouraged by that memory when we begin to feel discouraged in our Christian living or to doubt the validity of our hope in Christ Jesus.¹²

Receipt of the Gift of the Holy Spirit

The gift of the Spirit Peter refers to is the gift of the Spirit Himself.

For the Purpose of Indwelling and Regeneration

Indwelling

The Spirit’s dwelling inside the Christian is clear to see as we read the New Testament:

- Acts 5.32, *God has given the Holy Spirit to those who obey Him.*
- Romans 8.9-11: *the Spirit of God lives in you.*
- 1 Corinthians 6.19: *your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who lives in you.*

⁹ Cottrell, Jack. *Baptism: A Biblical Study*. Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 1989, p. 55.

¹⁰ BDAG defines the word as denoting the purpose of a thing: “to denote purpose *in order to* . . .” See Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 290.

¹¹ A person can be lost when he or she determines to no longer walk according to the Spirit, reject Christ, and live for oneself.

¹² Cottrell, Jack, *Baptism . . .*, p. 58.

- 2 Timothy 1.14: *the Holy Spirit... lives in us.*

Acts 2.38 explains that it is at the time of a person's baptism when the Spirit enters into one's life.

Regeneration

The Spirit brings us from death to life. In the moment of our baptism, He directly applies the benefits of Jesus' death and resurrection to us. Titus 3.4-6 helps us understand *why* we were saved:

We needed to be cleansed. The *washing* of Titus 3.5 connects this activity with the time of baptism.¹³ The only human action taking place is our personal decision, moved by repentance and sorrow for sin, to make ourselves available to God in baptism, where He performs the saving work by the Spirit. It is never *because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy.*

This passage also helps us understand *how* we were saved:

Paul says we are saved by *the washing of regeneration and renewal.* This explains what happens during your baptism. *Regeneration* comes from a word that can be translated into English as our "re-birthday." During Paul's day the word was used to talk about "coming back from death to life," or "the restoration of life of individuals."

Who Saved You?

It is not the water that saves, but the Spirit. It is the Spirit **who** gave you new life. Titus 3.6 connects to Acts 2.38b, where Paul says that those who repent and are baptized receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

What is the Promise of Acts 2.39?

For the promise is for you and for your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

The *promise* Peter refers to is the promise of salvation to all who believe.

The promise was to the Jews and their descendants first because they were the firstborn in the family, with special privileges. The promise was also to those who are far off, i.e., Gentiles who had not been part of God's family, but now had been brought near by the blood of Christ, Ephesians 2.11-13.

The most important thing about the day of Pentecost was not so much the miraculous signs that appeared, but the fact that the Holy Spirit was bringing salvation to all who would receive. This is the main point of Joel's prophecy Peter quotes at the beginning of his sermon:

Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, Acts 2.21. (Joel 2.32)

This also seems to be the point behind Jesus' statement of Luke 11.13 and His *living water* promises in John 4 and 7.

¹³ "Washing," *loutron*, refers to baptism. See also Ephesians 5.26, where it specifically refers to the washing of water. The verb form of the word is also used in Hebrews 10.22 where the writer speaks of our *bodies washed with pure water*. See Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*. New York: United Bible Societies, 1996, p. Vol. 1, p. 537.

All who believe receive the Spirit, who brings life, cleansing, and His presence. This is understood more clearly by a reading from Young's Literal Translation:

for *to you* is the promise, and to your children, and to all those afar off, as many as the Lord our God shall call.¹⁴

The emphatic in the verse is to you. The wording is out of order for emphasis. **You** will receive the Spirit. You will receive the promise. This is the promise of Luke 24.49a and Acts 1.5. This is the promise of salvation . . . for every person who chooses to receive it. This is conditioned upon:

- Luke 11.13 - our *asking* for it.
- Acts 22.16 - our *calling upon the name of the Lord*.
- John 7.37-38 - our *belief*.
- Acts 2.38 - our *repentance and baptism*.

The People's Response

Luke did not provide us with an entire transcript of Peter's preaching, but we do have an excellent summary of what he said. Peter continued to plead with those in his audience as it was not easy for them to get their minds around what God was calling for. It was a major thing for them to change their beliefs, walk away from family traditions and customs, and admit they had been wrong about Jesus. Peter continued to remind them of the urgency of the situation. *Be saved from this corrupt generation*. If they were ambivalent about the need to change or simply refused to do so, they would be lost.

Most likely the majority of those present did not receive him favorably, but those who did so immediately. On that day, around 3000 people were saved.

What is so important about the mode of baptism?

How would you refute the charge that you believe in "baptismal regeneration?"

Who saves you in baptism?

Who enters your life upon your baptism?

What is the promise of Acts 2.39?

¹⁴ Young, Robert. *Young's Literal Translation*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1997. The emphasis in the verse is mine.