

Baptism in Acts: Nine Stories

Turn to Acts 2. We're going to read nine stories in Acts about baptism. Being a Bible teacher changed my mind about quite a few things in the Bible. Things I assumed were true and that I'd been taught turned out not be what I had understood them. Things I assumed were not true and had been taught turned out to be true.

People had quoted some Scripture when they said these things, but as I read the big picture, it became clear that that's not how it was. The way this usually happened was that I found myself teaching a paragraph of the Bible that I did not believe. Will I teach what I think it should say, as some do, or will I just teach what it says. In my mind, I had to teach what it said. Baptism is one of the big things I had to change my mind about.

When I began teaching at seminary, there was lots of controversy in churches about Pentecostalism and the charismatic movement. These disagreements came mostly out of Acts. I taught Acts my first year, and I decided to sort this out for myself. I found all the conversion stories in Acts, these nine, and I made a chart to find out what was preached, and what it said about the Holy Spirit, and how people responded.

As far as the Spirit goes, there was lots of variety. Sometimes the Spirit played a big role, sometimes just mentioned, and several times not mentioned at all. The only thing that I found in every story was baptism. I was very surprised. In my church background, baptism was not quite ignored, but almost. But now in Acts, it was part of every conversion story, specifically a part of the conversion story.

So I started over with my nine stories, and I just read very carefully what it said about baptism. "Wow," I thought, "I had no idea." Here we go. Let's begin with Acts 2.

1, Peter Preaching at Pentecost – Acts 2:37–41

This is the first big sermon in Acts, the first time the gospel gets preached after Jesus ascended to heaven. At the end of the sermon the crowd knows that they are in big trouble with God, and they have no idea how to make it right: "What shall we do?"

Acts 2:37-39 - When the people heard Peter's sermon, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" 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.

What should they do? Repent and be baptized. They were Jews; they had rejected and crucified Jesus their Messiah. How could they be rescued from this mess? Turn away from that sin, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Repent and be baptized.

A few verses later we read how the crowd responded (Ac 2:41) - *Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.* Those who accepted his message were baptized. “Repenting” and “being baptized” go together, and “accepting the message” and “being baptized” go together. This is how people respond when they receive the good news. Choose God’s ways and be baptized.

2, Philip in Samaria – Acts 8:12

A few years later, Philip preached the gospel in Samaria. Acts 8:12 – *But when the Samaritans believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.* When they believed, they were baptized. Faith and baptism belong together. Can’t get simpler than that.

3, Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch – Acts 8:35–37

Later in Acts 8, an angel of the Lord told Philip to travel down the road to Gaza. On that road Philip met an Ethiopian eunuch, the money manager of the queen of Ethiopia. This Ethiopian had been worshiping God in Jerusalem, and was going home. He was reading Isaiah and was confused. Philip offered to explain Isaiah to him, the man said “Sure.”

Acts 8:35–38 – *Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.*

The eunuch said he wanted to be baptized. Where did he learn about baptism? It is not in Isaiah. Acts just says Philip “told him the good news about Jesus.” The good news about Jesus included explaining baptism as how we tell God we want this.

If you were going to tell a person the good news about Jesus, would it include baptism? In our circles, usually not. At that time I certainly would not have. For Philip, and the whole book of Acts is like this, the good news about Jesus *always* included baptism.

So out there on this lonely road, Philip baptized the eunuch. Is this to join a church? There was probably not much of a church in Ethiopia at this time. Is this a witness to the world? No, it can’t be, there is no one watching. Baptism is how to tell God you are repenting; it is how to tell God that you believe the good news and want Jesus.

4, Saul in Damascus – Acts 9:9, 17–19

The next story is the conversion of Paul, who was called Saul in those days. He was traveling to Damascus to persecute Christians there, and on the way the Lord appeared to him in a bright light. He was completely blinded by that light. He went on to Damascus, led by the people with him, and waited, because the Lord said he’d get instructions there.

Acts 9:9, 17-19 – *For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything... Then Ananias went to the house [where Saul was] and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.*

Did you notice the order of events once Ananias came to Saul? Remember that this was now the third day in which Saul had not eaten or drunk anything. First, Ananias spoke. Second, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes and he could see. Third, Saul was baptized. Fourth, he ate some food and felt better. They did not wait to baptize, did they.

Also, it sounds here like Saul might have been baptized by pouring. The Mediterranean world was hot and dry, and they did not have pools in every other back yard. It sounds like they did not go far. Baptism by immersion does not seem likely here.

5, Peter and Cornelius – Acts 10:44–48

Peter was preaching about Christ to Cornelius and to his friends and relatives. These were the first Gentiles to become disciples of Jesus. They were listening to Peter.

Acts 10:44-48 – *While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.*

Then Peter said, “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

While Peter spoke, the group was believing in their hearts, and mid-sermon the people exploded into praises and speaking in tongues. What were the first words out of Peter’s mouth? *Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water.* The other Jewish believers agreed, and they were baptized.

People don’t have to be baptized to receive the Holy Spirit. In Acts, people often received the Spirit when they were baptized. This Scripture does tie them together, though, because it was the coming of the Spirit that convinced Peter they should be baptized.

These people have believed the gospel and received the Holy Spirit. Have not all the important things happened? No, they have not — they have not been baptized! What will baptism accomplish that has not already happened? I don’t know. But Peter knew, and he knew this conversion was not complete. God had done his part, and for Peter, we must do our part, and do it now.

6, Lydia in Philippi – Acts 16:14–15

Paul was in Philippi, and on the Sabbath day he found a group of women meeting by a river. He told them about Jesus. Acts 16:14-15 – *One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth.*

She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

What should we do when the Lord opens someone's heart to the gospel? Be baptized. She and her household were baptized. It does not mention repentance or faith, but we assume they were part of this. How did her faith show? Hospitality.

7, The Jailer in Philippi – Acts 16:30–34

Still in Philippi, Paul and Silas were caught by an angry mob. They were severely whipped, and thrown into prison. Their feet were fastened in stocks. At midnight, they were praying and singing hymns to God.

There was an earthquake, and all the stocks were opened and all the doors of the prison were opened. The jailer in charge of the prison was ready to kill himself, because if anyone escaped he'd be executed for sure. But Paul said, "Don't! We're all here!"

Acts 16:30-34 –The jailer then brought Paul and Silas out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

The order of events: first, Paul and Silas told the jailor and his household the gospel. Second, the jailor washed their wounds, did some first aid on their torn up backs. Third, the jailor and his household were baptized. It does not say they believed or repented, does it. Just that they were baptized, because that means they repented and believed. Fourth, they all ate together and celebrated. And this was all before morning.

Here again, baptism was an important part of becoming a child of God. And this is another story that sounds like they were baptized by pouring. How else would all these people be baptized in the middle of the night? I was taught that immersion was the only right way of baptism, but I cannot find that in here.

8, John's Disciples in Ephesus – Acts 19:2-7

Paul asked some men who were disciples, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?" "John's baptism," they replied.

Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all.

These men, these disciples, did not have the Holy Spirit, had not even heard about the Holy Spirit. And the first question Paul asked them was about their baptism. How did Paul get there? Why ask that? I was baffled. Furthermore, he was right. They *did* have a baptism problem. Once they'd been baptized in Jesus' name, the Spirit came.

I grappled with this in my first year of teaching seminary. I was teaching Acts, and I could hardly believe this story. It dawned on me that I knew nothing about baptism, and that I did not understand Paul nearly as well as I had thought.

9, Ananias and Paul – Acts 22:12–16

Turn to Acts 22, and we'll look our last story. Paul was back in Jerusalem, about twenty-five years after he became a Christian. He is telling his story to a large crowd of angry Jews, he's telling how he went from being a persecutor of Jesus to a follower of Jesus. He's telling about being blind and hungry for three days in Damascus.

Acts 22:12-16 – A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very moment I was able to see him.

Then he said: 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, and to see the Righteous One, and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard. And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.'

Listen again to that last line: *And now, what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.* Hurry Paul, don't wait!

Paul met the Lord on the road three days earlier, and Paul had already decided that Jesus really was the risen Lord, and Paul had decided to obey Jesus. That's all done, and Ananias knew this. But it was not finished, because Paul was not baptized and his sins were not forgiven. *Be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.* In this line, baptism is how we call on God and ask him to wash our sins away. Oh, I thought, that's bad theology, right there in the Bible! But 25 years after it happened, Paul obviously still agrees that Ananias's words were just right.

These are the stories that I read over and over again, and they re-educated me about baptism.

About the time of that visit to Jerusalem, Paul wrote this to Titus: *not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy, he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and the renewing of the Holy Spirit.*

He saved us by the washing or regeneration and by the Holy Spirit. What kind of washing is this? *“What are you waiting for, Paul? Be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on the Lord.”*

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, and reminded them of their conversion. He said, *“you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified.”* You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified. What kind of “washed” did he mean? *Be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.*

There is nothing magic about water, and the point is not to get dirt off our bodies. But baptism is how we call out to the Lord. Baptism is how we tell the Lord, “Yes, I believe the gospel; yes, I repent, want forgiveness, I will live in your ways, I want in. Yes!”

Let us keep baptism as one an essential part of coming to the Lord. When we repent and come to Jesus, our sins are forgiven and we have peace with God. We receive the Holy Spirit, and we receive eternal life. We tell God we want all this by being baptized. At the end of Matthew, Jesus tells the apostles: baptize them, and then teach them to obey.

And if there is someone listening to this who has not repented and believed and been baptized, then by all means do so. Pursue this. Talk to me, or to someone. As Peter says, “save yourself from this wicked generation.” Amen.

PRAYER: O God, thank you for the gospel. Thank you that you open our hearts to receive the message, and that at some point this happened to each one of us. Thank you for explaining this to us in such simple ways. Thank you for all the people in the world who have heard this message and been baptized. Millions and millions, Lord, we are so glad. May more people come to you in faith today to be baptized. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.