

Baptism: John, Peter, and Ananias
Luke 3:1–14; Acts 2:36–41; 22:14–16

Turn to Luke 3 please. We will look at three Scriptures today because we're interested in how three different people speak about baptism: John the Baptizer, Peter at Pentecost, and Ananias when he visited Paul. For each of these people, baptism is connected to other things, and we can understand baptism by seeing how they speak about it.

We'll talk about baptism for a few reasons. There are always young people growing up in the church who need to hear about this. Also, I can't teach about baptism without talking about salvation, about our basic choice to become followers of the Lord, and it's always good to keep that in front of us. And this is a good way to lead up to our covenant of membership.

John the Baptizer – Luke 3:1–14

John's baptism was not quite Christian baptism, because it did not include Jesus the savior. But except for that, the New Testament builds Christian baptism solidly on John's baptism. I'm calling him "John the baptizer" not "John the Baptist," because it is not just a name. John was famous in his own lifetime for baptizing people.

"Hi, my name is John the Baptist, I'm pleased to meet you, thanks for coming out to the Jordan River today." That is NOT how it worked. He was unique because he baptized. He was not John the preacher, or John the prophet, he was John the baptizer. Let's read from Luke 3:1.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

"A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation.'"

John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

“What should we do then?” the crowd asked. John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?” “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

“In the fifteenth year of Tiberias Caesar.” This puts John at AD 29. Last week we talked about the Bible as the real human history. There is no other holy book anywhere that always ties itself to real times and real places. No “once upon a time, somewhere far away” in the Bible. Always real times and real places. God acts in history in many places in many times, always described.

John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Mark’s Gospel uses the identical words. John preached a particular baptism. He did not preach repentance or forgiveness, but a particular baptism. He did this because God came to him in the wilderness and said, “John, now it’s time.” Our baptisms also are a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Luke quotes from Isaiah. In the ancient world, and still actually, if a very important person plans to visit your town and drive up main street, you make sure the road is smooth and level and welcoming. Isaiah predicted that a messenger would do this for God.

Luke is telling us that John was the person that Isaiah foretold. How did John get people ready for the king of kings? John preached a baptism that meant people were repenting so that God would forgive their sins. Once we’ve had a baptism like that, we’re ready for God to come.

John’s welcome: imagine a preacher urging his audience to come to God and be forgiven and saved. “If you want this,” the evangelist says, “come up here to the front.” Many people come to the front. And then the preacher says to those who came to the front: “You brood of vipers! You children of snakes! Who warned you to flee from the wrath that’s coming to you?”

That’s what John did. That’s how the kingdom of God began, that’s how the first gospel preacher handled the first crowds. The people of course did not know they were a brood of vipers, and they did not know the wrath of God was hot on their heels. That’s why John told them.

What if, on the day you and I received the Lord, we were actually nasty snakes escaping a huge fire right behind us? What if that’s what was really happening to you and me? We didn’t think we were that bad, and we did not think the danger was that great. John says to us, “You *are* that bad, and the danger *is* that great.”

“If you really mean this baptism,” says John, “you make sure your life shows that you’ve repented.” None of us are anywhere near perfect, my brothers and sisters, and John’s not asking for that. “Fruit of repentance” means my life has real evidence that I follow God. That’s all. “Don’t tell me how good you are,” says John, “because you’re on the brink of judgement.”

The people got it. They were listening to John, and they got it, because God was at work. “What should we do?” To repent means to decide to live in God’s ways. John answers this for three groups of people, first the crowds in general, then tax collectors, and lastly soldiers.

The soldiers were probably Jewish men who hired themselves out to Rome to be the police around the tax collectors, to be the tax collectors’ enforcers. For devout Jews, the soldiers would be spiritual losers just like the tax collectors. Traitors who left Israel to work for the idolaters.

What’s repentance look like? John shows them godliness with money and possessions. Is that what you expected from a hellfire repentance preacher? What John tells them comes straight out of Moses and the Old Testament prophets. Be generous to one another with your possessions, share, help each other, don’t gouge each other, don’t take too much, be content with your pay.

Jesus himself took wealth and property to be his greatest competitor for the hearts and loyalty of people. Most of us live in the quiet comfortable prosperity of Kleefeld. It is a blessing from God, and also a real spiritual danger.

For John, repentance begins by using money and property as kindly to one another as possible, never taking too much when you have the power to do so, and being content. When people could see their way through to that, he would baptize them, and they would be forgiven and escape the coming wrath. Who of us thinks our prosperity is our greatest spiritual danger?

So for John, three things go together: baptism, deciding to live in God’s ways, and forgiveness of sins. I was taught that baptism was not important, but we would not get that from these lines. For John the baptizer, baptism was right beside repenting and forgiveness of sins.

Peter at Pentecost – Acs 2:36–41

Turn now to Acts 2, our second text. We’ll find out how Peter speaks about baptism. Acts 2 tells the story of the Holy Spirit being poured out on the followers of Christ. A big crowd gathered, and Peter preached a long sermon to them about the Holy Spirit and mostly about Jesus.

We pick it up at Acts 2:36, which is the last sentence of Peter’s sermon, it is the point he’s been getting to from the start: that Jesus, who they crucified, was actually the Messiah from God.

Acts 2:36–41 - *“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this [concluded Peter]: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.” When the people heard this, 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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this

corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

“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. This sounds a lot like John the baptizer, doesn’t it. John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Peter puts the same three things together, except he adds “in the name of Jesus Christ.” Every one of you, repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.

Christian baptism adds two things. One, baptism is in Jesus’ name. Two, *and you will receive the Holy Spirit.* In John’s baptism, we do two things: we’re baptized, and we decide to live in God’s ways. And God does one thing: he forgives our sins. Peter adds the Holy Spirit to what God does for us: he forgives our sins, and he gives us the Holy Spirit.

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Save ourselves? We are not used to thinking like that. How save ourselves? Simple: “repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” That’s it. That’s how we bring salvation to ourselves. On that day, about 3,000 from that crowd were baptized.

I am going to take a detour here before we listen to Ananias in Acts 22.

Detour: Some Common Baptism Explanations

Here are three baptism explanations I’ve heard that are not really what Scripture teaches. The first is that baptism is how we tell the world that we’ve decided to follow Jesus. That is, baptism is not really for God, it is for people so they can see we want God. But there was nothing in Luke 3 that would make us think baptism was for people to see.

Repentance is for God, and forgiveness comes from God. So baptism also is for God. Nothing in Luke 3 or anywhere in the New Testament tells us that baptism is for people to see. Baptism is for God, just like repenting. If there is a witness to the world in these words, it is repentance, deciding to live in God’s ways. That’s how we show that our baptism was real.

Secondly, baptism is for church membership. You get baptized when you want to join the church, and that’s why you do it, is what some understand. This one is a little trickier.

When we repent and believe and are baptized, we do become at that time one of God’s people, we become a part of the universal church. But the New Testament does not have anything like church membership as we have it in many churches, so it cannot be that. Baptism is how we say “yes” to God, “yes, God, I want to repent and be forgiven and I want the Holy Spirit.” God gave us a way to say “yes” to him: it’s baptism.

Thirdly, sometimes we view baptism as an extra step of commitment to the Lord past just conversion. We get saved, this view goes, to get our sins forgiven, but when we're ready to actually follow the Lord like disciples, we need to be baptized. No more fooling around.

But again, let's not separate baptism from deciding to live God's ways (which none of us do well) *and* having our sins forgiven *and* receiving the Holy Spirit. In the NT, these are always a part of the same package. Baptism is for God, repenting is for God, forgiveness is from God, and the Spirit is from God. Detour is over.

Ananias in Damascus – Acts 22:14–16

One more text, Acts 22. Paul is back in Jerusalem, 25 or 30 years after the Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus. That story is in Acts 9. In Acts 22, years later, Paul re-tells the story to an angry crowd in Jerusalem. We'll pick it up in 22:14. Ananias came to help Paul understand why the Lord had appeared to him on the road to Damascus.

Acts 22:14–16 – “[Ananias said to Paul]: ‘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.’”

In a sense Paul did not have any choice about repentance, because God just took over his life. “God chose you to see and hear the righteous one, and you will be God's witness to all people of what you saw and heard.” Paul submitted to this, but the way it's told, he had no choice.

It is the last line we're interested in here, the baptism line: *What are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.* Three things go together here: be baptized, wash your sins away, and call on God's name.

The NT rarely uses exactly the same words to describe how we come to God. It is a little different every time. It is not a formula. It is real people coming to a real God, joining up with the big promise, coming to God to worship him and live in his ways. The details are never the same, every story is unique.

Ananias has some urgency here. Paul has been waiting, not eating or drinking, for three days. It is the third day since the Lord met him on the road, Paul waiting for Ananias to come and tell him what on earth was going on! Acts 9 tells us that Paul did not eat or drink until after he'd been baptized.

So John put these together: baptism, repentance, and forgiveness of sins.

Peter put it this way: repentance, baptism, forgiveness of sins, and receiving the Holy Spirit.

Ananias: baptism is how we wash our sins away and how we call on God. Perhaps that line makes you a little nervous.

In my student days I got the same warning about baptism as about the Lord's Supper. I was warned not to make too much of these. They were just externals, and not really important as far as spiritual reality goes. But as I began to read the New Testament more for myself, I noticed that the Bible was not worried about us making too much of baptism and the Lord's Supper. These things are bound up with our spiritual lives.

So baptism is one of the basic parts of conversion, coming to God to be one of his people.

The biggest challenge, coming out of all this, is the children of the church. The church has traditionally made 12 years of age the point at which people are old enough to decide for themselves how they want to live, to decide for themselves to follow Christ and to serve God.

This goes back to Jesus going to the Temple when he was 12. So we go with that. Some are ready sooner, some not till later. I'll try to make clear what baptism means, and when you're twelve you can decide if this is for you.

And remember that after baptism there are still real struggles to keep the faith. This happens when people are baptized young, and when they wait. We can never promise God that that won't happen. If we quit following, we don't need baptism again, we just turn back to the Lord again.

God is in the process of keeping his one big promise, to come to earth and restore Israel and the human race. He's doing this above all through his Son Jesus Christ. And here's how we come into this salvation. Let's try to keep these things together, because the New Testament keeps them together: Baptism, deciding to live in God's ways, the forgiveness of our sins, receiving the Holy Spirit, calling on God. These are how we save ourselves from our wicked generation. Amen.

PRAYER: God, when we first came to you to be saved, we were all children of wrath. Even though we did not know it, we slaves to the authority of darkness, and your judgement was hot on our heels. God, we didn't know how bad we were, or how much danger we were in. But I can't see how we were any better than the people in John's audience, so this has to include us.

But you came to us, you made sure we heard the message, you opened our hearts to believe. You told us to repent and be baptized, so we did these things. We were forgiven and received your Holy Spirit! Thank you Father, thank you, thank you. Amen.

BENEDICTION (DOXOLOGY): To him who is able to keep you from falling, and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power, and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. God in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.