



In the Old Testament, baptism was practiced as a ceremonial washing away of sin—and usually for specific sins committed as a part of a sacrificial system.

As the New Testament begins, John the Baptist is baptizing people in the same way as the Old Testament practice—for forgiveness of sins. John did so to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, Jesus. John baptized Jesus in the river Jordan. But when Jesus was baptized, there came a voice—the voice of God who said of Jesus, “this is my Son with whom I am pleased”. **And then the Holy Spirit descended upon Him.**

As Jesus’ ministry commenced, he didn’t baptize anyone, but commanded his disciples to do so. As a matter of fact, baptism and salvation (eternal life) are linked in many passages, although not all (John 3:16). **The book of Acts is the history of the early Christian church**—and in it baptisms are recorded.

Baptism starts in Acts 2:38. Peter says repent and be baptized and you will receive the Holy Spirit. This is called “believer’s baptism”. It simply means that a person has come to faith, received Jesus as their Lord and Savior. In this case, **baptism is the witness of the believer**. Since this was the first generation of believers, they would, of course, come to faith as adults. But as these adults went to their homes and families, **things began to change**.

There is another application of baptism evident in the book of Acts, chapter 16, where an **entire family** was baptized:

Paul and Silas were preaching and casting out demons. A girl who could tell fortunes because of the spirit within her kept following them. Finally, to get her to be quiet, they set her free of the evil spirit within. Her owners were upset at the loss of their income, so they complained and Paul and Silas were thrown in jail.

About midnight, an earthquake shook the jail, opened the doors and broke open the chains that held these two disciples. The jailer, believing that Paul and Silas had escaped, tried to kill himself, sparing himself a worse fate that would be delivered by his superior. But Paul and Silas were there! He was so moved by their confidence and faith, and now by saving his life, he asked, “what must I do to be saved”. They said, “Repent, believe in the gospel and be baptized.” Acts 16:32 says that he and his whole family were baptized that very night.

The whole family—that meant husband, wife, and children (this is not the only place where this occurs, simply one example). **They were all baptized**—it does say that they all believed. There is no where in the Bible that says only adults can be baptized, and nowhere does it say that babies can’t be baptized.

**God always takes the first step.** In the covenant with Abraham (Gen 15) he was unable to speak, was sound asleep, but God made the promise. In Exodus 20, the first commandment God said “I am your God, you will be my people” —not really a subject for discussion. **Peter, in his first sermon recorded in Acts 2: 39, tells us that the “promise” is for you and your children!** Jesus, though not speaking of baptism, tells his disciples to not keep the little ones from him, but takes them into his arms to bless them. (Matt 19:14). **The point is God takes the first step—and when an infant/child is baptized, God is taking the “first step”.** **But also when an adult is baptized as a witness to faith—God has still taken the first step!** So when we baptize, whether it is a child or an adult, we call it a **sacrament**.

**What is a sacrament?** A sacrament is a promise or an “oath of loyalty”. In our practice of sacraments, there are two: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Sacraments have two characteristics: 1) they are instituted by Jesus and 2) use an earthly element. Jesus himself was baptized by John the Baptist in the river Jordan and commanded his disciples to baptize as recorded in Matthew 28:19. So baptism meets both those requirements. The other sacrament that we observe is the Lord’s Supper—but that is the subject of another article.

In Baptism God makes a promise to the one baptized—He will be their God and they his people. **Like any communication, for it to have effect, there must also be a response.** In the case of an infant or young child, we hope that the response will—in time—be one of faith.

## **Does Baptism Save Us?**

No. Baptism by itself, without faith, is simply a ceremony. When God speaks, things change, and his words **make a difference!** Parents tell their infants that they are loved. Why? There is no infant, who when first born understands the language spoken by the parent. Never the less, parents are non-stop telling their babies they are loved. If they can’t understand, why say the words? **It is the desire of a parent’s heart to say the words regardless of understanding. God’s heart towards his people is the same.** And because God takes the first step, in this proclamation of love there is no demand for a response. God says it because it is God’s nature. *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this:*

*While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5: 5-8.*

**Before we could say a word, God demonstrated his love.**

This is a **call to faith and faith is required.** As little ones grow up, and parents fulfill the promises that they make to God regarding how they will raise that child, the child will know Jesus as Lord and respond in faith. The Lord knows when someone comes to that response, when the Holy Spirit has done the work of faith. God discerns the moment of understanding, we can’t. We baptize as a means by which God demonstrates His “first step” and we promise to do all we can to ensure that the child receives the promise and comes to know Jesus as Lord.

**How we respond is still the ultimate question.**

**Baptism is not a guarantee of salvation;** neither is its absence a guarantee of damnation. The Bible records the thief on the cross as having the promise of Jesus to be with him in paradise (Luke 23: 40-42) and there is no mention of him being baptized before he died. There are other references to believing, trusting in Jesus for salvation, and no mention of baptism at all, the most familiar of which is John 3:16. Baptism is a **gift**, not a law. Faith in Jesus alone is enough for salvation. Since Jesus commanded us to baptize, in order to submit to God’s authority, we should willingly follow.

**One illustration of baptism is writing a check.** While the water of baptism washes away the sin, God is writing a check! A personal check, and in the amount of all the wealth and riches of the kingdom of God. When the baptism is complete, the Lord places that check in the baptized person’s heart and then waits for the day it will be cashed. A check is only as good as its author. Since the Creator of the universe wrote the check—it’s good! **But a check in the “pocket” is only a promise. If the baptized wants to receive the benefits of the promise, the check must be cashed.** A parent’s job is to teach the child how to cash the check. **It’s the Holy Spirit’s job to make believers!** That’s why parents

make promises in baptism:

to bring them to worship,

to teach them the Lord's prayer, the Creed and the 10 commandments,

to place in their hands the Bible,

to introduce that child to Jesus.

**Only the Holy Spirit can make a child a Christian,  
but a parent can give witness to the hope within-Jesus!**