

What is Baptism?

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Preacher: Andrew Price

[0 : 00] Well, in case you're visiting us this morning, welcome. We've been looking at over the past month, really, at church, worship and the sacraments.

So we've had two weeks on worship, two weeks on church and two weeks on the sacraments. Now, the word sacrament simply means a visible or outward sign that represents a spiritual reality.

And there are two sacraments or symbols in the Bible. There's the Lord's Supper, which Andrew spoke about last week and which we'll be celebrating today. And of course, the Lord's Supper symbolized Jesus's death.

And the other one is the sacrament or symbol of baptism. And so immediately I need to point out and remind you that baptism is simply a symbol.

In fact, I had one person ask me this morning, so we're not saved when we're baptized. Now, I know many of you will know that, but I just need to point it out because it's not always clear.

[1 : 02] So baptism does not make us a Christian and it does not make us more godly. It's like a wedding ring, if you like. Just because someone wears a wedding ring on their wedding finger doesn't mean they are definitely married.

My daughter was wearing a ring on her wedding finger the other day pretending to be married. Now, is she really married? I hope not. It's just a symbol. Well, what's important for married couples is not whether they wear a wedding ring, but whether they have actually been married.

In other words, it's not the symbol that is important, but what it points to. Well, so too with baptism. A baptism is like that wedding ring. It is a symbol. And so the water is not sacred.

It's just water. And so if we disagree over what baptism is or who should be baptized, then I want to suggest it's okay because it is a symbol. What matters is what it points to.

And so what does baptism point to then? Well, again, Christians disagree over this as well. And part of the reason for this is that the Bible seems to present different pictures.

[2 : 09] I mean, if it were crystal clear in the scriptures, then there would be less disagreement, wouldn't there? And so what I want to do today is show you different pictures or concepts that stand behind this symbol of baptism and let you make up your own mind.

But first, what does the word baptism mean? We're point one on your outlines. Well, the word baptism is straight from the Greek word baptism. And on the slide, baptism means dipping, washing or plunging or immersing.

Now, this can be either literal washing or a figurative washing. And so on the next slide, Jesus visits a Pharisee's house and the Pharisee noticing that Jesus did not first wash.

The word is literally be baptized or baptize himself before the meal. And the Pharisee was surprised. And so baptism here is used for that ceremonial washing of hands and feet, if you like.

Now, it wouldn't have been his whole body, but it certainly would have involved a bit of water. On the next slide, we have a metaphoric use. Jesus said this to his disciples.

[3 : 12] He says, can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with? Now, the cup here is the cup of God's judgment at our sin.

And Jesus is just about to suffer this judgment on the cross. And the word baptism here is used in a figurative or a metaphoric way to talk about this judgment that Jesus is about to be plunged into for us.

So you've got a metaphoric use. And then on the next slide, we've got a use that we're much more familiar with. So this is Philip speaking to the eunuch. Philip opened his mouth and beginning with the scripture, he told the eunuch the good news about Jesus.

And as they were going along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, see, here is water. What prevents me from being baptized? And so, as I said, this is a much more familiar use of the word baptism.

It refers to the literal water baptism as we know it. And so, as you can see, the Bible has uses the word in different ways, but it does use it most often in the way that we're familiar with water baptism.

[4 : 20] And so, what then does water baptism symbolize? We're at point two. Well, what I want to do this morning is kind of build up a picture from the Old Testament to the New, as briefly as I can.

And so, in the Old Testament, the actual practice of baptism as a ceremony did not actually happen. We've got examples like Nahum, which Jennifer mentioned in her prayers, who washed himself in the river to get rid of the leprosy and so on.

But as a practice, as a ceremony, it wasn't practiced. And so, if you've got Rahab the prostitute from Jericho, she converted to Judaism. Remember, she joined the Jews. And she wasn't baptized.

Ruth the Moabitess, when she joined Israel, wasn't baptized. In fact, there was some debate about when the actual practice of baptism started. Some say it was a couple of years before Christ, about 2 BC, that the Jews started doing it for those who wanted to become a Jew.

Others say it actually started with John the Baptist. And so, there's a bit of disagreement. But what did certainly occur in the Old Testament were lots and lots of washings, ceremonial washings.

[5 : 27] And these washings helped people to be ceremonially clean. The priests had to do it. The people had to do it. And so on. It was part of being holy before their God. And so, washing very quickly became a symbol of forgiveness or cleansing of sin, you see.

And we saw that from our first reading, didn't we? Remember David, Psalm 51. On the next slide, he says, Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Or verse 7, Cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean.

Wash me and I will be whiter than snow. You see how the language of washing there is associated with forgiveness. And it's a natural association, isn't it?

And when you get something dirty to clean it, you wash it, don't you? Our children know this all too well. I caught my youngest a little while ago putting some clothes in the dirty clothes basket.

And when I asked her what she was doing, she said, They're dirty. They need to be washed. The only problem was, it was her third outfit change for the day. She didn't even warn them for half an hour. And they weren't dirty.

[6 : 31] But even our youngest knows that dirty things need washing to be made clean. And so washing is a natural way in the Old Testament to talk about being cleansed from sin.

To symbolise cleansing from sin. The only problem was, people kept sinning. And so we needed a new way or a new covenant, which would bring unlimited forgiveness whenever we asked for it.

And we also needed help to live God's way and not sin. And so the Old Testament promised a definitive cleansing and God's spirit to help.

And so on the next slide, we've got a passage from Ezekiel 36, where we see such a promise. God says to the people, You see it here?

And so in the Old Testament, washing was associated with forgiveness and it looked forward to a time where God would forgive unlimitedly.

[7 : 45] And he would give his spirit to help. And it's this idea of forgiveness that John the Baptist taps into, as we saw in our reading.

But he also emphasised the need to repent, to be forgiven. And so please turn, if you've closed your Bible, to Mark chapter 1, which we had read a little while ago. So Mark chapter 1, here John prepares people for the coming of the Lord.

So in verses 1 to 3, we read, At the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as is written in Isaiah the prophet, I will send my messenger ahead of you.

The messenger, of course, is John, who will prepare your way, a voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.

And so how does John the Baptist prepare the way for the Lord? Well, he prepares by preparing the people, preparing their hearts to accept the Lord. And so in verse 4, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance, a change of heart, for the forgiveness of sins.

[8 : 54] And the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him, confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River. You see, John called people back to God.

And that's what repentance means. It means a change of mind, a change of heart, a turning around, a U-turn, if you like, back to God. And with this came forgiveness.

And so John's baptism was a symbol that you have repented for the forgiveness of sins. But Jesus has still not yet come. He had still not yet died on the cross to bring us unlimited forgiveness.

And Jesus had not yet risen as king of all people. And so the repentance that John's baptism symbolised, it wasn't a turning back to Jesus as Lord yet.

And the forgiveness that John's baptism symbolised wasn't an unlimited forgiveness that Jesus brings. Instead, John's baptism symbolised a true but unlimited kind of forgiveness.

[9 : 59] And he actually pointed to Jesus, who would bring unlimited forgiveness and the Spirit. And so you see verse 7? And this was John's message. After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.

I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit. You see, John's baptism was like a stepping stone. It foreshadowed, it picked up things in the Old Testament, and it foreshadowed Jesus' greater baptism with the Spirit, who would cleanse our hearts and bring unlimited forgiveness and help us to obey.

We see this in places like Titus chapter 3 on the next slide. The word baptism is not used, but the idea is there. It says, God saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

See the language of washing and pouring here? This is what happens when we become a Christian. And it's not as some churches teach, an extra step we have to take.

Some churches will teach you, become a Christian when you believe, and then later on you have to get baptised by the Holy Spirit. That's not what the Bible says. When we believe we become a Christian, we are baptised by the Holy Spirit.

[11 : 23] He washes us clean, as David prayed for in Psalm 51. And so, while John's baptism helps us to see that baptism symbolises repentance and forgiveness, it's not the whole story.

He points forward to the time when we will be baptised by the Spirit as well. It's kind of like those Russian babushka dolls. Have you seen those ones? I've got a picture up on the slide there.

You can unpack each one, and there's another one underneath, if you like. Actually, someone told me a joke about them a couple of weeks ago. They said, Have you heard about those babushka dolls?

They're full of themselves. I didn't say it was a good joke. But these dolls are like lots of things in the New Testament, including baptism.

To understand them, you have to unpack each layer, you see. And then we start with the smallest doll, and work back up to get a fuller picture of this baptism, what it's about. And so, on the next slide, we've looked at the Old Testament.

[12 : 24] That's the first doll, if you like. And then we've looked at the stepping stone, John the Baptist. And now we need to look at what happened in the New Testament, in the early church. So, please turn with me to Acts chapter 2, and see what baptism is about there.

So, Acts chapter 2, it's page 1092, Acts 2, 36. This is the day of Pentecost, when the apostles receive the Spirit, and the crowd wonders what's going on.

And then later on in Peter's sermon, his first sermon to the crowd of Jerusalem, this is what he says, bottom left-hand corner of page 1092, verse 36. He says, Therefore, let all Israel be assured of this.

God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ, or Messiah. When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the other apostles, Brothers, what should we do?

And Peter replied, Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you'll 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.

[13 : 38] And with many other words, he warned them and pleaded with them, Save yourselves from this corrupt generation. And those who accepted his message were baptized, and about 3,000 were added to their number that day.

Now we'll come back to the children part in a while, but notice three things here. First, baptism in the early church is also associated with repentance, and forgiveness, isn't it?

Just like it was with John the Baptist. Similar to the Old Testament too, actually. But unlike, secondly, unlike John the Baptist, this one was in the name of Jesus, and is associated with receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And so now there's this new element, which baptism symbolizes, you see. It not only symbolizes repentance, and cleansing, but it also symbolizes being baptized by the Spirit, receiving the Spirit, just as the Old Testament promised.

Just as John the Baptist said Jesus would do for us. So that's the second thing to notice, that new element. Third thing to notice is verse 38. You see verse 38, what must people do to receive forgiveness, according to verse 38?

[14 : 50] Repent. This is not a rhetorical question. I'm just making sure everyone's awake. Repent and be baptized. Thank you. Yeah. Repent and be baptized.

It doesn't say repent and believe, does it? Does that strike you as odd? Now, does that mean then, if we are not baptized, we cannot be forgiven?

I hope you're thinking, no, good. Of course not. The Bible is very clear that it's all about believing in Jesus. Peter himself will say that later on in Acts 10. Everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name, he will say.

So when Peter says repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus, what he's meaning is repent and show you believe by being baptized in his name.

In other words, baptism also symbolizes a belief in Jesus. I mean, it's hard to be baptized into the name of Jesus without believing in Jesus. Is it not?

[15 : 53] What's more, the fact that it is in the name of Jesus indicates that baptism is also symbolic of allegiance to Christ. We are baptized publicly.

It's a public declaration that you bear Jesus's name. You're one of his followers. You are now a Christian. In fact, we're going to have a baptism here at nine o'clock next Sunday.

And Diane is going to publicly declare that she is one of Christ, that she follows, she believes in Jesus. Now, I'm not going to point to Diane so that she'll get embarrassed, but she's just over there. So we'll look forward to that.

But do you see how broad the concept of baptism is? It's why there's such disagreement amongst Christians. As some will say, it just symbolizes repentance.

As some will say, it just symbolizes forgiveness or the washing away of sin. Others will say it symbolizes being baptized by the spirit. Others will say it symbolizes our faith in Jesus or our allegiance to Christ.

[16 : 55] And still others will say it symbolizes our union with Christ, the way we die to our old life and rise to our new life. And we haven't even had time to look at that one. But the thing is, they are all true because they are all connected.

They're all part of becoming a Christian, you see, or being born again into God's family. Becoming a Christian means repenting and believing. That's our side.

But it also, from God's side, means being washed from sin, receiving the spirit through Christ's death for us, by dying to our old life and raising us to new life.

Baptism represents all those things. And so I think in the end, the best definition of baptism is a broad one. Baptism is a symbol of becoming a Christian.

It's why it was almost always done in the early church, as soon as people did become Christians. And so does that mean then we should not baptize infants or children? Point three.

[18 : 01] Should we wait until they become Christians? Well, look at that. The time's up. We'll have to finish there. Well, let me say a few things about this.

The first thing they'll say is, how do you know when they become a Christian? If you've got children in Christian families, how do you know when they become a Christian? If they always grow up believing, at what point did they become a Christian themselves?

You see, whenever we baptize them, it won't be right at the moment they believe, like it was in the early church. In the early church, there were not generations of people growing up in Christian families.

And so there were more examples of people being converted and baptized on the spot. So baptism of our children, whether as infants or when they grow up, will be before or after they become Christians.

It won't be exactly at the point they become a Christian. It won't be exactly like the early church in the Bible. It will be a little bit different. So that's the first thing to say. Actually, what's more, if we dedicate our children as infants and then baptize them as adults, or if we baptize them as infants and confirm them as teenagers, either way, we're actually doing something that is and is not in the Bible.

[19 : 17] Because the dedication of children and the confirmation of teenagers are not in the Bible. And so we cannot say we are being more biblical than that family over there because we're at a different stage to the early church.

And neither dedication of children or confirmation of teenagers is in the Bible. So that's the first thing to say. The second thing to say is that God does actually work more corporately than we do. In our Western world, we are very individualistic.

But God is not. He's on about gathering together one family, one people, all united in Christ. The church is described as one body with different parts, different members.

But one body. You see, God loves unity. He loves gathering. He loves the corporate. Why? Because God is on about relationships.

In fact, God himself is relationship. You know, Father, Son, Spirit. And so it shouldn't surprise us that God works more corporately in relationships than we think.

[20 : 22] Now, does this mean then that children of Christian parents are automatically saved? No, it does not mean that. Otherwise, it's no longer through Jesus that they are saved, but whether they are born into the Christian family.

But it does mean that children are treated as part of God's family until such time that they reject what they've grown up believing, which hopefully won't happen.

But let me show you this corporate idea from the Bible. So on the next slide, we've got a household being baptized. So verse 16, chapter 16, this is Lydia. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia to Paul and the other apostles, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God.

The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message about Christ. And when she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. Now, we don't have the whole story there.

We don't know if the other members of the household had the message preached to them. We don't know if there were children in that household or not. But do you notice, Lydia believes and the whole household is baptized.

[21 : 28] There's this corporate nature, you see. Or take the next passage from Ephesians chapter 6 on the next slide. I love this first part of the verse. Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

And then it goes on to say, fathers, do not exasperate your children. Instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. Notice here that Paul treats children as though they are Christian.

He commands them to obey their parents in the Lord. This is part of the children's, part of their serving the Lord Jesus, is to obey their parents.

Paul treats them as though they are Christians, you see. And parents, fathers in particular, are to bring up their children as Christians, not to convert them first, then baptize them, then train them.

He just says, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord as though they are Christian. Or back in our passage, hopefully you've still got Acts 2 open before you. Verse 39, Peter says, this promise the gift of the Holy Spirit, this promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, for all whom the Lord our God will call, he says.

[22 : 45] You see, while baptism is associated with conversion in the Bible, the Bible also assumes that children will grow up believing. It doesn't guarantee, it doesn't guarantee it, but it assumes and treats them as though they are Christians.

And so, why does God do that? Well, again, because he works corporately. And by the way, this means that at least one parent must be Christian.

Otherwise, the children will not grow up being taught or believing, will they? And so, I will not baptize children where both parents say they are not Christians. But the point is, the Bible expects us to raise our children as Christians and assumes, not guarantees, but treats them as though they are until they deny it.

And so, why not baptize them? And now, there are many, many other things to say, like, you know, well, why not wait until we have evidence that they are Christian?

But even adults who confess their faith and baptize, I know some who now don't call themselves Christians. And so, even the confession of faith is no guarantee. But the final thing to say, and again, people at Bible college spend, you know, 10 weeks on these sort of topics.

[24 : 00] I'm trying to do it in one sermon. So, there's lots of things I've had to miss out. But the last thing I wanted to say is, it's, I think we need to have flexibility on this topic. You see, it's interesting that Jesus didn't seem to baptize anyone.

In fact, on the next slide, John makes it clear that Jesus did not baptize. John 4, the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John, although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples.

And Paul, on the next slide, downplays baptism. He says, for Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel. You see, Paul is downplaying baptism for a reason.

The Corinthians started following those who baptized them, so he downplays it for a reason, but it's still secondary to him. It's a secondary issue. And so, while I think baptism is certainly a good thing to do, and if you haven't been baptized, then I'd highly recommend it, I don't think there's only one way to do it.

I think we can be flexible. Someone heard I was preaching this morning on baptism today, and they're not really a big fan of infant baptism, and so they cheekily said, oh, so can I have my daughter dedicated then?

[25 : 12] Yeah, thank you. Sure. But, yeah, why not? We can be flexible about this. But when we do baptize, it certainly needs to involve a liberal washing of water.

It should be public. It should be some expression of faith, whether by the parents or by the person being baptized. But in the end, it is simply a symbol, a very good one, but still a symbol.

What matters most is what it symbolizes, that people are Christians, that they've been washed by the Spirit. And so that's what we should be concerned about the most.

That's what we should be praying for, that our kids and grandkids will grow up being Christian. Praying not just for them, but for our neighbors and work colleagues as well, that they will become Christians.

We have a prayer night coming up this Wednesday night. Why not join us and pray for that? What matters most is using the opportunities and gifts we have to share the gospel with people, to invite them to evangelistic events, like the gingerbread house making one coming up.

[26 : 15] What matters most is people growing up as Christian or becoming Christian so that they too might have all the blessings that come with being part of God's family. And if we've got that priority right, then it doesn't really matter if we splash, wash or dunk.

Now does it? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this symbol of baptism in the Bible. we thank you for a great symbol that it is, that it symbolizes everything that happens when we become a Christian.

Father, we pray though that you would help us to get our priorities right, to not get caught up on the symbol of baptism, but rather what it points to. Help us, Father, to be concerned as you are concerned for the lost, that they might become Christians and so receive all the blessings of your kingdom.

And Father, we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.