

## **Baptism**

(an excerpt from *Start Here: Beginning a Relationship with Jesus* by David Dwight and Nicole Unice, published by David C. Cook, 2014)

Baptism is the sacrament that marks the beginning of life in a relationship with Jesus Christ. Generally speaking, a person is baptized once, and it is a mark of his or her beginnings in God. (This is different from Communion, which is an ongoing and repeated practice for Christians.) Over the centuries, Christians have come to two main views of baptism: infant baptism and believer's baptism. For the sake of *Start Here*, we'll briefly describe the two, but we don't intend to go deeper than that. You can read and research this on your own if you'd like.

Infant baptism is when a very young child is brought for baptism by his or her Christian parents. When an infant is baptized, he or she is not actively engaged in the process. Part of the unspoken message of this is the acknowledgment that God works in our lives long before we ever know it. It marks the promise that God is making through Jesus Christ, that forgiveness of sin and new life are offered. And even though the child doesn't understand yet what's happening, God is still offering. He has a very active role. In other words, God was inviting you long before you realized it. The sign of this offer of forgiveness and new life in Jesus is water sprinkled or poured over the child's head.

Believer's baptism is slightly different. This is when a person has come to a place where he or she understands God's offer of life in Jesus and is being baptized as an expression that he or she has accepted this offer. Believer's baptism emphasizes that the person being baptized has made a conscious decision to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior. In believer's baptism, a person may be momentarily immersed under water, which symbolizes that this person has died to self and is raised to new life in Jesus.

While infant baptism and believer's baptism are both about life in Jesus, infant baptism puts emphasis on God making the offer while believer's baptism emphasizes the person saying yes to God's offer. Either way, one of the powerful aspects of this sacrament is that someone else carries out your baptism. This signifies a relational participation with other believers (the church) as an integral part of your life in Christ. Part of what's being conveyed, since you can't baptize yourself, is that we do this life of faith together.

There's more to baptism, of course (approximately one million books more), but we're interested in fostering unity rather than debating. And since that's the case, we're going to talk about the core idea of baptism—mainly that when we receive Jesus Christ, God washes us clean from sin and adopts us into His family. Water marks the washing, since water is the universal agent for cleansing. And not only are we washed, but we are also cleansed

of all unrighteousness. The Bible goes further, making it clear that Jesus takes our sin *and* our shame (Genesis 3:21; Isaiah 61:10; Romans 10:9-11; 1 Peter 2:24). So baptism is a sign that God forgives us, cleanses us from sin, and takes our guilt and shame. Indeed, God in His grace and love has been covering our guilt and shame from the very earliest time of sin.

Remarkably, the Bible repeatedly speaks of God not only cleansing us but also covering us. He did this in Genesis—covering Adam and Eve with clothing when they rejected Him—and thereafter the Bible repeatedly connects our forgiveness with “being clothed.” How kind of God not only to accept us, not only to cleanse us, but also to clothe us in garments of grace, to cover our shame (Isaiah 61:10; Luke 15:22). All of these things show how God gives us a new start with a clean record, and if you’ve lived some life and experienced the pain and shame of regret, a new start with a clean record is an awesome gift.

### ***Dying and Living***

Entering this place of being forgiven comes when we accept Jesus Christ, expressing, “I want to accept the offer of Jesus’s forgiveness and new life.” With this, we are saying, “I am surrendering myself as the center of my life and inviting Jesus Christ to be the center of my life.”

Or again, saying to God, “I want to stop living my way for me; I want to start living Your way for You.”

Sometimes you hear this referred to as “dying to self” (see Romans 6:2; 2 Corinthians 5:15). Becoming a Christian for real means I’ve come to a place where I no longer want to live for myself, but I want to live for God. So I’m “dying to me and living to Him.”

This story of a military chaplain illustrates the concept of laying ourselves down when we repent and receive Jesus. The chaplain, deployed for Operation Desert Storm, had many soldiers come to him to receive baptism and declare their new standing in Christ. When he began to search for a receptacle to hold water for baptism, the chaplain realized that coffins were all they had. And so a coffin was lined with a body bag, then filled with water ... and those who wished were baptized in the coffin—giving each one an even more illustrative experience of lying down in the water in the coffin and then being raised from it. What better symbol of dying to self and being raised to new life in Christ?<sup>1</sup>

Yes, baptism marks God’s offer of salvation and the beginnings of new life in relationship with Jesus Christ. It illustrates and teaches us about the incredible gift of cleansing and forgiveness that Jesus Christ offers when we die to ourselves and receive Him. You may think this idea of “dying to self” (see Matthew 16:25) sounds frightening—and we fully understand. It scared me (David) when I first heard it. Remarkably, however, people

have shared again and again through- out Christian history that this is when they began to feel fully alive for the first time—finally feeling free, feeling like themselves! One of our favorite experiences in ministry is being part of baptism services. It's meaningful for everyone involved—the new believer, the leaders, and the community. If you've begun a relationship with Jesus and you've never been baptized, we encourage you to take that step. It'll be an important mark in your own history, a tangible reminder of your new life with Christ.

<sup>1</sup> Ken Hemphill, *We Are (Kingdom Promises)* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2006), 57.