

TUTORIAL
2.11

The meaning of Baptism

At this point in the narrative of Acts, three thousand people are baptized. This tutorial discusses baptism, looking at Jewish baptism, John's baptism, and the true meaning of baptism under the New Covenant.

The portion of Scripture referred to in this tutorial is: **Matthew 3:11,13, Acts 2:37, Acts 2:41.**

Last time

We found the disciples in an upstairs room in Jerusalem where they and other followers of Jesus regularly gathered in the days after His return to Heaven. On the morning of the Jewish festival day called Pentecost the Holy Spirit came in a special way to the world, to permanently live in the *Body* of believers, and in each one individually. This fulfilled Jesus' promise to the disciples that He'd send a Replacement for Himself. As a sign of His coming, the Spirit gave them the ability to speak in other languages, which were recognized by people from different countries staying in Jerusalem at the time. Three thousand people were saved and added to the new Church that day.

Why baptize the new converts?

The Narrative says that all of those 3000 people were baptized (Acts 2:41). So, picture the scene. For the Apostles and the rest of Jesus' small band of followers there in Jerusalem it has been an incredible day. Since Jesus left, the questions must have swirled around in all their minds and no doubt constantly came up in their conversations and prayers. What did the future hold for them as a group? Would they just end up being seen as an obscure sect of Judaism that faded quickly away? Now of course everything has changed with the Holy Spirit's arrival. Suddenly hundreds and hundreds of people who'd previously been hostile, or at least indifferent, were joining them! They too have put their faith in Jesus as the Christ, and have accepted His sacrifice on their behalf!

When have things ever changed for a group of people so quickly and dramatically? So then why, in the middle of this tumultuous excitement and new hope do they start baptizing people? Obviously for them it is pretty important, or they wouldn't be making the effort. What puts it so high on their priorities, and what do the new believers understand it is all about? If it was so

important to the Apostles on this inaugural day of His *Body* to which we also belong, then surely it must be important for us today to understand why.

Jewish baptism

It is helpful for us to consider the background context and the things the disciples were processing. Baptism or ritual immersion, known as *mikveh*, has long been a part of Jewish religious custom. The *Torah* - the Law God gave Moses spelling out the conditions for the Old Covenant - demanded a complete washing of the body for a number of things...for example, people who'd become ceremonially unclean somehow, or before a priest could carry out certain tasks. The *Talmud* - the Jewish civil and ceremonial traditional law - also requires the *mikveh* immersion for other instances such as a bride before her wedding, or a woman after childbirth. Before bringing a sacrifice, a man goes through the ritual full body cleansing. Also, a Gentile man wanting to become a Jew is required by the priests to go through ritual immersion as well as circumcision. There are a number of designated pools, or *mikvot* as they are known, sunk into the rock around the Temple area - evidence of which can still be seen today, 2000 years later (picture at right).

John's baptism

They also have another kind of baptism still quite fresh in their minds. All the disciples are familiar with the message that John, Jesus' cousin, was preaching a few years ago. Most had been drawn along with the crowds who'd gone to the uninhabited stretch of the Jordan river where John was preaching and challenging people to prepare their hearts for the coming of the Messiah.

We can assume that along with others, prepared to publicly acknowledge their guilt before God, they had each gone down into the river, then under the water, to represent their need for complete spiritual cleansing by the Promised One from God. We don't know, because the Narrative doesn't tell us, whether John said any specific words or even exactly what role he played in these baptisms. It may have been that individuals immersed themselves, as was traditional in the *mikveh* ritual cleansing. Certainly he was seen to have authority in the process as the teacher of God's Truth because the text records him saying "I baptize with water..." and also that "Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River *to be baptized by John.*" (Matthew 3:11,13)

The Spirit's guidance was available

So the Apostles were aware of the ritual immersions related to the Old Covenant, and to the baptism associated with John's preaching...but those were different. One was for a system that they knew had now been superseded by the New Covenant Jesus had initiated through His blood...as He'd so memorably represented with a cup of wine in their meal together just before His arrest. The other was to prepare people and demonstrate

repentance in the time leading up to Jesus publicly declaring Himself as the Promised Messiah. So it's not as though there are no cultural, historic and even 'Narrative' threads tying this new Dawn of the Church with the past, but everything needs to be reinterpreted now in light of how God's purposes are to play out under the New Covenant.

God remains unchanged, of course, but His Son's coming to the earth and then all He achieved here has brought about a landmark shift in...well, in *everything*. The Apostles are no doubt just beginning to glimpse the scope of the changes and to understand some of the implications. Jesus has left them to lead His Group as decisions are made about how things should be done. But this is new territory. How are things to be done now? Should they just follow the old *forms*, the Jewish traditions? Should they invent new ones? What, for example, should they do when someone says they have repented and put their faith in Jesus as the Christ? If only He were still here to show the way.

Oh, but what a comfort to remember that God's Spirit is with them permanently now. They don't have to work things out for themselves. Jesus had said the Spirit would lead them into all Truth. So they can rely on Him to help them know how to function...to know how to think about things in this new era. He can guide them as they guide the *Ecclesia* - God's called out people. And they'd already experienced how this was supposed to work. First up, He'd given Peter exactly the right words for addressing the crowds that morning...the things that would convince them of their sin and need for salvation through God's Son, Jesus. And then, when the people - *pierced to the heart* as Luke would later describe it (Acts 2:37) - were calling out asking them what they should do, the Spirit had reminded him of what Jesus said just before He went back to heaven. He said that based on the authority God had given Him, He was sending *them* out - His disciples - to make disciples of people from all the world's ethnic groups - some of which were represented there in the crowd - and that they were to baptize them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18-19).

What baptism means under the New Covenant

So that's what they did to some 3000 people, and as each one was baptized they were making a public statement that through their faith they were now permanently associated with Jesus of Nazareth and His group of followers. It seems likely that the Apostles also explained to the believers and any other observers what would later be explained in written form in God's Word. This act of baptism doesn't itself *do* anything. It doesn't save anyone or change their status in God's eyes. But as a physical action it provides us with a powerful illustration of something amazing that we know has already happened:

"This pool, the water you see here, represents Jesus' death and the grave. When Jesus hung on that cruel cross just a few months ago, He was

representing this person before God. So now as they go down under the water it is a picture of His death and burial that they've participated in through faith. They have died with Him and their sins have been dealt with. Now, watch as they come up out of the water. It represents what has happened...God has included them in Jesus' resurrection. It's just like when He came out of the tomb. God raised Him again and rolled away the stone because the payment for sin was completed. Sin and death couldn't hold Him. And so it is for this person. Now they have been raised to a new life with our dear Master. And they can enjoy a relationship with God because of Him. They have God's Holy Spirit living in them as do all of us who are His people." This baptism that the disciples initiated then at the dawn of the Church, carries on today for all of those who, as Jesus' disciples, become part of that Church.



DISCUSSION POINTS

The meaning of Baptism

1. Does the description of baptism here line up with what you have been taught previously?
2. Do you feel this view of baptism is consistent with the flow of God's Narrative, as it has described His character and purposes so far?
3. If you have been baptized, what was your understanding at the time? Was it done in such a way as to reflect the rich illustration of a believer dying, being buried and then being resurrected with Jesus?
4. Do you feel that it is important to be baptized as a believer through immersion, or do you see this as one of the "negotiables" of our faith?
5. Do you have any thoughts on *who* should baptize someone else? Is there anything in the Narrative so far that might guide us in this?