



2. Is water baptism a prerequisite of salvation?

The question. Must someone be water baptized to be saved ... or is *believing in Jesus* the only requirement for salvation? That is the question answered here. The implications of including or not including water baptism in the Gospel are very significant. Paul wrote, "*As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!*" Galatians 1:9. The purity of the Gospel is very important. We must not add anything to it. We must not take anything away from it. This answer will not address the quantity of water that should be used, rebaptism, or the *when* and *why* of water baptism. This answer deals solely with whether or not water baptism is a prerequisite of salvation.

By grace through faith. Water baptism is important. Every believer should be water baptized. However, we must not add the good work of water baptism to a salvation that is "*by grace ... through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast,*" Ephesians 2:8-9. The only obedience required for salvation is that we obey in *believing in Jesus*. Some people asked Jesus, "*What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?*" Jesus answered and said to them, "*This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent,*" John 6:28-29. The simple Gospel is, "*That whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life,*" John 3:16.

Baptism is basic. Hebrews 6:1-2 encourages believers to move beyond the basics to maturity. "*Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of instruction about washings and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment.*" The subjects mentioned in these two verses are important ... but not all that is required for maturity. The word "*washings*" in this passage is the Greek word anglicized as *baptismos*. It is most often translated as *baptized*. Among other things, this passage encourages believers to press on beyond instruction about baptisms. The two subjects that we are to move beyond are the "*foundation*" of repentance and faith ... and "*instruction*" about baptisms and laying on of hands, and resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. Baptisms are not included in the *foundation* ... but rather are included in the *instruction* referred to in these verses. The word *baptism* is plural in this passage. We are to move beyond the teachings about the various baptisms. The author of Hebrews was not referring to the ceremonial washings of the Old Testament since the context of the passage is moving beyond the basics in New Testament teachings. Various baptisms are described in the New Testament including: that of John the Baptist (John 7:29), water baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18-20), baptism in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38), baptism by Jesus in the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8), the sanctifying washing of water with the Word (Ephesians 5:26), and the saving washing of regeneration and renewing by the Spirit (Titus 3:5). Two of these baptisms are relevant to the subject of this answer ... water baptism and baptism by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit baptism mentioned in this answer is not that described by some as a second blessing accompanied by tongues. In this answer, *the baptism in the Spirit* is the one uniquely described in the New Testament as that which saves everyone who believes in Jesus (Titus 3:5-6 and 1 Corinthians 12:13) ... an event that occurs at the moment of salvation.

The Spirit washes us. The baptism of the Spirit is that which spiritually washes us. *"He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life,"* Titus 3:5-7. This passage states that we are saved *"not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness."* That excludes all religious deeds ... thereby excluding water baptism as a prerequisite of salvation. This exclusion of *"deeds"* and inclusion of *"grace"* is consistent with Ephesians 2:8-9. The Spirit baptizes us *all* into one Body. *"For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit,"* 1 Corinthians 12:13. There is no mention of water baptism in these passages.

Understanding the Bible. There are but a few passages that some people interpret as requiring water baptism for salvation. Those will be analyzed later in this answer. However, some aspects of our approach to the Bible need to be considered first. Our conclusions about any doctrine must be consistent with *all* relevant passages. Our understanding of a few verses cannot be correct if it contradicts the majority of passages on the subject. It must also be understood that New Testament authors, and the speakers they quote, did not make errors of omission. We should also understand that God has made the requirements for something as important as salvation evident in His Word ... clearly stated and widely proclaimed throughout the New Testament.

Did they forget? There are many statements by Jesus, and by New Testament authors, about *belief* being the only requirement for salvation ... including 98 uses of the word *"believe"* in the Gospel of John (including 1:12, 3:16, 3:18, 3:36, 4:41-42, 5:24, 6:40, 7:38-39, 10:25-26, and 20:31). Jesus stated, *"This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent."* Peter described the requirement for salvation as, *"Every one who believes in Him has received forgiveness of sins,"* Acts 10:43. The Philippian jailer asked, *"What must I do to be saved?"* Paul and Silas answered, *"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved,"* Acts 16:30-31. Many such passages throughout the New Testament make no mention of water baptism as a requirement to be saved. Do these represent oversights or errors of omission? Did they forget to mention water baptism? No! Jesus, Peter, Paul, and the others did not intentionally or unintentionally leave out anything required for salvation. Those who heard them, and those who read their words, were not given an incomplete Gospel. The overwhelming majority of salvation passages make no mention at all of water baptism. We must understand those few that do mention it in a way that does not require us to disparage the teaching of Jesus, the Apostles, and the New Testament authors. Many New Testament books never mention water baptism at all, including 2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, James, 2 Peter, 1 & 2 & 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. Jesus apparently baptized no one with water, John 4:1-2. Paul baptized very few ... avoiding his participation in baptizing all but a few people, 1 Corinthians 1:13-17. Paul wrote, *"For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the Gospel,"* 1 Corinthians 1:17. Did Jesus commission Paul in an incomplete way or forget to mention water baptism to him? Did Paul misunderstand? Were Paul's missionary work and New Testament letters incomplete failures resulting in many thousands who were not truly saved but thought they were? No! Jesus, the Apostles, and New Testament authors did not forget to mention water baptism in the Gospel message ... it does not belong there.

Five passages. How can we interpret the few verses that seem to possibly imply the prerequisite of water baptism? We must interpret them individually in a way that does not contradict the over one hundred verses that define faith in Jesus as the only requirement for salvation. There are only five such passages that need explanation.

Passage 1. Jesus told Nicodemus about his need to be born again. *"Unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God."* John 3:3. Nicodemus, thinking that Jesus was referring to physical birth, responded, *"How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"* Jesus answered, *"Unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."* Was Jesus referring to water baptism or to the water of physical birth when He used the words, *"born of water"*? The answer is found in the continuing words of Jesus in

John 3:6. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Jesus was referring to physical birth (born of flesh) rather than water baptism when He spoke to Nicodemus using the phrase, "born of water". Jesus explained that a second physical birth was not what born-again meant. Being born-again is a spiritual rebirth added to one's physical birth.

Passage 2. "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned," Mark 16:16. This verse is of questionable authenticity. You probably already know that from the publisher's notes in your Bible ... or from any basic commentary. Mark 16:9-20 is missing from some of the oldest manuscripts of the New Testament ... and not in two of the most trustworthy ones. The genuineness of these verses is doubted by conservative Bible scholars. Many believe this was a later conclusion added to this Gospel by someone other than Mark. The questionable authenticity of Mark 16:9-20 dictates that we cannot use these verses in answering the question about water baptism. See *Good Questions* answer #3 for more information on the questionable authenticity of this passage. There are more than one hundred passages defining the requirements of salvation as belief only ... with no mention in them of water baptism. We have no trustworthy account of Jesus ever teaching that water baptism was required ... and no trustworthy mention of such a requirement in the Gospels. There is no mention at all of water baptism in 15 of the 27 New Testament books. Moreover, there are only three more passages to consider that could possibly be interpreted to mean that water baptism is required to be saved. Our dilemma is this ... we must explain away the lack of the prerequisite of water baptism in the many belief-only passages ... or we must understand the remaining *three* in a way consistent with salvation by faith alone. The former is impossible. The latter is quite easy.

Passage 3. Peter said, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins," Acts 2:38. Understanding this passage hinges on the meaning of the underlined word "for". If this verse means that water baptism is *for* (to accomplish or produce) forgiveness, then we have no explanation of salvation "not of works", Ephesians 2:8-9. However, if the word "for" in that verse means *because of* as in "be baptized *for* (because of) the forgiveness of your sins", it is consistent with the many belief-only passages. Such a translation of the Greek as *because of* is an accurate and consistent option. Those who believe that one must be water baptized to be saved put an unsubstantiated emphasis on one possible translation (among many) of the preposition "for" in Acts 2:38. Does the word "for" in this verse mean *with respect to* (because of)... or *resulting in* (to acquire). The Greek word translated in Acts 2:38 as "for" is a primary preposition occurring many times in the New Testament ... and translated there in many ways. The variety of possible meanings indicates that it would be unwise to base one's theology of salvation on one of those possible definitions. On its own, could the word *for* in this verse be defined as *to acquire*? Yes ... but it could equally be defined as *because of*. If someone brings the belief that water baptism *is* a prerequisite for salvation to that verse, he or she could conclude that this verse supports that belief. Likewise, if someone brings the belief that water baptism *is not* a prerequisite for salvation to this verse, he or she could conclude that the verse supports that belief. The varied translations of this Greek preposition in the New Testament include *throughout* in Matthew 4:24, *about* in Matthew 6:34, *against* in Matthew 18:21, *become* in Matthew 19:5, *toward* in Matthew 28:1, *come forward* in Mark 3:3, *out onto* in Mark 14:68, *until* in Acts 4:3, *before* in Acts 6:12, *among* in Acts 20:29, *so* in Romans 1:20, *with respect to* in Romans 4:20, *resulting in* in Romans 5:16, *in regard to* in Romans 13:14, *bestowed on* in 2 Corinthians 1:11, *beyond* in 2 Corinthians 4:17, *over* in Galatians 4:11, *with a view to* in Ephesians 1:10, *to the end* in Ephesians 1:12, *with reference to* in Ephesians 5:32, *until* in Philippians 1:10, *for your benefit* in Colossians 1:25, *to this end* in 2 Thessalonians 1:15, and *leading to* in 2 Timothy 2:25. In the KJV it is translated as *into* 573 times, as *to* 281 times, as *unto* 207 times, as *for* 140 times, as *in* 138 times, as *on* 58 times, as *toward* 29 times, as *against* 26 times, and in other ways 322 times. It is unwise to take a theological stand on one among many possible translations of a preposition.

Passage 4. At Paul's conversion, a man named Ananias said to him, *"Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name."* Acts 22:16. This verse does not say, *Be baptized to wash away your sins.* The placement of the word "and" in its two occurrences in the verse is strategic. The verse states, *Get up ... and ... be baptized ... and ... wash away your sins, calling on His name.* The verse's grammatical structure connects the washing away of one's sins to *calling on His name* as in Romans 10:13, *"For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."* The structure does not connect the washing away of one's sins to *getting up* or to *being baptized* by water.

Passage 5. *"Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you - not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience - through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,"* 1 Peter 3:21. The word "saves" in this verse is in the present tense ... *"baptism now saves you"*. It now saves you as an appeal to God for a good conscience through the Resurrection. If water baptism were a prerequisite of salvation, this verse might have been stated as, *Water baptism saved* (past tense) *you*. However, it is present rather than past tense. It is most likely that Peter was writing about the ministry of the Spirit. The Spirit is our present seal, pledge, and assured guarantee of salvation (Romans 8:16, Ephesians 1:13-14 & 4:4:30, and 1 Corinthians 12:11). That would make the phrase *"an appeal to God for a good conscience"* understandable. We were saved by grace through faith ... washed clean from the penalty of sin by the spiritual bath of regeneration by the Holy Spirit. Then we are kept saved by the Holy Spirit.

There is no trustworthy or definitive statement in the New Testament to lead us to conclude that water baptism is a prerequisite of salvation. There is no basis in the five passages mentioned above to contradict the many passages stating that we are saved by faith alone. From those five verses, it would be unwise to add something to *belief* as another requirement for salvation.

In conclusion. Water baptism is important. It is an act of obedience. It is a good work to be done because we are saved ... identifying us with the death, burial, and resurrection of our Savior (Romans 6:1-7). However, there is no definitive Biblical indication that water baptism is required for one to be saved. The belief that it is a prerequisite of salvation contradicts the many faith-only passages ... and is based on a misunderstanding of a few verses. Jesus apparently baptized no one with water. Paul avoided water baptizing ... and was not commissioned by Jesus to baptize. John wrote his Gospel, *"So that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name,"* John 20:31. However, he never mentioned water baptism as a salvation prerequisite. In the full context of the New Testament, we must conclude that water baptism is not required for salvation. Moreover, to conclude otherwise requires the dismissal or contradiction of the many passages that clearly state that salvation is by faith alone. Water baptism is not a prerequisite of salvation ... a conclusion consistent with the clear statement of Ephesians 2:8-9, *"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."*

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Acts One Eight, Inc., PO Box 50200, Colorado Springs, Colorado 80949 USA.