

# OpenTheo

## Q&A#52 Does Baptism Save Us?

September 20, 2018



### Alastair Roberts

Today's question: "In Q&A#46, you seem to say that baptism (with water) is necessary for salvation. Am I interpreting your perspective correctly, and if so, what do you think about the man on the cross next to Jesus going to heaven without baptism?"

See Q&A#46 here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yD1g9k-Oj6g>.

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## Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is in Q&A number 46, you seem to say that baptism with water is necessary for salvation. Am I interpreting your perspective correctly? And if so, what do you think about the man on the cross next to Jesus going to heaven without baptism? Well, first of all, scripture seems to say that baptism is necessary for salvation in some sense, or is related to it in a very powerful manner.

So in Mark 16, we read, In Romans 6, we are told that, Or in Titus 3, Or in 1 Peter 3, And then we see a similar thing. Now, these texts can be challenging for many people, and many will point out certain details as a way to try and escape their force. So, he who does not believe and is not baptised, it doesn't say that that person is going to be condemned, just the person who does not believe.

It just says the person who believes and is baptised will be saved, but it doesn't have quite the converse as the person who will be condemned. Likewise, we see things like the statement of not the removal of filth of the flesh, but the answer of a pure conscience towards God. These sorts of statements as, oh, it's not really baptism, it's not really washing with water, it's spiritual baptism.

Paul is just using, Paul and Peter and these other writers are using language in a loose way. Baptism is an illustration of something else. And that is a very common position among evangelicals who want to escape the force of arguments for baptismal regeneration and things along those lines.

But I don't think we need to take that route. I think we can take these statements and give them their full force without falling into the traps that many have seen in arguments for baptismal regeneration and the idea that we are saved in a miraculous way through just the washing of water. There's a lot more going on in the picture that I think helps us to understand what's taking place.

First of all, we need to step back and reconsider what is meant by salvation in many parts of the New Testament. The statement within this question seems to presume that salvation is narrowly focused upon the question of, am I going to go to heaven when I die? So the thief on the cross who believes he's going to go to be with Christ in paradise. Now, does that mean that baptism is unnecessary? Well, clearly, if he's going to go to heaven when he dies, he doesn't absolutely need baptism.

That text seems to prove it. But yet, in other places, we have a very strong view of baptism put forward. How do we square these things? One thing that helps is considering the fact that most of the people, or a great many of the people to whom the gospel was preached in the New Testament, were already going to go to heaven when they died.

That was not the point. The point was different. Rather, something had happened in history and they were to be included within that reality.

When Cornelius had the gospel preached to him by Peter, he was already a God-fearing Gentile. He believed in the God of Israel and he was going to go to heaven when he died. What did Peter bring that was different? Peter brought the proclamation of a new reality, the proclamation of the gift of the Spirit, the proclamation of the church as a realm of the life of the Spirit, an entrance into the reality of the risen Messiah who had come and delivered his people.

So it was not, in that case, a movement from unbelief to belief. It was a movement from old covenant to new covenant. It was a movement from individual faith outside of the community of the covenant people of God to belonging as a fellow heir and member of the household of God in Jesus Christ.

And so the movement is not simply one of coming to faith for the first time and being set apart for salvation on the last day. It's deeper and broader than that. And when we think about baptism, baptism is best understood in the light of that.

Baptism is about entrance into that broader reality, a reality in which we become members of the body of Christ in the church, that that participation is something that is

a reality for us. And it's a reality for us in large part through things like baptism. Augustine talks about the significance of visible words.

And many people think about visible words in terms of things that we are spectators upon. And we look at these visible words of the sacraments and we reflect upon them and meditate and relate them to our own heart issues. That's not what Augustine talks about visible words for.

Rather, visible words are what enable communities to be formed. Visible words are the exchange of signs whereby concrete public realities can be formed. And that's why the church needs the sacraments.

So it might become a community that is formed publicly and visibly as a companion of, as a communion of people of faith, of people who are marked out by Jesus Christ as a public entity. And so when we're baptised, we enter into that reality. We participate in that.

Now, in my previous talk, I compared these sorts of things to marriage and to things like adoption, and that can be helpful. The other example I gave was coronation. In the case of coronation, coronation is not the setting apart of someone to be king for the first time.

The person has already acceded to the throne. They've had their accession and now the coronation follows upon that as a public manifestation, demonstration and advancement of that fact. It's an entrance into that fact in a fuller and more public way.

It's a manifestation, a declaration of that reality to the public. And so it becomes a public reality in a way that it did not merely upon the death of the previous monarch. And baptism is similar.

It's an integral part of the process of coming into the enjoyment of the life and blessing of Christ. It's a means by which we enter into the fullness of life in his body as a member of his people, as one that is marked out as being among his people, identified with his people, associated with them, and ones who bear his name in a public way. And so this is not the limited question of am I going to go to heaven when I die if I've not been baptized.

No, it's the question of how do we enter fully into what Christ has given to us. And this entrance is a thing that occurs entirely by faith. It occurs by faith as faith receives what is held out to us in baptism.

What is held out to us in baptism is similar to I gave the example of adoption. The efficacy of adoption is not in some magic that occurs in the initial ceremony or signing of the papers or whatever it is at the beginning. No, the efficacy is seen in what happens next.

Is that child going to receive those promises, enter into that life, or is it going to abandon that and seek to form a life of its own, detached from its adoptive parents? But when we talk about these things in a proper way, we will speak about these things as having an efficacy. So the wedding ceremony is the means by which you enter into the loving life of a marriage. Now, there can be other ways to enter into the life of a marriage in unusual circumstances.

Let's say you were on a desert island and there was no one to officiate your wedding. There's no reason in principle why the couple are the administrators of the sacrament primarily. They are the ones who minister the vows to each other.

And so in principle, they could do it privately. And yet it wouldn't be quite the same thing. Likewise, we also speak about common law marriage, people who have lived together for such a period of time in a way that it is very clear that they have made a commitment to live in a marriage-like fashion with each other.

And so the ceremony is not absolutely necessary in such cases. But the ceremony does bring something. It does mean an entrance into a fuller reality.

Marriage isn't just a piece of paper. A wedding ceremony isn't just an empty ceremony, an empty series of events. A wedding ceremony is in the ordinary course of events, the means by which you enter into the fullness of a marriage.

And where the wedding ceremony does not occur, a full entrance is difficult to take place. It doesn't often take place. There's something that's limited in the degree to which people can enjoy the blessing of marriage.

And when we have that public celebration before witnesses, there's something, there's a deeper entrance into the blessing of marriage. And so when we're talking about baptism, it should be thought of very similarly. Baptism isn't a magical thing in itself that saves us.

Rather, baptism is the ordinary means by which we enter into the full enjoyment of the life of Christ. It's the means by which we are marked out as members of his body, by which his body is identified as a reality within the world. Baptism isn't just about the individual.

It's also about, it's what defines the church as an entity. And in these sorts of events, what we see is that faith is involved throughout. Faith must receive these things.

So when we talk about marriage, a wedding ceremony is something that has efficacy. A wedding ceremony as your entrance into the loving union of marriage. It's not that there's something in the wedding ceremony considered in itself, detached from the approach of the couple towards it, that renders it a magical means of giving you a loving union.

It doesn't do that. Rather, as it is received appropriately, then it functions in that way. Likewise with baptism.

And the way that baptism is spoken about, it's not to say that in every single case, every single person who has been baptised is magically saved and brought into the enjoyment of all these realities. Rather, the point is that if it is received by faith, then, and if you enter into all that baptism holds out for you, you know the fullness of salvation. You know the fullness of belonging.

You know what it means to be baptised into the body of Christ. What it means to share in the life of his spirit. That is what baptism brings you.

Because baptism is the door through which you walk into the church. And yet we've often fixated upon this event in a way that detaches it from the faith that corresponds to it, and have treated it as either something that is miraculous in and of itself, or something that must be hollowed out and treated as if it were empty, and we give all the efficacy to a detached faith. And neither approach is right.

And so an emphasis upon the proper place of the sacrament and its proper relationship with faith, and the way that we receive the fullness of Christ's blessings, an entrance into the full reality of what he has given to us through baptism as the door to the visible church. And the visible church is the realm in which the reality of the invisible church is known and enjoyed. That is what really is primarily known and enjoyed.

Now there can be exceptional cases, but in those exceptional cases there is a limitation of the degree to which these blessings can be enjoyed. People are not fully entering into these realities. Cornelius, had he not heard the gospel, he would have still gone to heaven when he died, but he would not have known what it meant to be made a fellow member of the people of God in this moment in history.

He would not have known what it meant to be brought into the new covenant. And that's what Peter's bringing of the gospel to him brought. And likewise, baptism is a full entry into what Christ has given to us.

And for that reason, baptism saves us. Not in the way that many people suppose or fear, but baptism does save us. The language of scripture is true.

The language of scripture should be given its weight, but not in the narrow ways that we would tend to construe it. I hope that that helps. And if you have any further follow-up questions to this or on any other issue, please leave it in my Curious Cat account.

And if you would like to support this and other videos, please do so in my Patreon account. Thank you so much for everyone who has supported me. It really has made these things possible and I hope to continue these and any further support will be greatly appreciated.

Thank you very much for your time and your attention and Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow. God bless.