

#14

## A River Runs Through It

It's the most horrific story in human history. Originally, God intended for us to live in perfect harmony with Him. He placed our first parents in a glorious paradise where there was no pain, sorrow, suffering or death. Our home was a perfect garden, watered by a river (Genesis 2:8-10).

We blew it. Adam sinned, cutting himself off from the presence of God, and he was removed from the garden. The curse of sin affected the whole planet. The ground was cursed (Genesis 3:17-19), and food would no longer come easily. Adam was left with a cursed world—but also with a promise. The Messiah would come, and one day paradise would be restored. One day we will be in another garden, watered by another river—paradise (see Revelation 22:1).

The story of the Bible connects paradise lost to paradise restored. There are two gardens—connected by what happened in the Garden of Gethsemane and at the cross. There are also two rivers, connected by a river that runs all the way through the Bible: the river of forgiveness.

We find this river in Matthew 3:13-17, which describes the baptism of Jesus. Before Jesus began His public ministry, He was baptized “to fulfill all righteousness.” Even though He was sinless, He condescended to go through something designed for sinners.

Baptism is symbolic. What does it represent? Romans 6:3-6 tells us that it is a graphic portrayal of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When the believer is baptized, the old sinner dies, is buried, and a new creature (see 2 Corinthians 5:17) is born. Baptism is starting over. It is a death, burial and resurrection. As you are baptized, you are announcing to the world that you are dead to sin, buried with Jesus, and rising to a new life in Him. You are a new creature!

It is the only funeral that heaven loves. It is a symbolic funeral that God has designed to represent something very specific; yet the Christian world has developed scores of different methods of baptism. This is not what God intended. Ephesians 4:4, 5 speaks of *one* Lord, *one* faith and *one* baptism.

God intended for Christianity to be uniform in practice when it comes to the essential elements and symbols of faith. So what was God's intention for the symbol of baptism? It is supposed to represent a *death*, a *burial* and a *resurrection*. What method of baptism best portrays this? The one Jesus used!

Matthew 3:16, 17; John 3:23; and Acts 8:36-39 all reveal what the biblical understanding of baptism was. Jesus was baptized by *immersion*, which is a symbolic burial. John used “much water” because he was baptizing by immersion, too. Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch had to get down *into* the water because they were burying the eunuch by immersion! It was the universal practice of the church for more than 1,000 years. In fact, the very word “baptize” comes from the Greek word *baptizo*, which means “to submerge or dip.”

It is an important symbol to God. Jesus stresses how important it is in Mark 16:16: “He that believeth and is

baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.” It is intimately connected with salvation. It is our public declaration that we have surrendered our life to Christ—a public confession. “Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 10:32).

During the Dark Ages, many changes took place in the church. One of those changes was the mode of baptism. Because immersion was inconvenient, sprinkling and pouring eventually replaced it. These methods, however, do not adequately portray the message God was trying to get across through baptism: death, burial and resurrection.

In 1311, at the Council of Ravenna, the mode of baptism was permanently changed from immersion to sprinkling. But even then, church leaders were still aware that the Bible method of baptism is immersion! Eventually, when the Protestant Reformation came along, many Christians started returning to the original symbol that God gave us.

What are the prerequisites for baptism? There are three:

1. Acts 2:38 teaches us that you must *repent* of your sins before baptism.
2. Acts 19:4 indicates that in order to be baptized, you must *believe* that Christ has taken care of your sin problem at the cross.
3. In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus instructed His disciples to *teach* all nations and then baptize them. Afterwards, the instruction is to continue, but the important point to understand is that, like Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch, the disciples were instructing people in the Christian faith before baptizing them into the church. Before you sign a contract, you need to understand the terms. Before you step into the waters of baptism, you also need to understand what is involved.

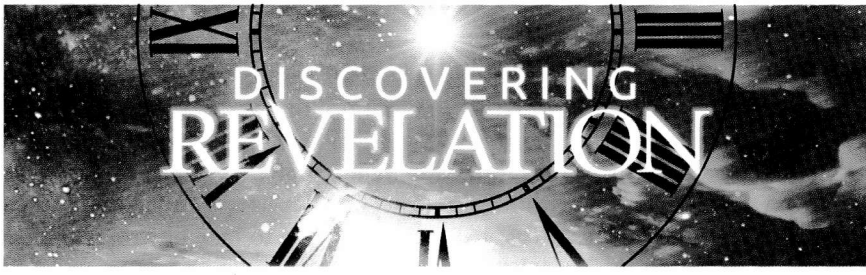
When you study the biblical prerequisites for baptism, it is obvious that this important rite was not designed for infants. Infants cannot repent, believe or understand what it means to be a Christian. Historically speaking, infant baptism did not make its appearance in the Christian church until hundreds of years after Christ. During the Dark Ages, there was a fear that infants who died would be lost, so some people started baptizing them as a safeguard.

Biblically speaking, this doesn't make sense—you cannot make a decision for Christ on someone else's behalf. Jesus' parents didn't baptize Him; He did it Himself when He was older. Instead, Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple to dedicate Him to God (Luke 2:22). In a child dedication, parents pledge before God that they will do everything in their power to raise their children to love Jesus—and then they let the children choose Him when they are older!

Baptism is important to God. If you haven't taken the important step of baptism by immersion, you are missing out on one of the biggest blessings God has in store for you. God designed baptism a specific way for a special purpose. It is an object lesson that gives us greater insight into the plan of salvation.

Perhaps you have never been baptized by immersion, and you long to follow Jesus. Now is the time to do it! Perhaps you were once baptized but have wandered away from God in the meantime. What better time is there to come home than now? You can start over. While baptism is never to be taken lightly, rebaptism is not entirely out of the question: Paul once rebaptized a group of Christians who wanted to dedicate themselves to a deeper and clearer understanding of God (see Acts 19:1-5).

Why not make that decision now? Time is quickly running out. Jesus is nearly here. Remember: “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37).



## A River Runs Through It

We've all experienced moments we wish we could go back and do over. Embarrassing mistakes. Humiliating moments. Times, perhaps, when we hurt someone we love. But like a river, time runs only in one direction. We can't go back; we don't get "do-overs."

Or do we?

### THREE INCREDIBLE PROMISES FROM GOD

1. What has God promised to do about your past through Jesus Christ? (2 Corinthians 5:17)

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2. What does God promise to do if you confess your sins? (1 John 1:9)

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3. How completely does God promise to deal with your sins? (Isaiah 1:18)

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When Adam and Eve sinned, they lost their beautiful, perfect garden home. Suffering and evil entered the garden and our world. But that isn't how the story ends. The story's happy conclusion occurs at the end of the Bible when God makes all things new. (Revelation 21:5) There will be no more pain, crying or death. (Revelation 21:1-4) Everything lost through sin will be restored by Jesus Christ.

A river of forgiveness runs all the way through the Bible. Jesus makes all things new. He can even make a new you!

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## BAPTISM: THE SYMBOL OF A NEW LIFE IN JESUS

4. What did Jesus do at the beginning of His public ministry?  
(**Matthew 3:13-17**)

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Even though He was without sin, Jesus was baptized as an example “to fulfill all righteousness.” (vs. 15) Since He came to take our place, He was baptized to show us the importance of this symbolic ceremony.

5. When a person is baptized, what does it represent? (**Romans 6:3-6**)



Baptism is a portrayal of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. Jesus died for our sins. He was buried, and He rose to life again. So when we are baptized, we are announcing publicly that we have died to sin, that we have been buried with Jesus, and that we have risen to a new life in Him.

6. How complete is the transformation in the life of a person who has accepted Jesus and expressed their faith through baptism? (**John 3:5-7**)

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Jesus called this being “born again” of water and the Holy Spirit. It's like being born all over again and starting life anew.

## BAPTISM: AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

7. How important is baptism for an individual? (**Mark 16:16;**  
**John 3:5**)

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Baptism is an important symbol to God. It is intimately connected with salvation. Baptism does not save anyone. We are saved only by the blood of Jesus. But baptism is a public declaration that we have accepted Jesus as our Savior from sin and that we have surrendered ourselves to live for Him.

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Jesus said, "Whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 10:32)

Note: If someone cannot physically be baptized, God understands. The thief on the cross was promised eternal life and it was impossible for him to be baptized as he died from his punishment on the cross. (Luke 23:39-43)

8. How does the Bible describe the baptism of one individual in the early Christian church? (**Acts 8:38, 39**)

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It's clear that Philip baptized the Ethiopian by immersion—by placing him completely under the water, and raising him back up. The Bible says they "went down into the water" (vs. 38) and "came up out of the water" (vs. 39). When Jesus was baptized, the record says that He "came up . . . from the water." (Matthew 3:16)

John the Baptist was baptizing people at a specific place "because there was much water there." (John 3:23) In fact, the word "baptize" comes from a Greek word meaning "to submerge or dip." Baptism by immersion is the only method of baptism in the Bible. As one reads through Scripture, you will not find one example of pouring or sprinkling water on someone's head as a means of baptism.

These methods of baptism came into the church centuries after New Testament times. Immersion is the method that fully symbolizes the meaning of baptism—the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

### **BAPTISM: MEETING THE NECESSARY PREREQUISITES**

Since baptism is such an important symbol in the Christian life, the Bible spells out some prerequisites—some things that need to take place in a person's life before he or she is baptized.

9. In his sermon on the day of Pentecost, what did the Apostle Peter tell the people to do before being baptized? (**Acts 2:38**)

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Since baptism represents dying to sin, a person must repent of his sins before being baptized. Without sincere repentance, there can be no forgiveness, and baptism becomes meaningless.

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10. According to Philip, what did the Ethiopian need to do before he could be baptized? (**Acts 8:36, 37**)

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In order to be baptized, you must believe in Jesus and know that He has forgiven your sins on the cross.

11. What did Jesus instruct the disciples to do to prepare a person for baptism? (**Matthew 28:19, 20**)

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Before being baptized, a person should be taught the teachings found in the Bible so that he or she can live in harmony with God's commands.

What about infant baptism? We know an infant can't repent, believe in Jesus or understand Jesus' teachings. If you read the Bible from cover to cover, the topic of infant baptism is not found. However, Jesus did bless the children. (Matthew 19:13-15)

12. What is the relationship between baptism and the church? (**1 Corinthians 12:13**)

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A person is baptized into the body of Christ—His church. (Colossians 1:24) Baptism is the entrance into the membership of Christ's church and the fellowship of other Christians.

If you have never been baptized by immersion and you long to follow Jesus, now is the time to do it! You can start over. Jesus can make a new you!

### **MY DECISION**

- Jesus, I want to be a new creation by Your grace and power. I want to be baptized to publicly announce that I have accepted You as my Savior from sin.

### **MY PRAYER**

*Father, take away my sins, I pray, and create a new heart in me. I thank You for Your promise to wash me whiter than snow. In Jesus' name, Amen.*