

The Great Stories of the Early Church
06 - The Day of Pentecost, 04
So, What About Acts 2:38?
Acts 2:14-40

- 14 But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them, Ye men of Judaea, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words:
- 15 For these are not drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day.
- 16 But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel;
- 17 And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams:
- 18 And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy:
- 19 And I will shew wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath; blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke:
- 20 The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before that great and notable day of the Lord come:
- 21 And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.
- 22 Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know:
- 23 Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain:
- 24 Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.
- 25 For David speaketh concerning him, I foresaw the Lord always before my face, for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved:
- 26 Therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope:
- 27 Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.
- 28 Thou hast made known to me the ways of life; thou shalt make me full of joy with thy countenance.
- 29 Men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day.
- 30 Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne;
- 31 He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption.
- 32 This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses.
- 33 Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear.

34 For David is not ascended into the heavens: but he saith himself, The LORD said unto
my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand,
35 Until I make thy foes thy footstool.
36 Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus,
whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.
37 Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the
rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?
38 Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus
Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.
39 For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as
many as the Lord our God shall call.
40 And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this
untoward generation. KJV

Introduction:

There is and has been no text of scripture that has received more attention and more debate than the 38th verse of Acts chapter two.

“Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”

The matter is of imminent consequence. What is at stake is the life after death, the glorious inheritance of the saints, everlasting fellowship with the Triune God in a place of eternal blessing and wonder. Must one be baptized in order to have what the gospel promises? The issue has been discussed and debated from all angles from the very early centuries of the church until now. And, it is not just the issue of baptism itself. There are also the arguments concerning how one is to be baptized, who is to do the baptizing, what formula is to be spoken at the baptism, etc. etc. There was even the discussion in the early church over whether the one doing the baptizing was to be, of necessity, regenerated (converted, born again) in order for the baptism to be legitimate. That is, if a person was baptized by a clergyman and it was demonstrated later by his leaving the faith, was the baptism legitimate? Many of you might be surprised to know that the Roman church decided that even if the clergyman was a scoundrel, a wolf in sheep’s clothing, an infidel and an imposter, if he baptized under the auspices of the Roman church, the baptism was legitimate.

But we obviously do not have the time to discuss all of that today. What we are concerned with here is the single doctrinal point, “is baptism necessary to salvation?” Another way to consider is this, “if a person is a true and legitimate believer but for whatever reason is never baptized, and dies in that state, is he a child of God or a child of the devil?” Does he go to heaven or hell?

Now surely every person who has any interest whatsoever in avoiding eternal damnation has a vested claim in the answer to that question. No one wants to be wrong and end up in the Lake of Fire for the sake of a religious ritual that we all acknowledge is taught and demonstrated in scripture. What person of faith would not insist on being baptized, and baptized absolutely correctly, if this were the case? We are not even going to get into the argument of which church actually has the right to administer baptism because if we demonstrate that one can be truly a

child of God without baptism then that point is moot.

So, where shall we go to start? If baptism is necessary for one to be right with God, then the NT should be filled with examples of statements to establish that principle, right?

But, actually, the very next time that Peter preached he demonstrated that repentance, not baptism, was the critical factor.

Acts 3:14-19

- 14 But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you;
- 15 And killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses.
- 16 And his name through faith in his name hath made this man strong, whom ye see and know: yea, the faith which is by him hath given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all.
- 17 And now, brethren, I wot that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers.
- 18 But those things, which God before had shewed by the mouth of all his prophets, that Christ should suffer, he hath so fulfilled.
- 19 Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; KJV

The word 'be converted' is almost a synonym for 'repent' in the Greek. It means 'to reverse course or turn around,' and it is obviously intended here in a spiritual/moral sense.

Then, we are introduced to a guy by the name of Simon, in Samaria, who is described as having believed and been baptized but who obviously did not repent of his sins. He was a religious charlatan who thought he might capitalize on this new Christian movement. In one of the most preposterous requests ever submitted to an apostle, he offered to pay money for the gift so that he could lay hands on people for them to receive the Holy Spirit. Peter's response was brutal.

Acts 8:20-23

- 20 But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money.
- 21 Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God.
- 22 Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee.
- 23 For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity. KJV

Peter had obviously concluded that the man was still in his sins and unconverted.

Acts 9 gives us the story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, the man we know as Paul. You will recall that he was on his way to Damascus to imprison Christians when the Lord struck him down, revealed Himself to Saul, and left him blinded. He proceeded into the city and sat fasting and praying for 3 days until the Lord sent a man by the name of Ananias to him. The order in which the events occurred is telling.

Acts 9:17-18

- 17 And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on

him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.

18 And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized. KJV

Ananias laid his hands on Saul to receive the Holy Spirit before he was baptized, before, as some would have it, that he was even regenerated. Now, we might mark that down as some slight disorganization of the story by Luke if it were not for what happened in the next chapter.

In chapter 10, as we referenced last week, Peter was sent by special revelation, both to himself as well as to the man to whom he was directed, to preach the gospel to a Gentile, a Roman centurion, who seemingly had become a profound believer but had not been fully informed of the gospel message. As Peter preached, the Holy Spirit fell on him as those with him, even though they had not yet been baptized.

Acts 10:44-48

44 While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word.

45 And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost.

46 For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter,
47 Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?

48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then prayed they him to tarry certain days. KJV

Obviously both Saul and Cornelius had been brought into the kingdom of God, had been given new life from above, *before* they were baptized.

We might mention other cases as well. In Acts 14:9 a lame man listening to the preaching of Paul was suddenly in possession of saving faith, so much so that Paul saw him as having faith sufficient to be healed. This, too, before his baptism. In chapter 16 we have the story of the Philippian jailer who asked Paul what he needed to do to be saved, Paul's answer in vs. 31 was "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved..." Surely this was the place to say, "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be baptized," if that was the message being preached. Then, in Acts 17:30, Paul declared to the Athenian philosophers that "God hath commanded all men everywhere to repent," but failed to mention baptism.

Now, we would be arguing unfairly if we did not acknowledge that baptism was so closely tied to being a Christian in these early days that it was unthinkable to separate believing and repenting from the rite of baptism. It was the universal and outward sign that one had left Judaism or paganism and had become identified with the religion of Christ. The great commission had enjoined the disciples to baptize those to whom they proclaimed the gospel message. It was only in later times that men began to try to play with the words and separated faith from baptism on the one hand, or tie it so tightly to baptism that one could not be saved without both. But the NT is clear if one will only be honest with scripture.

Paul took great pains to lay out the doctrine of justification by faith apart from works in Romans chapters one through five. He never mentioned baptism as a requisite. Even though James sternly reminded us that a faith that does not produce works is not saving faith, the witness of the NT is justification by faith with works coming as evidence, not part of the process.

So, what did Peter mean in Acts 2:38? The word translated 'for' in the phrase, "for the remission of sins" was a very useful and fluid word in the Greek language. It is one of the most frequently used passages in the NT but almost never, if ever, meant 'in order to obtain.' In fact, it may be one of the most variously translated words ever. In fact, it had already appeared in the book of Acts about 15 times.

'Toward,' 1:10

'into' (though obviously meaning 'toward') 1:11

'into' 1:13, 2:20 (X 2); 2:34

'unto' 1:12

'to' 1:25

'among' 2:27

'concerning' 2:25

'in' 2:27:31

and, then, 'for' in 2:38

Later in the book we will find it translated 'upon,' 'on,' 'that,' 'is become,' and 'against.' But never is it used in the sense 'in order to obtain.'

At the very least we can say that it is a very uncertain word upon which to build an entire theology, especially when this phrasing is never used again concerning baptism. What *does* it mean? Almost the entirety of Evangelical Christianity has always held that the word here should be understood in the sense of 'with a view toward' the remission of sins or 'concerning' the remission of sin. Baptism is, in picture form, a representation of having our sins remitted. We have been washed, the scriptures say (1 Cor 6:11). We have been placed, as it were 'baptized,' into Christ, (Rom 6:3; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal 3:27), dying with Him, being buried with Him, and rising again in Him to newness of life. But we were placed there before He died that our sins might be His and the Work of Redemption might be a real and finished act for us and upon us. There is a tight focus in baptism on the Great Work of Redemption by and through our Union with Jesus Christ.

The word that I am more concerned with in Acts 2:38 is the word 'repent' which does appear consistently in the NT in the gospel message. It was the theme of John Baptist's message, the message of Jesus, and all of the prophets.

But, 'repent' of what? Look again at Peter's message.

Acts 2:22-24

22 Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know:

23 Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain:

24 Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not

possible that he should be holden of it. KJV

Acts 2:32-36

32 This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses.

33 Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear.

34 For David is not ascended into the heavens: but he saith himself, The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand,

35 Until I make thy foes thy footstool.

36 Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ. KJV

Quite obviously Peter laid at their feet the charge of crucifying and killing Jesus. Obviously the direct guilt lay with the Sandhedrin and Pilate but these people were culpable because they had rejected Jesus and the message that he proclaimed. Their sin was the entire though and belief system that had brought them to the place of refusing to accept Him and His message. They held corporate responsibility, therefore, in His death, as has everyone since that time who has heard the message He proclaimed and rejected it.

They were guilty and needed to repent of every sin that Jesus had pointed out concerning how they were disobeying God while going through the shame of worship. Likewise every religionist that has copied them since that day stand guilty before God.

They were doing business in God's temple as if it were a common market, following 'blind guides' who taught there, 'doing religion' rather than worshiping from the heart, taking care of technicalities while avoiding the real essence of faith, etc. etc.

Which brings is to the question, "What are the essential elements of Biblical Repentance."

Unlike baptism, the scripture is quite clear that apart from repentance a person cannot be a Christian, cannot be born again, cannot be regenerate.

Luke 13:2-5

2 And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things?

3 I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.

4 Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem?

5 I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. KJV

Any version of 'faith' that does not include repentance, the biblical sense of it, is not and cannot be 'saving faith.'

So, what are the parts and pieces of Repentance, the kind that Peter was talking about?

Now, although I am going to lay these out in order, please understand that every person experiences God's Work uniquely and the 'pieces' though they must all be present, sometimes

come in a different order.

Repentance includes:

A real sense of what sin is. One cannot repent of that which he does not recognize to be sin. So, his understanding of sin must be somewhat, and for the most part, congruent with God's declarations concerning it. The person who is in a disagreement with God about sin can hardly repent in a way acceptable to God.

“Whatever God has declared to be sin, that I will own and agree with Him that it is.”

This is the profound commitment of any repenting soul.

He must have a sight of sin's deep-rootedness and infestation in his life. If he believes himself to be only slightly a sinner, he has a disagreement with God's revelation through Paul in Rom 3:10-19.

Rom 3:10-18

10 As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one:

11 There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.

12 They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

13 Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips:

14 Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness:

15 Their feet are swift to shed blood:

16 Destruction and misery are in their ways:

17 And the way of peace have they not known:

18 There is no fear of God before their eyes. KJV

Anyone who does not own this as a description of himself cannot possibly repent in the way that Peter was admonishing.

Additionally, he must have had experience with sin that:

- has humiliated him to the place of complete brokenness and total humility so that he owns for himself the doctrine of complete depravity... he applies it first in his mind to himself.

- has defeated him until he is convinced of his own total inability to overcome it and has been shamed by it until he loathes himself.

Now, I know that this last phrase is politically incorrect but consider what God said to Ezekiel.

Ezek 20:42-43

42 And ye shall know that I am the LORD, when I shall bring you into the land of Israel, into the country for the which I lifted up mine hand to give it to your fathers.

43 And there shall ye remember your ways, and all your doings, wherein ye have been defiled; and ye shall lothe yourselves in your own sight for all your evils that ye have committed. KJV

Ezek 36:30-32

30 And I will multiply the fruit of the tree, and the increase of the field, that ye shall

- receive no more reproach of famine among the heathen.
- 31 Then shall ye remember your own evil ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall lothe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and for your abominations.
- 32 Not for your sakes do I this, saith the Lord GOD, be it known unto you: be ashamed and confounded for your own ways, O house of Israel. KJV

Can a person honestly face the sins that he has committed before God with a repentant heart and be happy with himself? Satisfied with himself? Mildly disappointed with himself? Of course not!

The Repentant soul is one who has experienced shame, humiliation and self loathing to the point of profound anger against sin and is ready to go to war with it, sometimes with profound consequences for himself and others. One can only be punched in the gut so many times until he is ready to fight.

Consider the repentance of the Jews under Ezra in which families were broken up, wives and children sent away.

Consider the case that was recently told to me. A man whose marriage was based on drunkenness and wild living came to Christ. His wife no longer wanted to be married to him so she left.

But the repenting soul must also be given a vision of the holiness of God. Otherwise he would probably be suicidal. He must see the holiness of life to which he is called and the possibility that he might be rid of his guilt and robed in the righteousness of God.

His hunger for righteousness must be as strong as his hatred and loathing of his own sins.

Then... there must come that moment... in which he sees the reality that Jesus Christ bore in His Own body, actually and truly, the guilt of all those sins that the sinner now despises and is ashamed of.

- The dawning of that reality upon the mind of a sinner who is totally convinced of his own wickedness is a mind altering experience.

- It is literally unbelievable that God should have loaded His Own Son with such a heavy burden.

It is just as incredible to his mind that this God against Whom he has sinned so often and so badly would love him and have included him in that Wonderful Work of Jesus Christ.

So, he does that which Jesus described to Nicodemus, he 'comes to the light,' so as not to 'be condemned,' but he might 'be saved,' and have 'everlasting life.'

You must realize that John 3:16 was first spoken to a repentant and repenting soul and that it was recorded for all the repenting souls that would come after Nicodemus. To pretend that it is heaven's invitation to every person regardless of his spiritual state is to support and propagate a monstrous lie.

Nicodemus risked his status, his reputation, and maybe even his career to come to Jesus Who

answered his unspoken question, the same one that the Jews asked Peter at Pentecost, “what must we do?” “How can a man be right with God?” How do I know that? Because that is the question that Jesus answered.

Long Story short:

Biblical Repentance is a work of God wrought in the soul of a human.

- It draws him into a confrontation with sin as a principle.

And...

- With his own personal guilt resulting from his violations of God’s Laws.
- It teaches him to detest and loathe sin, to love and seek after righteousness.
- It shows him the Savior even as God speaks faith into his life to believe on Christ.
- Finally, it secures the reality of forgiveness to him as spiritual life erupts within him unto joy, gratitude, and profound humility.

The life is revolutionized as obedience takes the place of wickedness and commitment to God replaces commitment to self.

This is the process of coming to spiritual life.

We mentioned last week that Paul asked the Ephesian believers, “have you received the Holy Spirit since you believed.” But, I ask you, “Did your believing have any connection to Repentance?” Did you repent when you believed?

Your eternity depends upon you being able to honestly say, “Yes!”