

## **Death, Rebirth, and Living Forever** *Baptism and Why It Hasn't Lost Its Relevance*

Religious conversion has been studied closely by sociologists. While it possesses many features, an identity shift may be the most central. One psychologist describes conversion as, “a change in which the self becomes identified with the sacred.”<sup>1</sup>

The Bible does indeed speak of a death of our old selves to make way for the new:

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Colossians 3:1-4

Paul, who literally changed his name when he changed religions, said, “We were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). What does this death and rebirth look like? Let’s look at the stories of five individuals: Saul of Tarsus, John the Baptist, Nicodemus, the Ethiopian eunuch, and the Philippian jailer.

### **Saul of Tarsus**

Saul, the “golden boy” of the Jewish community at the time of Christ, was born in a Roman province called Cilicia and raised in Jerusalem under the tutelage of the great rabbi Gamaliel. Young Saul trained in the strictest sect of the Pharisees, developing a strong zeal for the glory of God. What a promising young boy! But he had one problem. He didn’t know God’s Messiah, Jesus Christ. In fact, as a grown man he persecuted the followers of Jesus thinking he was doing God a great service by stamping out challengers to the Jewish faith. He facilitated the enslavement and death of scores of Christian men and women (See Acts 22:3-5).

As Saul journeyed one day to the city of Damascus, he encountered a “great light from heaven” (vs. 6), intense enough to send him to the ground. He then heard a voice:

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

“Wh-who are you, Lord?” Saul answered.

“I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,” came the voice again.

“What shall I do, Lord?” Saul asked.

“Arise and go into Damascus,” Jesus told him, “and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do.”

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, p. 248.

Suffering temporary blindness, Saul had to be led to Damascus by the hand. There he met Ananias, a devout Jew who helped Saul heal from blindness and commissioned him to gospel ministry.

Saul then engaged in a very delicate task. Ananias said, “And now, why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (vs. 16). Saul, who changed his name to Paul, was baptized. He changed his public image from an enemy to a friend of Christ, from persecutor to preacher of the gospel. In order to demarcate one era of his life from the other, he made needed to make a public statement of change. Thus, baptism.

### **John the Baptist**

This mysterious man fulfilled Old Testament prophecies which spoke of a messenger who would prepare the way for the Messiah (See Malachi 4:5-6). He wore a coarse garment of camel’s hair to signify repentance for sin, foraging through the wilderness for food, living essentially as a nomad in the desert. Thousands came and “were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins” (Matthew 3:6).

One day as John went about his work, Jesus appeared in the crowd requesting baptism. “I need to be baptized by You,” John protested, “and are You coming to me?”

Jesus assured him, “Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” As Jesus came up from the water, the heavens opened and the Spirit of God floated down in the form of a dove, alighting upon Him. Then the voice of God was heard, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

John set an example for other disciples of Jesus who have become baptizers. In fact, the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19 calls us all to baptize: “Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

### **Nicodemus**

The story of this Jewish elder statesman in John 3:1-8 teaches us much about the nature of baptism. Nicodemus started out as a closet follower of Jesus. To avoid exposure, he arranged for a night meeting with the Savior. There in the moonlight, he said, “You are a teacher come from God; no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

Jesus talked right past Nicodemus: “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

There must have been a long pause as the Pharisee processed the unfamiliar analogy. Finally recovering, he asked, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

Baptism signifies regeneration. First, the Holy Spirit re-births our hearts inwardly. Then we declare that regeneration outwardly by being “born again” of water in baptism. Paul said, “Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized in Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?” (Romans 6:3). The waters of baptism close around us like a watery grave in which we die to our old self. But that’s not the end. Just as Jesus burst out of the tomb on resurrection morning, “we also walk in newness of life,” (Romans 6:4).

### **The Ethiopian Eunuch**

In Acts 8:26-40 we read about the most unique baptism in the Bible. As the story goes, Philip the evangelist received a message from an angel telling him to go to a certain desert road. When he arrived, a royal chariot passed by in which sat the treasurer of Candace, the queen of Ethiopia. Those who worked closely with royalty would undergo castration for the safety of the king and queen, and so the man was a “eunuch.” From the roadside, Phillip noticed him reading aloud from Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit whispered to Philip, “Go near and overtake this chariot.”

When he finally caught up with the man, a breathless Philip blurted, “Do you understand what you’re reading?”

As if expecting Philip, the eunuch said, “How can I, except someone guide me?” Beckoning Philip into the chariot, the two had a little impromptu Bible study, reading, “He was led as a sheep to the slaughter and as a lamb before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth” (Isaiah 53:7).

Philip had no trouble explaining these verses, for they described the Jesus he had come to know and love. The eunuch’s heart opened wide to receive the truth. When the chariot pulled up alongside some water, he said, “See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?”

“If you believe with all your heart, you may,” an elated Philip said.

“I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God,” said the eunuch.

The end of the story is even more bizarre than the beginning. As soon as Philip had baptized the eunuch, he disappeared, caught up by the Spirit of the Lord, who then deposited the man in a place called Azotus. Off he went for more ministry adventures. And off the Ethiopian eunuch went, rejoicing in his newfound faith.

This man’s castration made it impossible for him to bear children, or even partake of certain forms of worship at the temple (Leviticus 21:20). Yet God dignifies our scars. When genetics, circumstances, or even our own poor choices leave us broken, He gladly gathers us in His

healing arms. He can actually use our scars, giving us “beauty for ashes” (Isaiah 61:3). We can “comfort those who are in any trouble with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (II Corinthians 1:4). Our scars will give us credibility with, and compassion for, those in similar difficulties. Nothing is wasted in Christ!

### **The Philippian Jailer**

In Acts 16:25-34 we find the story of Paul and Silas in prison for their faith. Rather than lament, they prayed and sang hymns to God with the other prisoners listening on. Suddenly the ground began to quake until the prison foundation cracked and all the doors opened. The prison guard, assuming all had escaped, drew his sword to take his life. But Paul called out, “Do yourself no harm, for we are all here!”

Throwing himself down before Paul and Silas, the man asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ,” they said, “and you will be saved, you and your household” (vs. 30-31). This led to a midnight baptism followed by warm fellowship.

While we aren’t saved by works, God requires us to obey Him. While baptism isn’t *saving*, it is *commanded*. And our obedience shows that we have received His spotless robe of righteousness, because as He gives us a clean slate, He also gives a clean heart, willing and wanting to follow Him.

Notice that while we are baptized into Christ (Romans 6:3), we are also “baptized into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13), *His* body. Baptism signifies more than a covenant between ourselves and God. It signifies a covenant through Him with other believers in collective worship and community.

### **Baptism for You**

Think of the preparation for baptism as involving your **head**, your **hand** and your **heart**:  
**Your Head** must be filled with the truths of the gospel. You need adequate information to make an intelligent decision. Jesus said that as we make disciples and baptize, we should teach people to “*observe all things that I have commanded you*, and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). To “observe all things,” we must know what they are in order to make an informed choice!

**Your Hand** must reach out in faith to grasp these truths. While knowledge is important, we mustn’t stop there. Head-knowledge religion is what the devils have. They “believe and tremble” (James 2:19), but their belief doesn’t change them.

Some feel very troubled over their lack of faith. This is why Jesus said, “If you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you” (Matthew 17:20). A mustard seed is tiny, but produces a large plant. “God has dealt to each one a measure of faith” (Romans 12:3). Jesus is saying, “You have a little faith—now use it!”

**Your Heart** will be pierced with repentance for the sins of your past life. Peter’s sermon at Pentecost ended with, “*Repent*, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). “Repent” is from the Greek *metanoeo*, meaning “to know after.” If you look back on your sins, “knowing after” that you did wrong, then you are experiencing true repentance!

The Ethiopian eunuch asked, “what hinders me from being baptized?” Acts 8:36. You can ask the same question! And if your head, your hand and your heart are adequately prepared, the answer is, “Nothing!”

### The Takeaway

Baptism symbolizes the death of the old self and the birth of the new. It is a public declaration of a shift in our identity, and by extension the entire direction of our lives. Through baptism we declare that we died with Christ and accept a new life in Him, a life given from above, which will prepare us for an eternity of fellowship with holy beings.

### Quiz

1. For you died, and your life is \_\_\_\_\_ with Christ in God.
2. As a grown man Saul \_\_\_\_\_ the followers of Jesus.
3. Jesus asked to be baptized by John the Baptist in order to fulfill all \_\_\_\_\_.
4. When Phillip asked the Ethiopian Eunuch if he understood Isaiah, he said, “How can I, except someone \_\_\_\_\_ me?”
5. While baptism isn’t *saving*, it is \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Preparation for baptism involves the \_\_\_\_\_, the \_\_\_\_\_, and the \_\_\_\_\_.
7. “Repent” is from the Greek *metanoeo*, meaning “\_\_\_\_\_.”
8. If you look back on your sins, “knowing after” that you did wrong, then you are experiencing true \_\_\_\_\_!

## Answer Key

1. Hidden
2. Persecuted
3. Righteousness
4. Guide
5. Commanded
6. Head, hand, heart
7. To know after
8. Repentance

