



The New Life in Christ

Lesson 2

Baptism—A New Start to a New Life

Washing and Worship in the Old Testament

Washing was an important part of worship under the Law of Moses in Old Testament times. We read about this law in the early books of the Bible – Exodus to Deuteronomy. It ruled the nation of Israel for 1400 years, although for most of the time they disobeyed it. In the Tabernacle compound, where Israel met to worship God, there was a large bronze basin full of water; it stood just outside the entrance to the Tabernacle tent. The priests were commanded by God to wash their hands and feet each time they went into the Holy Place and risked death if they did not do this (Exodus 30:17-21). There were many reasons for this and we shall consider just one. Each time they washed it should have reminded them that, just as their bodies became physically dirty, so sin contaminated and made them spiritually unclean inside. All of the ceremonies of the Law of Moses were designed by God to show His people spiritual lessons about sin and how it could be forgiven. So the priests, as they washed themselves, were reminded that ‘dirt’ represented ‘sin’ and ‘washing’ represented ‘forgiveness’. Since they went into the Holy Place at least once a day to make sure that the oil lamp was burning brightly, this ritual of washing was never ending. Just as their bodies became physically dirty every day, so sin contaminated them every day and the Law could *never* make them totally clean and free from sin; the ritual of sacrifice and washing had to be repeated day after day.

The Work of John Baptist

In the days of Jesus many Jews ignored this unpleasant fact. Ritual washing was quite common; they even washed themselves by full immersion in water but in their minds there was no link at all with sin. They believed that they were righteous (made right with God) by two things in their lives. Firstly by being Jews, descendants of Abraham, the man to whom God had made such great promises and secondly by their involvement in ritual worship of God in the Temple or synagogues. Imagine their shock when they first heard John Baptist’s message.

“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,
‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’...
Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him,
and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”

Matthew 3:1, 5-6

John made a very clear connection between washing (by baptism) and the forgiveness of sins. It is worth listing the main points of Matthew’s record like this.

1. “**Confessing their sins**” – they willingly and openly acknowledged their sins - that they had disobeyed God. It cannot have been easy to ‘own up’ to all the wrong things they had done, but when they did this, it lifted a great weight off their consciences and they felt relieved by their decision.

This is an *essential* part of our coming to God also for:

“Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.”

Proverbs 28:13

The Bible tells us that when we are honest before God in this way, we honour His name and give Him glory as we acknowledge the rightness of His Word. In the Old Testament version that Jesus used, the word which is translated as ‘confess’ in our English New Testament is sometimes translated as ‘praise’, especially in the Psalms. This is a lovely thought, that when we confess our sins to God, we give Him praise.

Look at what David said to God after his sins of adultery and murder.

“Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be **justified in your words** and blameless in your judgment.” Psalm 51:4

When Achan sinned by stealing gold and garments from Jericho, Joshua asked him to confess what he had done and said to him:

“My son, **give glory to the LORD God of Israel** and give praise to him. And tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me.” Joshua 7:19

2. **“Repent”** – it was not enough though just to confess their sins, they had to renounce them; ‘he who confesses *and forsakes them* will obtain mercy’. Those who came to John the Baptist had to experience a complete change of heart; they needed a fresh start, a new life. There had to be *a sincere and total desire not to sin like this again*. This is extremely important teaching for us. There is no point in being baptized if we have not repented of our old lives. In Matthew 3:7-9 we read of the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to John to be baptized by him. John was angry with them and warned them that their salvation was in peril because their hearts had not been touched by the Gospel message; they had not repented. They were willing to go into the water but unwilling to change their lives and this was unacceptable to God.
3. **“Baptized by him”** – *only after* this process of confession and repentance were people baptized (in a deep part of the river Jordan – chosen so that they could easily go right under the water, John 3:23).
4. **“For the Kingdom of heaven is at hand”** – the reason why people came to John and were baptized in this way was that they understood that the Kingdom of God was coming and that this was the *only* way to prepare for it.

Baptism into Christ

“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Galatians 3:27

When the disciples of Jesus baptized people, they baptized them ‘into Christ’ or ‘into the name of the Lord Jesus Christ’. This baptism brings men and women into a special relationship with the Lord God through Jesus; they belong to God as members of His family and, if they are faithful, the Lord Jesus Christ will give them immortal life in his Kingdom when he returns to the earth.

Nicodemus, one of the leaders of the Pharisees, came to Jesus to ask him about these things:

"Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus said to him, "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, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is **born of water and the Spirit**, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'" John 3:3-7

This is very clear language. If we want to be invited into God’s Kingdom when Jesus returns to the earth then we *must* be baptized by immersion in water and we *must* be ‘born of the spirit’. Jesus describes this change in our lives as being born again – it is as great an event as the birth of a little baby out of its mother’s womb. It is a new beginning, a new start to a new life and we must treat it very seriously indeed. Note that both parts of this change are essential. Being immersed in water is not enough by itself to ensure a place in God’s Kingdom; it must be accompanied by what Jesus calls being ‘born of the spirit’.

The Washing of the Disciple’s Feet

In the Upper Room, on the night before he died on the cross, Jesus tried to teach his disciples the need for this change.

“Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?"
Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand."
Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me."
Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"
Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean."
John 13:5-10

We see Peter showing the old Jewish attitude – that washing was a ritual thing to be done more than once. Jesus explained that baptism was a ‘one off’ ritual, it only needed to take place once in the life of someone who really understood what it meant. Why then did Jesus tell Peter that he needed to wash his feet? This Bible record is a fascinating one. Jesus had sent Peter and John ahead to the Upper Room. They were to ‘make preparations there’- this would include greeting the other disciples as they arrived and washing their feet. This was a Jewish custom, but neither of them was willing to do it; neither was willing to humble himself to look after the other guests. In effect Jesus is saying to them; ‘You have been baptized once, that was enough, but if you are really my disciples you must learn to humble yourselves and follow my example in your lives’. If we really understand the true Gospel message when we are baptized then there is no need ever to be baptized again. Jesus died on the cross *once* and so we are baptized *once* into his death. When we sin after our baptism, then if we ask forgiveness of God in prayer, He will forgive us and continue to accept us as His children.

“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.
If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”
1John 1:8-9

In the Upper Room Jesus said to his disciples:

"You call me **Teacher and Lord**, and you are right, for so I am.
If I then, your **Lord and Teacher**, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.
For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you."
John 13:13-15

Note the way Jesus changes the order of just two words. The disciples, like many people today, were willing to see Jesus firstly as a *teacher*. However, Jesus asks us to see him firstly as our **Lord**, someone whom we must obey. He has left us an example of a perfect, Godly life. If our baptism really means something to us, then it will be accompanied by a change of heart and a determination to follow this example, to try to serve Jesus as our Lord.

Born of the Spirit

What then does it really mean to be ‘born of the spirit’? Look at these two passages.

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. **The words** that I have spoken to you are **spirit and life**.”
John 6:63

“...love one another earnestly from a pure heart,
since you have been **born again**, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, **through the living and abiding word of God**;
for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls,
but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you.
So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.
Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation...”
1Peter 1:22- 2:2

When we begin a new life in Christ at our baptism, God does not instantly and supernaturally change us so that we automatically behave in a loving and Christ like way for the rest of our lives. We are like new born babies. Babies need milk to feed on; it helps to make them grow up and to be strong. We need spiritual milk, food from God’s Word, to help us to grow spiritually strong.

“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, **the word of God, which is at work in you believers.**” 1Thessalonians 2:13

It is by constantly reading and meditating on the Bible and through prayer that we learn how to behave as true disciples of Jesus Christ. As we do this we will find our minds and hearts being filled with God’s Word and His ways and this will help to push out of our minds and lives our own desires and sinful ways. This is not easy and it does not happen overnight when we are baptized – indeed it is a lifetime’s work and we will never change ourselves completely to be like Christ. This will only happen when he returns and uses the power of the Holy Spirit to change his disciples and make them physically like himself. This change can also be described as being ‘born of the spirit’ and the two ideas are linked. If we try to change our spiritual lives now to become like Jesus then he will change our physical bodies and make us like him when he returns.

“The Lord Jesus Christ... will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.” Philippians 3:21

Many people learn the Gospel message by reading and studying the Bible. They accept it and are baptized into the name of Jesus. Sometimes it seems as if they believe that this is the end of a process and not the beginning of a new life. They stop reading the Bible; they do not change their lives; they do not become more like Jesus. They have been baptized of water but not of the Spirit. Their beliefs have had no effect on their lives and they continue to behave as they did before they were baptized. They are in mortal danger because of this; not only will they not be invited into the Kingdom of God but they will have to appear before Jesus at the Judgement Seat to explain their behaviour to him.

There are many passages which tell us how to recognise disciples who have been truly born again. Perhaps the best known is Galatians 5:16-23. The Galatian disciples are a good example of people described in the previous paragraph. They had willingly accepted the Gospel message; they had been baptized but as soon as Paul had left their city, they started behaving just as they had done before their baptisms. Note the points the Apostle Paul makes in this chapter.

Verses 16-18

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”

They are encouraged to live by the Spirit (to let the Word of God work in their lives). If they fill their lives with God’s thoughts and ways then this will help to push out the desires of their sinful nature.

Verses 19-21

“Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

These are the things they were doing, it showed that they had not been ‘born of the Spirit’ and so if they continued to do them, they would not be in the Kingdom of God.

Verse 22-23

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”

This is how we know if we are born again. It is not just a matter of calling ourselves ‘born again Christians’. We show people what we are by how we behave as well as by what we preach. If we show qualities like love, kindness, gentleness and self control in our lives then we show that we really

believe God's Word and we are allowing it to change us into people more like Jesus Christ. God wants words *and* actions from us to demonstrate our commitment to Christ.

Questions

1. Why should we confess our sins to God and how does it effect us when we do this?
2. What does it mean when we repent of our sins?
3. What two things must we do if we want to be in the Kingdom of God?
4. What does it mean to be 'born of the spirit'?
5. What must we do for this to happen in our lives?