

# Do You Have to Be Baptized to Go to Heaven?

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## Baptism Doesn't Divide But It Does Distinguish

To answer the question, "Must I be baptized to go to heaven?" we must first admit that there are differences of belief within the body of Christ, then we need to define both baptism and the gospel, and, finally, seek biblical case studies to guide us to our answer.

To begin, the short answer is: no. Heaven is not dependent upon the Sacraments of Baptism or, for that matter, the Lord's Supper. But merely stating this leaves out a great deal of necessary discussion. For God commanded that a sign (His sign of distinction, of the entrance into the Family of God) of washing away of sin be instituted and practiced until the end of the world. So, it is not enough to say, "No, you don't have to be baptized." We must give attention to this vital matter. Hopefully, we will find not only clarity but conviction as well.

Men and women of good will and strong [faith](#) differ about some things revealed in the Bible, and there is quite a difference between disagreeing out of unbelief and disagreeing out of faith. The former is quite different from the latter. The latter, Christians with differing convictions about what the Bible means, must recognize each other as fellow followers of Christ who hold different positions of interpretation and practice. Yet, each looks to the Bible as the unassailable standard of faith and life. While it is a cherished hallmark of Protestant Christianity that every person has freedom of conscience, especially, in the interpretation of Scripture and the freedom to worship as he or she sees best from the Word of God, it is also the teaching of Christ that we should hold such convictions in humility. What did Christ say? — "...for whoever is not against us is for us" ([Mark 9:40](#)).

The Apostle Paul summarized this enigma of "one Word with diverse opinions," and he challenged the obstinate whose faith was weaponized for ecclesiastical in-fighting and called all of us to mortify putrid pretentiousness:

*"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" ([1 Corinthians 13:12](#), KJV).*

Baptism is one of those very important matters that creates—I prefer to call them—"communities of conviction."

## Why Baptism Is a Matter of Priority

It is no wonder that baptism is a conviction of faith that is taken as a doctrine of "first things." For baptism, like the other sacrament, or sign of God's salvation—the sacrament of Holy [Communion](#), or, "the Lord's supper"—is a commandment of our Lord Jesus Christ. We don't squabble over the color of the carpet (and if we do, shame on us—[go with wood or tile]). We don't initiate movements and fellowships over secondary matters. Baptism is of first importance in the life of the Church.

### **Is Baptism Our Testimony or God's?**

Both Baptism and Holy Communion are New Covenant signs that continue the Old Covenant signs of circumcision and the Passover meal.<sup>1</sup> These two visible expressions of God's salvation are not something we do for God but something God has done for us. The Lord commanded that we remember His salvation through the practicing of these sacraments until the end of the world. So, the signs of engrafting into the one true body of Christ – that is, Baptism—along with Communion — the sign of nourishing and caring for those who have been saved — are vital signs of life within the church. Having said that, and recognizing that there are communities of conviction who received Scripture to say that baptism is necessary for salvation, I would humbly but resolutely submit that there is nothing necessary for salvation apart from repentance and faith in the finished redemptive work of Jesus Christ: His perfect life, His atoning sacrifice at Calvary.

### **Can Baptism Save You?**

One does not have to be baptized to go to heaven. However, believers and their children should submit themselves to baptism if they are able. God commanded that we should be baptized. But our baptism, the visible expression of what God has done for us, that is, God's grace, is not the saving power but is rather the divine authentication of God's grace. The sum of the Scriptures teach us that baptism is not our testimony to God about what we have done for Him, but rather baptism is God's testimony to us concerning His salvation promised, made possible, and applied by God the Father, God the son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Shall we deemphasize what the Almighty has emphasized? For not only did God command that the two sacraments are signs of salvation to be continued until the end of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ forever linked baptism to the mission of the Church in the world. For the Great Commission is Christ's final mandate to the Church and is, therefore, our first responsibility. We are not only to make disciples of the nations, but the disciples should be baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

### **Only Jesus Saves—Baptism Signifies**

But we are back to our initial question: Do you have to be baptized to go to heaven? The Bible says that we are [saved by grace through faith](#) and that is not of ourselves. We are admonished, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you should be saved*" ([Acts 16:31](#)). The Bible also [commands baptism](#), but baptism does not save us from sin. Communion cannot save. It is not even our faith that saves, only Jesus saves. Faith is a gift from God, made possible by the grace of Jesus Christ, whereby we lay hold of the promise offered freely. Baptism is God's sign of marking you out, bringing you in, and cleansing you from sin.

## **The Thief on the Cross**

The greatest example of this truth is seen in the life of the thief on the cross. Did this man who repented and believed in Jesus Christ as God and Savior go to heaven? He was not baptized. Furthermore, he could never join in with the Christian community. He would never take Communion. But he was as much a member of the body of Christ as any member of the Church today. The circumstances, however, were not the norm, but the exception. The norm is seen in many other places in the New Testament. Let's look at two.

### **1. Peter's Sermon at Pentecost ([Acts 2:28](#))**

On the day of Pentecost, 50-days after Easter, and in fulfillment of the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son and came down upon the disciples in an extraordinary demonstration of heavenly presence and power. On that day the Apostle Peter preached before the great throng of humanity from every part of the Roman Empire, and what did he add to his preaching of repentance and faith?

*"And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will be saved'"* ([Acts 2:38](#) ESV).

That is to be the norm, wherever possible.

### **2. The Philippian Jailer and His Household ([Acts 16:25-40](#))**

The other instance that I will refer to happens in [Acts 16](#). St. Paul and Silas were in prison at Philippi. We remember that God heard the hymns and prayers of the two apostolic missionaries and sent an earthquake to release them from prison. The Philippian jailer feared for his life because of the compromise of security. In fact, he preferred death by his own hand rather than to fall into the cruel charge of his severe superiors, but Paul stopped him. The Roman correctional officer, therefore, cried out to the Apostle Paul, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved" ([Acts 16:30](#)). Saint Paul and Silas declared the Good News and this man was saved. The Apostle Paul not only baptized

him but the Bible says that Paul baptized the entire household ([Acts 16:32-33](#)). This narrative along with [Acts 2](#) demonstrates the normative place of baptism in the mission of the church and in the life of a believer.

### **While Baptism Doesn't Save, Baptism Does Signify God's Glorious Activity in Our Lives**

But we say again: baptism is a sign of salvation that is commanded as the norm. Every believer and their children should be baptized, but there are exceptions. The broken-hearted parents' little baby—dying in infancy—who is now singing praise to the One who welcomed the children and laid His hands upon them for blessing; and the adolescent—lost in an automobile accident—who professed faith in the resurrected Christ, but who had not yet been baptized, is safe in the arms of Jesus.

#### **"Pastor, What Must I Do to Be Saved?"**

I was in the VA Hospital in Miami when I met him. I was calling on a Veteran in the next bed. But as I read from the Scriptures and prayed, this elderly gentleman listened in. He then hollered across the curtain, "Pastor, what must I do to be saved?" I shared the Gospel of Jesus Christ— "Sir, salvation is not of works, it is all of grace, a gift to you from God. The Bible declares that you are a sinner, you cannot save yourself, God will punish sin, but by grace, He extends to you a new life in His Son, Jesus the Christ, fully God and fully Man, who died on the cross for your sins, who rose on the third day that you, too, will live, though you die."

The elderly veteran repented and trusted in Christ as he lay dying. Suddenly, the happy new convert—of 95 years of age or so—lamented to me his regrets. Among those regrets was having squandered his years in profligate living, and having never been baptized. I told him that I would baptize him. I called for the hospital chaplain, and we baptized him.

I left him with the covenantal waters running down his face, as he lay in his bed. When I returned to see our parishioner and my new "father" in Christ, he was not there. The Veteran had died. He is in heaven, but baptism didn't put him there, God's grace did. Baptism was a loving sign from God that He had washed away the old man and created a new man. But what if he had died before baptism? Well, I think you know the answer by now.

#### **Baptism doesn't save us; baptism signifies God's presence and power to us.**

So repent, be baptized, and baptize your children. But if God's Providence prevents the sign of God's Promise, you, too, will be safe in the arms of the Savior.