

Acts 2:38

So That Your Sins May Be Forgiven

By Phil Sanders

Most of the common versions of the New Testament translate Acts 2:38 as does the King James Version, "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." One will find a similar rendering in the RSV, NASB, NIV and the NKJV; but this translation leaves some questions still to be asked. The phrase "for the remission of sins" is especially disputed, since some religious groups hold that baptism follows salvation rather than precedes it. This controversy surrounds the word *eis* or "for," a Greek preposition used hundreds of times in the Greek New Testament. In such cases, they would translate the word "for" to mean "because of," arguing that one should be baptized because he has already received the remission of his sins. Though some evangelical scholars, such as H. E. Dana, J. R. Mantey and A. T. Robertson, suggest that *eis* means "because of," and though they have many in agreement, the evidence does not sustain that point of view. There is broad and irrefutable evidence from the language and from history that "for" points not to the cause but to the purpose of repentance and baptism. Peter was telling the Jews to repent and be baptized in order to receive the remission of their sins and the Holy Spirit.

There are three lines of evidence to support this conclusion: first, the context makes sense only if baptism precedes their salvation; second, modern lexicons and versions strongly support baptism as preceding forgiveness; and third, the early church's testimony overwhelmingly confirms that baptism precedes forgiveness.

The Evidence from Context Argues that Baptism Precedes Forgiveness

When the day of Pentecost had come, the apostles baptized in the Holy Spirit took their stand in the temple with the first gospel sermon. They preached Jesus, crucified and resurrected. Peter did not hesitate to let that multitude know that day that they themselves were in part responsible for the terrible death of the One that God had named both Lord and Christ. He said, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ-- this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). Such a statement must have shook the people of that day to their very core. Luke says that they were "pierced to the heart." They had awakened to the awful reality of the seriousness of their sin. "They had killed the Son of God; their hands were stained with blood. They knew that they had sinned against their God in the most grievous way.

Luke continues, "Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?'" (37) It is guilty men who ask this kind of question not innocent men, desperate men who know in their hearts that they are carrying a burden with eternal consequences. Do you not think that these Jews would have done anything to have this stain removed. Their greatest desire is to be forgiven for this sin and to be reconciled to the God that they love. They asked, "what shall we do," because they know that this guiltiness must be removed.

God in His grace has a plan for them. He wants them to be saved, to be restored to His love and care. Though they had committed so great a crime, yet the love of God was greater. With many words Peter was exhorting them, “Be saved from this perverse generation!” They wanted to know what to do! He told them, “repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” When Peter told them to repent and be baptized, he was telling them what to do in order to obtain the forgiveness they longed for. He was answering their question. It is absurd to think that he would tell them to be baptized because they had already had their sins forgiven. Such an answer doesn’t make sense; it does not fit the question.

Such an answer, however, does fit the belief that faith alone saves. Some have regarded baptism as a work; and since one cannot be saved by works (Eph. 2:8,9), baptism cannot have anything to do with our salvation. They have accused those who believe that baptism precedes salvation with the charge that they believe in a works salvation. It is from this stance that they must deal with *ei|j* in Acts 2:38. They cannot sustain a “faith alone” theology and believe that baptism leads to salvation. They must find an optional view of *ei|j*, so that they can harmonize their belief with the text. As a result, they must read into the text a view that no one held for more than 1500 years. The evidence from ancient times, as we will show, supports the view that baptism is the time when one receives the cleansing from his sins.

Baptism is indeed a work, but we must understand that baptism is not primarily man’s work but God’s! Col. 2:12,13 says, “having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions.” The exhortation to “be baptized” is a passive imperative, a command to have something done to you. Baptism is an ordinance we submit to; but it is God Himself who is working on us, saving us, cleansing us, redeeming us, and justifying us. While the commands to believe, to repent, and to confess are active, the command to be baptized is passive. You do the believing, repenting and confessing; but you submit to someone else who dips you in water and submit to God who saves you in the blood of Christ. God is the active party in baptism; and you, the passive party, receive in baptism the forgiveness of your sins. God is the active party in baptism because only God can forgive.

That we are saved by faith is indisputable (Rom. 5:1), but affirming that we are saved by faith alone is untenable. The Scriptures teach that we are likewise saved by grace (Eph. 2:8), saved by the blood of Christ (Rev. 1:5), saved by baptism (Mark 16:16; Acts 22:16; 1 Pet. 3:21), saved by the gospel (Rom. 1:16), saved by obedience (Heb. 5:8,9), saved by confession (Rom. 10:9,10), and saved by repentance (Luke 24:47). If one is saved by faith alone, why mention these other things? Are we to dismiss them too? Of course not! Our salvation is somewhat like life. We are alive because we breathe, eat, drink fluids, and have shelter. Cut any one of these things off indefinitely and we would die. We need air to live, but without water we would surely die. We need shelter from extreme heat and cold, but without food we will perish. Faith is essential to our salvation; but repentance, love, confession, and baptism are also essential. To suggest that we are saved by faith apart from these other things is to ignore plain Bible teaching.

We must further argue that other passages of Scripture plainly teach that baptism is the time of our salvation. Ananias, sent from God to Saul of Tarsus, plainly said, “And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name” (Acts 22:16). Peter himself understood this when he writes, “And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you--not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience--through

the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 3:21). The apostle Paul noted that we die to sin when we are baptized into the death of Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:2,3). He further acknowledges that we are buried with Him in baptism and raised with Him to walk in newness of life. Just as Jesus did not have new life until He was resurrected, we do not have new life until we are resurrected in baptism with Him. It is at that time that our body of sin is done away with (Rom. 6:4-7). Since we have died with Him, we are free from sin. The Bible is not a book to contradict itself. It is a mishandling of the Scriptures to make Acts 2:38 contradict these other passages. God desires that we give diligence to be workmen who do not have to be ashamed, handling accurately the Word of Truth (2 Tim. 2:15). Pitting one passage against another brings about confusion and division; it always leads to error.

The Evidence from Versions and Lexicons Argue that Baptism Precedes Forgiveness

If indeed *ei[j* should be translated “because of” one would expect to find versions of the New Testament and Greek lexicons which support that translation. When one goes to the library to research what the versions actually do say, one finds that the versions and the lexicons do not support that position at all. It is remarkable, in fact, that the only people who defend that view are people influenced by Calvinist theology; and that defense is neither wholehearted nor unanimous. In the following list of versions are some that, for honesty’s sake, have gone against the prevalent beliefs of their tradition. They have done this simply because they are committed to an accurate translation. We salute them for their integrity. Here is a list of versions and lexicons which support the historic understanding that “for is purpose (in order to, so that) rather than causal (“because of”).

Versions

Williams

“You must repent--and as an expression of it, every one of you be baptized..., that you may have your sins forgiven”

Young’s Literal Translation

“Peter said unto them, “Reform, and be baptized each of you on the name of Jesus Christ, to remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

J. B. Phillips Translation, 1958

Peter told them, “You must repent and every one of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that you may have your sins forgiven and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Today’s English Version, 1966

Peter said to them: “Turn away from your sins, each one of you, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven; and you will receive God’s gift, the Holy Spirit.”

Amplified New Testament, 1958

And Peter answered them, “Repent--change your views, and purpose to accept the will of God in your inner selves instead of rejecting it--and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus

for the forgiveness of and release from your sins; and you shall received the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Goodspeed

“You must repent, and every one of you be baptized...in order to have your sins forgiven.”

New Revised Standard Version, 1989

Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

New Evangelical Translation, 1990; God’s Word to The Nations, 1995

Peter answered them, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the Name of Jesus Christ so that your sins will be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”

Contemporary English Version, 1995

Peter said, “Turn back to God! Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven. Then you will be given the Holy Spirit.”

Easy—To—Read Version, 1990

Peter said to them, “Change your hearts and lives and be baptized, each one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ. Then God will forgive your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

McCord’s New Testament Translation. 1989

Peter said to them, “Change your hearts, and let each one of you be immersed in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins might be forgiven, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”

New International Version (1st edition), 1974, 1978

Peter replied: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (1984 edition: “for the forgiveness of your sins”)

William Barclay’s Daily Study Bible, 1976

Peter said to them, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins maybe forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

The Jerusalem Bible, 1968

“You must repent,” Peter answered, “and every one of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

New Revised Standard Version, 1989

Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

International English Bible, 2001

Then Peter answered, "Change your hearts and each one of you must be immersed by the authority of Jesus the Messiah, so that your sins may be forgiven. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

So far as this author knows, *there is no major, credible version that has ever translated Acts 2:38 with the words "because of."* Unfortunately, one version (International Standard Version, 1999) translates ei|j as "since" your sins are forgiven.

Lexicons and Greek Works:

Thayer's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 1889

"ei|j a]fessin a[martiwn, to obtain the forgiveness of sins, Acts ii.38." (p. 94)

Bauer's *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev, and augmented by Gingrich and Danker, 1979.

"to denote purpose in order to, to...ei|j afessin amartiwn for forgiveness of sins, so that sins might be forgiven Matt. 26:28; cf. Mk 1:4; Lk 3:3; Acts 2:38."

A. Oepke, "ei|j" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* II:429; cf. I:539.

Oepke lists ei|j in Acts 2:38 under the heading "Consecutive and final ei|j." He stated, "The preposition denotes the direction of an action to a specific end." This means that the act of the repentance and baptism is directed toward the specific goal of the forgiveness of sins. He specifically cites: "John baptizes, and Jesus sheds His blood for the forgiveness of sins (Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3; Matt. 26:28; cf. Ac. 2:38)" The pairing together of these passages shows that the reason why Jesus shed His blood is the same reason that one is to be baptized, i.e., "so that sins might be forgiven."

Barkley M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida in *A Translator's Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles*.

Newman and Nida write that the phrase "so that your sins will be forgiven (literally 'into a forgiveness of your sins')...modifies both main verbs: turn away from your sins and be baptized." (New York: United Bible Societies, 1972, p. 60.)

The Expositor's Greek Testament (R. J. Knowling)

"ei|j, RV, signifying the aim (that is, the aim of the command is the forgiveness of sins, pds.) 'It has been objected that St. Peter lays no stress upon the death of Christ in this connection, hut rather upon His resurrection. But we cannot doubt that St. Peter who had emphasized the fact of the crucifixion would have remembered his Master's solemn declaration a few hours before His death, Matt. 26:28. Even if the words in this Gospel ei|j afessin amartiwn are rejected, the fact remains that St. Peter would have connected the thought of the forgiveness of sins, a prerogative which, as every Jew was eager to maintain, belonged to God and to God alone, with the (new) covenant which Christ had ratified by His death. Harnack admits that however difficult it may be to explain precisely the words of Jesus to the disciples at the Last Supper yet one thing is certain, that He connected the forgiveness of sins with His death.... As each individual ekastoj was to be baptised (sic), so each, if truly penitent, would receive the forgiveness of sins.'" (Vol. 2, p. 91.)

C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek*

Moule clearly regards eis in Acts 2:38 as “final or consecutive,” meaning “in the senses with a view to, or resulting in. The grammatical idea is that repentance and baptism result in the forgiveness of sins. (p. 70.)

Although neither a lexicon nor a version, G. R. Beasley-Murray’s *Baptism in the New Testament* is a classic presentation of the apostolic teaching on baptism. In this scholarly work, he says:

“Whatever the relationship between baptism and the gift of the Spirit elsewhere in Acts, there appears to be no doubt as to the intention of Acts 2:38: the penitent believer baptized in the name of Jesus Christ may expect to receive at once the Holy Spirit, even as he is assured of the immediate forgiveness of his sins.” (p. 108)

“The extent and nature of the grace which the New Testament writers declare to be present in baptism is astonishing for any who come to the study freshly with an open mind. Adolf Schlatter, who was no traditionalist sacramentarian, stated. ‘There is no gift or power which the Apostolic documents do not ascribe to baptism) He meant, of course, there is no gift or power available to man in consequence of the redemption of Christ that is not available to him in baptism. Though many will expostulate at the statement, there is little doubt that Schlatter is right. On the basis of the exposition offered above, and without any attempt to give exhaustive references, the ‘grace’ available to man in baptism is said by the New Testament writers to include the following elements:

forgiveness of sin., Acts 2:38 and cleansing from sins Acts 22:16. 1 Cor. 6:11;
union with Christ. Gal. 3:27, and particularly union with Him in his death and resurrection, Rom. 6:3ff.; Col. 2:11ff., with all that implies of release from sin’s power, as well as guilt. and the sharing of the risen life of the Redeemer. Rom. 6:1—11;
participation in Christ’s sonship. Gal. 3:26f;
consecration to God. 1 Cor. 6:11, hence membership in the Church, the Body of Christ, 1 Cor. 12: 13. Gal. 3:27-29:
possession of the Spirit, Acts 2:38, I Cor. 6:11, 12:13, and therefore the new life in the Spirit. i.e.. regeneration. Tit. 3 5, In 3
A grace to live according to the will of God, Rom. 6:1ff., Col. 3:1ff.
deliverance from the evil powers that rule this world. Col. 1:13;
the inheritance of the Kingdom of God. Jn. 3:5, and the pledge of the resurrection of the body, Eph. 1:13f., 4:30.” (pp. 263,264)

The Evidence from Early Church History

If baptism was for the forgiveness of sins, i.e., to wash away sins, the early church would have known that fact. It is inconceivable that the early church would not know when their sins were first forgiven. If baptism preceded salvation, we would surely know this from the writings of the early church. On the other hand, if salvation came before baptism, early authors would have been clear about that too.

Everett Ferguson, the most highly regarded Patristics scholar in America, said in *Early Christians Speak* this about baptism:

“Quite impressive is the way all second-century authors speak of the meaning and benefits of baptism. Among the blessings ascribed to baptism in these writers are the following: remission of sins, salvation, illumination, eternal life, regeneration, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The unanimity and vigor of the early second-century statements about baptism are presumptive of a direct relationship between baptism and forgiveness of sins from the early days of the church. The consistency with which second-century authors make the statements, which they do would have been impossible if this had not been the common Christian understanding earlier. It is inconceivable that the whole Christian world reversed its understanding of the meaning of its central rite of conversion within fifty years of the lifetime of the apostles.” (p. 38)

Evidence suggesting that salvation is at the time of faith and without baptism is just not encountered in the writings of man who lived close to the time of the apostles. While a second-century argument is not decisive in and of itself it does confirm what has already been shown to be the teaching of the first century, i.e., baptism is when God forgives our sins. The following quotes present some of the early Christian writers’ own words:

The Epistle of Barnabas

Let us inquire if the Lord was careful to make a revelation in advance concerning the water and the cross. Concerning the water it was written with regard to Israel how they will not receive the baptism which brings forgiveness of sins but will supply another for themselves...Blessed are those who place their hope in his cross and descended into the water. . We descend into the water full of sins and uncleanness, and we ascend bearing reverence in our hearts and having hope in Jesus in our spirit.” (11:1,8,11)

Shepherd of Hermas

“The Shepherd” doesn’t directly quote Acts 2:38 but he does allude to it.

“And I said, ‘I heard, sir, some teachers maintain that there is no other repentance than that which takes place, when we descended into the water and received remission of our former sin.’ He said to me, ‘That was sound doctrine which you heard; for that is really the case’”
(Mandate 4:3:1,2)

Justin Martyr

“Then they are led by us to where there is water, and in the manner of the regeneration by which we ourselves were regenerated they are regenerated. For at that time they obtain for themselves the washing in water in the name of God the Master of all and Father, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit. For Christ also said, ‘Unless you are regenerated, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.’ . . Since we have been born without our knowledge or choice at our first birth from the moist seed at the union of our parents and have existed in bad and evil conduct, in order that we might not remain children of ignorance and necessity but become children of choice and knowledge and might obtain in the water the forgiveness of past sins, there is called upon the one who chooses to be regenerated and who repents of his sins the name of God the Master of all and Father.... This washing is called illumination since they who learn these things are illuminated in their understanding.” (Apology 1:61)

Theophilus (115 to 181 or 188 AD)

“Moreover, the things which come from the waters were blessed by God, in order that this might be a sign that men were going to receive repentance and forgiveness of sins through the water and the ‘washing of regeneration,’ namely all those who come to the truth and are born again, and receive blessing from God.” (*To Autolycus* 2:15)

Clement of Alexandria (150 to 220 A.D.)

After his conversion from paganism, he became an elder and is credited with founding a school in Alexandria to teach Christians the Scriptures. He wrote “The Instructor” to teach new converts how to develop the proper character and live a Christian life. In this work, he alluded to both Acts 2:38 and Acts 22:16:

“Being baptized, we are illuminated; illuminated, we become sons; being made sons, we are made perfect; being made perfect, we are made immortal... This work is variously called grace, and illumination, and perfection, and washing. Washing, by which we cleanse away our sins; grace, by which the penalties accruing to transgressions are remitted; and illumination, by which that holy light of salvation is beheld, that is, by which we see God clearly... Instruction leads to faith, and faith together with baptism is trained by the Holy Spirit.... We who have repented of our sins, renounced our faults, and are purified by baptism run back to the eternal light, children to their father.” (*Instructor* 1:6:25:3-26:2; 30:2; 32:1)

Cyprian

“Certainly, since I found in the letter the copy of which you transmitted to me, that it was written, ‘That it should not be asked who baptized, since he who is baptized might receive remission of sins according to what he believed,’ I thought that this topic was not to be passed by, especially since I observed in the same epistle that mention was also made of Marcion, saying that ‘even those that came from him did not need to be baptized, because they seemed to have been already baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.’ Therefore we ought to consider their faith who believe without, whether in respect of the same faith they can obtain any grace. For if we and heretics have one faith, we may also have one grace.” (*Epistles* 72:4)

“For he who has been sanctified, his sins being put away in baptism, and has been spiritually reformed into a new man, has become fitted for receiving the Holy Spirit; since the apostle says, ‘As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.’” (*Epistles* 73:5)

Tertullian

“Happy is our sacrament of water, in that, by washing away the sins of our early blindness, we are set free and admitted into eternal life! ...The consequence is, that a viper of the Cainite heresy, lately conversant in this quarter, has carried away a great number with her most venomous doctrine, making it her first aim to destroy baptism. Which is quite in accordance with nature; for vipers and asps and basilisks themselves generally do affect and live in water less places. But we, little fishes, after the example of our ΙΞΘΥΣ Jesus Christ, are born in water, nor have we safety in any other way than by permanently abiding in water; so that most monstrous creature, who had no right to teach even sound doctrine, knew full well how to kill the little fishes, by taking them away from the water!” (*On Baptism* 1)

“It has assuredly been ordained that no one can attain knowledge of salvation without baptism. This comes especially from the pronouncement of the Lord, who says, ‘Except one be born of water he does not have life.’” (*On Baptism* 12)

While these quotations are brief and only a sample of the writings of the early church, we hope that they are sufficient to demonstrate that the early church believed that baptism is the time that ones sins are washed away.

Conclusion

Based on the three lines of evidence, we believe that the argument that one is baptized so that his sins may be forgiven is the correct Biblical understanding. If this be true, then Christians ought to be wary of those who are teaching otherwise or are disturbing congregations by creating doubt. Raymond Kelcy said that there was one doctrine about which he had no questions, i.e., “that baptism is for (in order to obtain) the remission of sins.” May we also, having investigated the evidence, also place our trust in that truth from God.

The best thing anyone can do who wants to know the truth is to study the teachings of the New Testament itself We encourage you to look beyond this attempt to understand one passage to a richer study of the New Testament teaching on baptism. We encourage a deep and exhaustive study of Mark 16:15,16; John 3:1-7; Acts 22:16; Rom. 6:3-7; Col. 2:12,13; Eph. 5:26; Tit. 3 5-7; 1 Pet 3:21. Each of these passages can help one gain a better knowledge of the will of God on the matter.

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