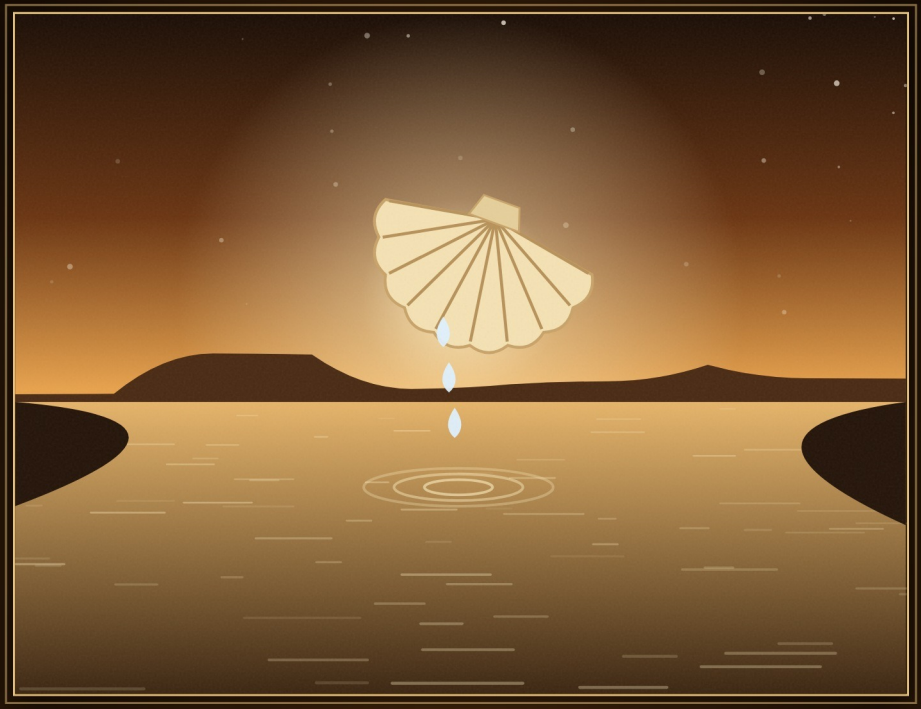
A SHORT BIBLE STUDY

Understanding Baptism

Starting Out with Christ · Book 10



What it means to go down into the water

Andrew Dominguez

Trinfinity Enterprises

Understanding Baptism

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A Note on the Bible Translation Used in This Book

My preferred Bible for personal study, teaching, and research is the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). I chose it because it is a word-for-word translation in today's language, built on the ancient Scripture sources: the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. I prepared the SLB myself, and the Scripture in this book is taken from it.

Where a literal phrase would mislead an English reader, the SLB gives the writer's meaning in plain words. Words added for sense are set in bold italics so you can see what is in the original and what is not.

The complete Steadfast Literal Bible is free to read, search, download, and print at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb. If you want to check a verse in its full setting or read the translation's preface and principles, that is the place to go.

Above all, my desire is not to promote one translation over another, but to faithfully teach the Word of God, encourage careful examination of the Scriptures, and help readers grow in their knowledge, understanding, and relationship with the Lord.

May every page of this book direct attention not to the translation itself, but to the truth of God's Word and the One whom it reveals.

Introduction

Few subjects have caused more debate in church history than baptism. Christians have argued over how it should be done, who should receive it, and what it actually accomplishes. Some see it as a sacrament that saves. Others see it as an ordinance that pictures what God has already done.

Pastor Jimmy Carter led me to Christ when I was a boy in Victorville. I was baptized years later, on October 19, 1995, and that same day I had the greatest honor of my life: I baptized my wife. Years later I baptized our youngest daughter in our backyard pool in Las Vegas.

My goal in this book is not to add to the arguments. I want to look at what Scripture says, explain why I believe baptism follows salvation rather than producing it, and show why it still matters so much. If you are thinking about being baptized, I hope this helps you take that step with understanding.

1 What the word means

The Greek verb behind our word baptize means to dip, to plunge, or to immerse. A closely related Greek word was used in everyday life for cloth being dipped into dye. The cloth went in one color and came out another. It took on the nature of what it was immersed in.

That is a helpful picture. When a believer is baptized, he is saying that his life has been immersed in Jesus Christ. He has taken on a new identity. The water

itself is ordinary. The Jordan River was used for washing clothes, for drinking, and for play. What made baptism different was the name in which people were baptized and the commitment they were making.

> *Therefore, having gone, make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things, as many as I commanded you; and look, I am with you all the days, until the consummation of the age.*
>
> **Matthew 28:19-20 (SLB)**

Jesus' last command to His followers tied baptism to discipleship. That is why a baptism is never done in the name of a pastor or a church. It is done in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

My family attended the Catholic church when I was young, so I grew up thinking of baptism as water poured on a baby. Translating the New Testament for the SLB, I saw that the Greek word means to dip or immerse. Philip and the Ethiopian official went down into the water (Acts 8:38). Knowing what the word means clears up a lot of confusion.

2 Salvation comes first

In the New Testament, baptism always follows faith. When the jailer in Philippi asked what he must do to be saved, Paul and Silas answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31, SLB). That same night

he and his family were baptized (Acts 16:33, SLB). Belief came first. Baptism came right behind it.

> *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this **is** not from yourselves; the gift **is** of God, not from works, so that no one may boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8-9 (SLB)**

I believe baptism does not bring salvation. It declares it. The church in the New Testament practiced believers' baptism as an act of obedience to Christ and a personal declaration of a person's identification and unity with Him.

Some point to Acts 2:38 (SLB), where Peter told the crowd, "Repent, and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins." Sincere Christians read that verse differently, and I respect that. I read it alongside the many passages that tie salvation to faith alone, and I understand baptism there as the public response that went hand in hand with repentance.

Pastor Jimmy Carter led me to put my faith in Christ first. My baptism came years later, on October 19, 1995, because of the salvation I already had. Salvation is a gift received by faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). Water cannot wash away sin, which is why faith in Jesus comes before baptism.

3 A picture of the gospel

Baptism preaches a sermon without words. Going down into the water pictures the death and burial of Jesus. Coming up out of the water pictures His

resurrection. It also pictures what has happened to the person being baptized. The old life has died, and a new life has begun.

> *Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised out of **the** dead through the glory of the Father, so we also may walk in newness of life.*
> **Romans 6:4 (SLB)**

This is one reason I believe immersion best fits the meaning. Jesus went up from the water after He was baptized (Matthew 3:16, SLB). When Philip baptized the Ethiopian official, "they both went down into the water," and "they came up out of the water" (Acts 8:38-39, SLB). A burial is a full covering.

Colossians 3:1-17 (SLB) shows what that new life looks like. Since we have been raised with Christ, we seek the things above. We put to death what belongs to the old nature, and we put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love.

I was baptized on October 19, 1995, and I baptized my wife that same day. Going under the water pictures being buried with Christ. Coming up pictures walking in new life (Romans 6:4). Baptism is a living sermon that shows the gospel without a word.

4 How Christians have understood it

It helps to know that believers have held four broad views. Roman Catholic teaching holds that the act itself brings new birth. Lutheran teaching holds that baptism imparts saving grace to the one who

exercises faith. Reformed teaching sees baptism as a sign and seal of the covenant, an outward sign of an inward reality. Baptist teaching sees it as a testimony, one of the first public professions a believer makes.

My own understanding is closest to the last two. The Foursquare Church's Declaration of Faith (1923) describes water baptism as a blessed outward sign of an inward work, an emblem reminding us that just as our Lord died, was buried, and was raised, we reckon ourselves dead to sin and raised to walk in newness of life. That says it well.

People who love Jesus disagree about the details. Whatever position we hold, we should hold it with humility. Ephesians 4:4-6 (SLB) reminds us that there is "one body and one Spirit," "one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all."

My family attended the Catholic church when I was young, and I came to faith later through a neighbor. So I understand why people feel strongly about the traditions they were raised in. I do not attack other believers. I open the New Testament and look at what Jesus and the apostles practiced.

5 Baptized in the Holy Spirit

John the Baptist said that he baptized with water to repentance, but the One coming after him would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matthew 3:11, SLB). The book of Acts records that promise being fulfilled.

In Acts the Spirit's coming was often marked by something others could see. At times believers spoke in tongues (Acts 2:4; 10:46, SLB). At other times they were "speaking the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31, SLB), Peter spoke up before the rulers (Acts 4:8, SLB), or they prophesied (Acts 19:6, SLB).

This subject has divided churches, and there are two errors to avoid. One is to avoid it altogether, even though Paul wrote, "do not forbid speaking in tongues" (1 Corinthians 14:39, SLB). The other is to treat one gift as the test of real spirituality. Paul also asked, "Do all speak in tongues?" (1 Corinthians 12:30, SLB). The Spirit gives gifts, "distributing to each individually as He wills" (1 Corinthians 12:11, SLB).

The goal is not a particular experience. The goal is a life filled with the Spirit and bearing His fruit.

6 Before you step into the water

Who should be baptized? Everyone who has trusted Christ. Children should wait until they are old enough to believe and understand what baptism means. When should you be baptized? As soon as you believe. The Ethiopian official said, "Look, water! What hinders me from being baptized?" (Acts 8:36, SLB). If you wait until you feel good enough, you will never go.

A baptism service can include three questions for each candidate. Do you hate the devil and all his works? Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the soon-coming King, and have you

accepted Him as Lord of your life? Do you desire to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ, declaring before every witness here that you are indeed His disciple?

Baptism is not only for the person in the water. It is a moment for every believer watching to ask, "Am I living today as a committed, obedient follower of Christ? Is His lordship evident in my daily decisions?"

> *I have been crucified with Christ; and I live—no longer I, but Christ lives in me; and what I now live in* ***the*** *flesh, I live in faith, that of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.*
>
> **Galatians 2:20 (SLB)**

Understanding Baptism

✦ ✦ ✦

Christians have argued about baptism for centuries. This book looks at what the word means, why salvation comes first, how baptism pictures the gospel, how believers have understood it, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and what to know before you step into the water.

Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised out of the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also may walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:4 (SLB)

Book 10 of 11 in the collection Starting Out with Christ

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