

BAPTISM

In previous articles, we have discussed how God created His law, the Ten Commandments, for the benefit of man. We saw that this law prescribed correct behavior, that would bring about peace and prosperity. We learned that the definition of sin is to break this law (1John 3:4). The article about repentance showed that Christians need to resolve to stop breaking the law and change their way of life. The decision to make an abrupt change in one's way of life to obey God is the essence of repentance.

When one has repented and has resolved to stop sinning, there still remains the record of sinful behavior, however. The repentant sinner's guilt has not yet been dealt with. One of the most beautiful and inspiring scriptures in the Bible, found in Psalm 103, shows God's intention for our sins:

PSA 103:10 He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. 11 For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him. 12 As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us. 13 Like as a father pities his children, so the LORD pities them that fear him.

This passage tells us that God is eager to forgive us of our sins. He did not intend for Christians to remain guilty. He instituted a means of dealing with this guilt, a way to wash it clean and obliterate its record entirely. God has a Fatherly interest in us and has compassion on our weakness and proclivity to sin.

The idea of washing to achieve cleanliness is a persistent theme throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament, many washing rituals were prescribed as symbols of being made clean and righteous. Here is one of the first examples of people being made clean through washing:

EXO 19:10 And the LORD said unto Moses, Go unto the people, and sanctify them to day and to morrow, and let them wash their clothes, 11 And be ready against the third day: for the third day the LORD will come down in the sight of all the people upon mount Sinai.

In this example, the nation, Israel, was told to wash their clothes in order to be clean enough to come into the presence of the Lord. God was about to enter their physical realm to deliver to them His law. A search of the word, "wash" in the Bible will yield many examples of prescribed washings of the sacrifices, the priests and the congregation in the wilderness before coming into God's presence.

The need for these ritual washings does not continue to this present time for the Christian, with but one exception. God requires Christians to be washed clean of his or her sins in the waters of baptism. We read a scripture in the article about repentance that demonstrates this need:

ACT 2:37 NRSV Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" 38 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. 39 For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him."

After repentance, we need to be baptized so that our sins may be forgiven. Only then may we receive the gift of God's spirit, God's presence in us. Baptism involves total immersion in water,

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symbolizing the washing away of our sins. This ritual is symbolic of God removing from us our sins, as described in Psalm 103, above.

Is baptism truly a requirement for Christians? Peter said it was in the passage above. Jesus Christ was baptized as an example to the Christian. Christ, who never sinned, had no need to be baptized for the remission of sin, yet He insisted that John, the Baptist, would perform this ceremony on Him as an example for His followers:

Mat 3:13 NRSV Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Peter tells us in his first letter that we need to follow Jesus' example as we walk through life. If we want to receive the holy spirit, to have God abiding with us, we need to be baptized, after true repentance.

1Pet 2:21 NRSV For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that *you should follow in his steps*. 22 "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." 23 When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, {Or [carried up our sins in his body to the tree]} so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds {Gk [bruise]} you have been healed.

So one reason we must be baptized is that Christ was baptized as an example for us to follow. As John, the Baptist, pointed out, Christ had no need of remission of sins. He was baptized to set an example.

But we might ask, "How can God just forgive our sins as if they never happened? Doesn't the law require a penalty to be paid for transgressions?" Indeed, the law does demand a penalty for sin.

Rom 6:23 NRSV For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Who is subject to this penalty?

ROM 3:23 KJV For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;

We are all guilty of sin and are all under the penalty of death for those transgressions of God's law. The scripture from 1 Peter, above introduces us to the process God uses for the paying of that penalty. Jesus Christ has paid the penalty for us. Paul explained in his letter to the Colossians how this worked:

COL 2:13 And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened [made alive] together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; 14

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Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross;

In the ancient Roman world, execution by crucifixion was a ghastly, brutal, lingering death, reserved for only the worst criminals. It was customary to post the indictment of the guilty party on a document nailed to the cross over the head of the accused. Colossians 2:13-14 is telling us that Christ nailed the indictment for *our* sins to His cross at the time of his crucifixion. He has taken the accusation of sin away from us and paid its penalty in our place. He blotted out the handwritten accusation for our sins with His blood. Peter discussed this in a sermon he gave shortly after the death of Jesus:

ACT 3:19 KJV Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.

Many Christians believe that Christ nailed the *law* to His cross, that He nullified the law. This is a gross misunderstanding of the theology of forgiveness of sins. The Greek language of Col 2:13-14 is describing an indictment or a record of debt, not a law. It is our sin that Christ blotted out, not God's law. Christ specifically told us not even to think that He had come to abolish God's law:

MAT 5:17 KJV Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. 18 For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. 19 Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Indeed, if there was no law, if Christ had abolished it, it would not be possible for us to sin. Remember, "Sin is the transgression of the law." (1Jo 3:4). Further, Paul tells us that where there is no law, there is no sin:

ROM 5:13 For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law.

So the idea that Christ abolished the law is not logical. If there was no law, we could not be guilty of sin and we would require no forgiveness! The truth is that the law is still in effect for Christians and the rest of mankind. We are all guilty of sin and we need to call on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who paid the death penalty in our place, for our transgressions of the law.

Thanks to God, the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ for making it possible, through baptism, for the record of our past sins to be blotted out! It is only after we are cleansed from our sins that God will give us the precious gift of His holy spirit. This will be the topic of the next installment in this series of articles.