The Ring, Not the Marriage

Water baptism does not save. Trusting that Jesus took our punishment in our place does.

God loves us. Jesus took our punishment in our place, and he gives that as a free gift to everyone who trusts it *John 3:16*.

Baptism shows that a person is already saved. It does not make anyone saved.

I THE EVIDENCE

Four witnesses, and none needed water

1 **The thief on the cross.** He was dying. No baptism is mentioned. He asked Jesus, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom," and Jesus promised him Paradise that day.

"Today you will be with me in Paradise." *Luke 23:42–43*

2 **Cornelius.** The Holy Spirit came on him and his household while Peter was still speaking. The Spirit is God's seal, his mark that a person belongs to him (see The Seal). They were not yet baptized, but they already belonged to Christ. Then they were baptized, as a sign of what had already happened. This was after the resurrection, so it holds for us.

"They have received the Holy Spirit just like us." "If any man doesn't have the Spirit of Christ, he is not his."

Acts 10:44–48; Rom 8:9; Eph 1:13

3 **Paul.** The good news he preached is this: "Christ died for our sins", "he was buried", "he was raised on the third day" (1 Cor 15:1–4). Baptism is not part of it. If baptism were needed to be saved, it would be part of the good news.

"Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the Good News." *1 Cor 1:17*

4 **Many verses, one answer.** Again the Bible says how a person is saved: by trusting that Jesus took our punishment in our place. In each of these, nothing is added, no water and no works. See also John 3:16, John 5:24 and Rom 10:9.

"Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved." "…by grace you have been saved through faith… not of works."

Acts 16:31; Eph 2:8–9

II THE VERSES THAT SEEM TO SAY OTHERWISE

Read plainly, one at a time

JOHN 3:5

> *"Most certainly I tell you, unless one is born of water and spirit, he can't enter into God's Kingdom."*

Some read "water" here as baptism. But Jesus does not use the word baptism. He speaks of one new birth, from "water and spirit". In the original language, one small word ("of") goes with both nouns. It is one birth, not two steps.

Others read "water" as natural birth: Nicodemus asked about the womb (3:4), and Jesus sets flesh beside Spirit (3:6). Either way, the chapter never mentions baptism.

Jesus then says that a teacher of Israel should already understand this: "Are you the teacher of Israel, and don't understand these things?" (3:10). And in the same conversation he says how a person receives life: "whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (3:16), and "He who believes in him is not judged" (3:18). It is said again at the chapter's end: "One who believes in the Son has eternal life" (3:36).

So John 3:5 does not say that baptism gives new life. The same chapter says that life comes by believing.

ACTS 2:38

> *"Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."*

"Repent" translates a Greek word (metanoia) that means a change of mind: no longer rejecting Jesus, but trusting that he died in our place. It is not a work that earns anything. Peter is speaking to people who have just learned that they crucified the one God made Lord and Christ (2:36–37). He calls them to change their mind about Jesus and trust that he died for them, taking their punishment in their place, and he points them to baptism as the open sign that they have.

The word "for" can also mean "because of". We do not need to settle that, because Peter himself tells us how forgiveness comes. "Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19). "Turn again" means the same change of mind: turning to Jesus. "Through his name everyone who believes in him will receive remission of sins" (Acts 10:43). Neither verse mentions water. And at the house of Cornelius the Holy Spirit came on those who heard, and only after that were they baptized (10:44–48).

So Acts 2:38 does not say that the water forgives. Peter says it comes to everyone who believes.

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II THE VERSES THAT SEEM TO SAY OTHERWISE

Continued

MARK 16:16

> *"He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who disbelieves will be condemned."*

Read the second half. It does not say, "but he who is not baptized will be condemned." It says, "he who disbelieves". What condemns a person is not believing. Baptism is named beside believing because those who believe are glad to be baptized, as fruit of being saved. It is never the condition. It is not named in the sentence about condemnation.

A note, for honesty: many Bibles point out that the oldest copies of Mark end at 16:8, and that verses 9–20 are missing from them. We have answered the verse as it stands. What the Bible teaches about salvation does not depend on it.

So Mark 16:16 does not say that anyone is condemned for lacking baptism. It says a person is condemned for not believing.

1 PETER 3:21

> *"…eight souls, were saved through water. This is a symbol of baptism, which now saves you—not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."*

Think of Noah (3:20). His family was saved "through water", but the water did not save them. The ark did. They were safe because they were inside it, while the water destroyed everyone outside. Peter says baptism is a picture of that.

Then he rules out the wrong idea at once: it is "not the putting away of the filth of the flesh". Washing the body does nothing for the soul. What matters is "the answer of a good conscience toward God". Some Bibles say "the pledge" or "the appeal": the reply of a person who has already trusted God, and whose conscience is clear because Jesus took the punishment. And the power is "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ". Jesus saves. The water does not.

So this verse does not say that the water saves. It says that Jesus' resurrection does, and that baptism is the believer's answer to him.

III AT A GLANCE

The four answers in one line each

JOHN 3:5	One new birth. The same chapter says life comes by believing.
ACTS 2:38	Peter's own words: forgiveness comes to everyone who believes.
MARK 16:16	The sentence about condemnation names only not believing.
1 PETER 3:21	Not the water. Jesus' resurrection is what saves.

THE RING

A ring does not make the marriage. Baptism does not make the believer.

A wedding ring does not make anyone married. Lose it, and you are still married. It shows outwardly what is already true. So with baptism. Married people are glad to wear the ring, and believers are glad to be baptized. It is fruit, never a condition.

When Jesus sent out his disciples, he spoke of baptizing those who come to trust him (Matt 28:19). It is a gift and an open sign for the believer. It is never what saves, and never what keeps anyone saved. No one who trusts him is lost for lacking it.

Scripture uses the same picture: Abraham received circumcision as "a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while he was in uncircumcision". Rom 4:11

Saved by grace, through trusting that Jesus took our punishment in our place.

Continued on the third sheet ↓

Why It Matters

Not a side issue

This is not a quarrel over water. It is about what we trust. If something is added to Christ as needed to be right with God, it is no longer Christ alone.

IV CHRIST PLUS SOMETHING

What Scripture says about adding

GALATIANS: ONE RITE ADDED

> *"Behold, I, Paul, tell you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will profit you nothing." "You are alienated from Christ, you who desire to be justified by the law. You have fallen away from grace."* Gal 5:2, 4

The Galatians believed in Jesus. They did not give him up. They only added one outward rite, circumcision, as needed to be right with God. Paul did not call that a small difference. He called it a different "good news", which is no good news at all, and he said they were cut off from Christ. To be "alienated from Christ" is to stand on the wrong ground: on what we do, instead of on what Christ did. It is a warning to people who trust a rite. It is not a threat to anyone who trusts Christ alone. Making baptism a condition would be the same move: Christ plus something.

"There isn't another 'good news.'… If any man preaches to you any 'good news' other than that which you received, let him be cursed." Gal 1:7, 9

> **So Christ plus one rite is not a small difference. Paul called it another gospel, and said it cuts people off from Christ.**

ROMANS AND GALATIANS: GRACE CANNOT BE MIXED

> *"Now to him who works, the reward is not counted as grace, but as something owed. But to him who doesn't work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness."* Rom 4:4–5

> *"And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace."* Rom 11:6 *"I don't reject the grace of God. For if righteousness is through the law, then Christ died for nothing!"* Gal 2:21

A gift with a condition is no longer a gift. It is pay that is owed. If a person must also do something to be right with God, whether baptism, giving or keeping rules, then Christ's death was not enough, and Paul says plainly what follows: it would be for nothing. To trust a rite instead of Christ is to trust ourselves: what we did, and when we did it. If "I was baptized" is what a person leans on, that too is pointing at ourselves.

> **So Christ plus anything is not Christ alone. A condition turns a gift into wages.**

MATTHEW 7:21–23: POINTING AT WORKS

> *"Many will tell me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name, in your name cast out demons, and in your name do many mighty works?' Then I will tell them, 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you who work iniquity.'"* Matt 7:22–23

These people call him Lord, and their list of works is long. Jesus does not argue about the list. He says, "I never knew you." They pointed to what they had done. None of them says, "I trust what you did for me." In the same passage Jesus speaks of "he who does the will of my Father" (7:21). He tells us what that will is:

"This is the will of the one who sent me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life." John 6:40

> **So pointing to what we have done, even religious works, is not trusting Christ.**

THE WAY OUT

Christ alone is enough.

God loves you, and that is why the warning is plain. Jesus took the punishment for our offences against God's law, in our place, and he gives that as a free gift to everyone who trusts it (John 3:16). If you have been leaning on a rite, a record or a good life, change your mind about what you are trusting. Stop looking at what you have done. Trust that Jesus died for you, taking your punishment in your place.

Baptism is a glad sign for the one who already trusts him. It is fruit, never a condition, and never what keeps anyone saved. A ring is lovely as a sign. It is a poor thing to trust in place of the one who gave it.

Saved by grace, through trusting that Jesus took our punishment in our place.