

What Does it Mean?

This is the first in a series of short story articles. In reading these articles we hope to help you in discovering how the Bible describes these words. By reviewing the context of the verse and the contents of the chapter, understanding to whom the message was written, the Bible will fully give us a clear and concise meaning of these words.

This first story was written with permission of Dr. Mead based on a Wednesday evening lesson he gave several years ago.

What Does it Mean?

Over many years my wife and I had attended Sunday services, not regularly, but often enough to say that we went. For the most part we were greeted pleasantly and after awhile people would begin to recognize us. Oh!, the reason for the ‘after awhile’ is that we seldom stayed long with any one group or church. I guess we expected some type of “experience”. We knew going to church was important, but it never seemed that anything “happened”. The places that were friendlier, there we would attend longer; those where the people seemed to be too much “above or too good for us”, we simply just didn’t come back. And then there were those churches where the people weren’t unkind, not really out going, but it just seemed that they were there because it was what was expected of them.

As we attended the various churches we would study with them in the Sunday morning Bible classes, where they had them. Interestingly after awhile the classes, instead of being unique, all became one big blur. The lessons changed. The teachers’ styles varied, but the answers to the questions were always “safe”. There was nothing to provoke thought or additional questions. The idea of “learning by digging” or discovery seemed foreign to the teacher who really just wanted to get through the material safely. The teachers, who were members of the congregation, not professionals, seemed to think that if they talked long enough and often enough, there would be no questions asked. Or maybe they felt that if they kept repeating the information the class would understand everything. When someone did ask a question (and this would depend on the teacher) they might just rattle off an answer, often simply repeating what was already said; or insinuate that they “knew” what they were talking about and your question was off base. This made the students feel “dumb or stupid”, which I think eventually led to no one asking questions.

While some teachers attempted to work out side of the box and move beyond the written material, the students (the members) resisted these efforts by not answering questions presented to get them to think about what was behind the scriptures. In fact it appeared that they were happy to just leave things as they were. The instructor read the lessons, the questions answered, and they were finished.

What amazed us about the Bible study time verses the worship time was that there were nearly three times as many people at the service as there had been in the Bible study classes. A relationship that began to become apparent was the less friendly the people, the smaller the numbers in attendance at the Bible study.

During the “service” or “assembly” or “worship” time (the names varied, but the experiences didn’t), the involvement, the way in which the members participated began to form patterns. Noninvolvement may be a better word, for it seemed so often that only a few members made the effort to lead, or guide, or perhaps were *permitted* to be a part of the worship. The effect of the members not being an important part of the “church” experience was a major reason for us to keep moving from place to place.

When it was time for the “speaker” (various names and interesting clothing styles) would rise and stand behind the lectern. Imagine that, a place to stand and give a lecture. Why would anyone want to get up early to be lectured? You would think more people would be in the

Bible study classes and skip the lecture. It was here that often we would make a choice to stay or not stay. Was the “lecture”/ lesson, or talk, Bible centered; or did the speaker decide it was their position to discuss local or national politics? Did they only discuss vague ideas, using words that the ears liked to hear, but did not stir the heart or soul to action? But were they leading one to political correctness in an age of “let’s not hurt anyone’s feelings”, for everyone has a right to their beliefs? On those occasions when a scripture would be mentioned, just the book, chapter and verse, it seldom was actually read. Then the speaker would be off in another direction not relating to the verse or why this scripture was important to their talk.

In a few of the places we attended, the speaker would bring in multiple Bible verses, read them and then relate them back to the community as a whole, to the political climate, to the history of the local congregation and so on. There was no mention of salvation, GOD’S will, of our needs within the church; just that we should be involved. And don’t forget to be part of the car wash, the garden club and other activities that we could participate in even if we never attended this place of meeting.

This all became very frustrating for us. The Bible was important. GOD spoke to us through it, and we wanted to understand our relationship with Him. But we began to feel maybe we were wrong. There was really no reason for us to be going to all these different churches. The people in them behaved no differently than those we lived around or worked with who never went to a church. Why waste the one day a week we could actually sleep in? Yet there was something in us that drove us on.

We determined that if we were to continue to attend we were going to learn something. We would start asking questions and lots of them. Asking questions it turned out was not acceptable behavior. There was whispering. People shunned us after class and teachers would simply put us off, or suggest we needed to study more prior to coming to class. Our problem now became one that caused us not to stay very long, and worse was that we were running out of places to attend. This brought us extremely close to the conclusion that maybe the world was right and staying away from this church thing was the only right choice.

At this, our lowest point, an intervention occurred. Recently at the office where my wife worked a new female employee was hired. She was always on time, a good worker, and everyone who made contact with her was friendly to her as she was to them. One thing however that struck my wife was that during lunch she sat someplace quiet and read, and mostly it was the Bible. She did this everyday without fanfare or bringing attention. It was just who she was. We talked about this at home and my wife wanted to find out more about this woman. My wife took her lunch with her and made it a point to sit next to this woman. The woman did not make my wife feel rejected or like she was interfering, but freely talked about herself, how she read the Bible to learn about GOD and how He wanted her to live. She indicated that to her the Bible was alive. The more she read, the more there was to guide her. While the Bible was not the only book she read, the other books were mostly written by people who had experienced GOD’S love and guidance through the Bible.

When my wife came home and we talked about her experiences of the last few days of lunches with this woman, our dreams for so long unrealized, we awakened to our life’s

desires, our guide and future lay on the table in our living room, touched, carried, opened occasionally, but never really read - GOD'S word the Bible. It was then that we stopped searching for "places" to go on Sunday; our home became our shelter, we spent every Sunday morning now together reading this Bible, this book that for so long we took for granted. From it we learned so much. On its pages are stories written about people and places, events, and life's lessons. We began to see with the perspective of those who were there, and who through GOD'S guidance wrote it for us, so that we might learn how to live. We began to learn who GOD is, about our spirit and HIS. This was exciting! For us we felt our lives changing and we read now, not just on Sundays but every day. For a long time we did this, we had found the love we had been looking for in the growth ours along with the one for and from GOD. My wife continued to talk with the woman at work. She encouraged us and guided us when it was needed. As time passed, this woman invited us several times to visit the place where she gathered on Sunday mornings, but there really was no need to, we had found the secret, the joy, and the love that the Bible gave to us. We never stopped reading. Our learning was growing. Our lives had changed in so many ways, but our enthusiasm seemed to be fading. There were times when we were unable to find the answers to our questions; there seemed to be no answers. Slowly the realization that the reading alone was not enough touched our hearts. Something more was needed. We talked it over. Even though we had been disappointed so often, we would accept this woman's invitation to meet with her on Sunday and let things happen.

When we arrived, we were greeted with a friendship and warmth that we had seldom experienced in the past. They had classes where they used booklets to guide the study and they had classes without booklets guided by the teacher. The speaker stood up front, but he used scriptures to teach the lessons, reading them and letting them speak or explaining what the words meant for this talk. He talked about GOD as being alive there in the building as well as in every place we went. We kept going back.

Our Bible reading didn't stop. It was a time of sharing, and it kept us close no matter what was going on in our lives. There was however a word, a word that was found throughout the Bible. We heard it outside of the Bible and we had heard it used in some of the places we had visited in the past. Our problem was that we could not get a handle on it and it seemed that in each place, they used it or applied it in a unique way. After we finished our reading, we talked about it and we determined that this week in the Bible class we would bring up the question and see what happened. We announced to everyone what had been going on, and that we were wondering if they would help us learn what this word meant. The group said they would stop the study that we were in and help us learn what this word meant. We thanked them and then ask the question **"What does the word 'baptism' mean?"** A silence followed our question, we held our breath not wanting to experience the feeling of being dumb that had happen so often in the past. Then one of the men spoke up and said "we are not sure either, but if the word is in the Bible, the Bible should be able to tell us what it means"!

The following is how the class learned what the Bible had to say about what the word *'baptism'* means. (As you read this you may want to have your Bible handy – the version is not important – so that you may read for yourself what the class read).

One of the men suggested, that we begin with the first book of the New Testament, Matthew and see what it had to say. From there we would continue to move through each book looking for each occurrence of the word until we had a perfect understanding of its meaning.

The first reference we found was in Matthew 3: 1-6, it is here that we find John preaching about repentance. Those listening to him speak have come a long way, they came from Jerusalem and all Judea. This would have been a walk of anywhere from 15 to 30 miles. To walk this far to hear someone speak meant that these people must have felt it very important to hear John's words. We are told that when they did hear his words they **confessed** their **sins** and then they were *baptized* by him **in** the Jordan River. This *baptism* then appears to have something to do with confession of sin and going **into** a river. Next in verses 13-17 Jesus arrives, he has come from Galilee to the Jordan to be *baptized*. If Jesus has traveled here to be with John and the crowds then this **must** be very important. John then questions Jesus as why He should be *baptized*. Jesus answers by saying it is proper to fulfill **all** righteousness. John then baptized Jesus, who then went **up out** of the water. Since Jesus has come 'up out' of the water, then he must certainly have gone down into it. Jesus had indicated to John that it was proper for this *baptism* to occur because it had something to do with **righteousness**. In verse 17, after Jesus has come out of the water a voice from Heaven said "this is my Son, whom I love". It is at this point that GOD first identifies Jesus as His Son, which is **after** Jesus is *baptized*.

As we read through the remainder of Matthew, we stopped at chapter 28:18-20. This is after Jesus had died and is now reappearing to the eleven disciples; Jesus says "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me". He then says "therefore" – we took this as meaning that since he had been given this authority that what he was about to say was a directive, a command, something that they were required to follow and obey – "go and make disciples of **all** nations, *baptizing* them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". Much like an army commander he was giving them their marching orders. He goes on to say "and teaching them to **obey everything** I have commanded you". So as Jesus returns to the Father, he directs them to follow all that he had said, but here He places emphasis on the act of '*baptizing*' and this is to be done in a very specific way. As a group we reviewed what we had learned about this word from the book of Matthew. First it takes place **in** water and a lot of water. A river has a lot of water in it. Also the people doing this had to **confess their sins** and that Jesus was required to do it and by doing it, GOD announced his love for Him. Also because you did it, **righteousness** followed. Jesus had commanded the disciples to teach everyone to do it and it was to be done in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We had learned much in Matthew, but the Bible has a lot to say, so we needed more information before we could be certain what this word meant.

As we began Mark, in chap 1:4 we read "so John came, *baptizing* in the desert region and preaching a *baptism* of **repentance** for the **forgiveness** of sins". We read that somehow this *baptism* allows our **sins** to be **forgiven**. Later in chap 16 verses 15-16, ".....whoever **believes and** is *baptized* will be saved, but whoever **does not believe** will be condemned". As we continued reading the remaining two Gospels, we saw nothing new, only the reinforcement of what we read in Matthew and Mark. One item of interest in John

3:23 "...John also was *baptizing* at Aenon near Salim, **because** there was **plenty of water**, and people were constantly coming to be *baptized*". We wanted to review what we learned from the Gospels before proceeding on. Here is what we learned. When *baptism* is mentioned you have to **confess your sins**. There has to be **water** and **plenty of it**. For you must **go in the water** and then **come up out of it**. A person when **baptized** must have it done in the name of the **Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit**. It is connected to **righteousness**. Your **sins are forgiven**. If you **believe** this then you will be **saved**, if **not** you will be **condemned**. We have learned much but we still were not confident enough to say we understood the word – and some were even confused.

Having completed the Gospels we knew we had learned quite a bit, but we knew we had to go on to the book of Acts. In Chapter 2 Peter addresses a crowd that had gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Beginning in verse 14, Peter reminds them that the coming of Jesus had been foretold to them by the prophets, and that He would have authority which would be ordained by GOD. When they realized that the promised Messiah, the Savior, the Son of GOD had been rejected and crucified; they cried out as one "Brothers what shall we do?" (vs 37). In Peter's answer we learned that you need to **repent**, to be *baptized* **in** the name of Jesus, **for** the forgiveness of sins; that this process was not just for a select few, but for 'all whom the Lord our GOD will call' 'for all who are far off' ... as well. And then **after** this process you will receive the gift of the **Holy Spirit**. We read that over three thousand of the people who were present and accepted the message were *baptized* and **added** to their number that very day. A new question arose, **How** did this adding work and to what number were they added? Did a committee make recommendations? Were they required to pass a test? Was there a waiting period? As we read on the answer came in vs 47, here we learn that **the Lord** added to their number **daily** to those that were **saved**. So far in Acts we have learned some of the same things we saw in earlier books, but now we know that *once you are baptized* you are **added** to those who GOD considers **saved**. We had gathered more information, but not a final conclusion as to what this *baptism* is.

The next chapter that helped to give us more knowledge was Acts Chapter 8. Here an Ethiopian eunuch, returning from Jerusalem, is reading from the book of Isaiah. Phillip runs up to the chariot carrying the eunuch and asks if he understands what he is reading? Philip reads from this point on and explains to the eunuch "the good news about Jesus". It is soon after this point that the eunuch exclaims, "Look, here is **water**. Why shouldn't I be *baptized*?" Surely something in the reading and explanation of the scriptures caused the eunuch to understand that this *baptism* and **water** were important to each other. We went on to read that after the chariot stopped that both Phillip and the eunuch went **down into** the water. The class stopped and we all looked at that section again, the chariot stopped **because** there was water, and then both men **entered** the water. This had to be a large body of water for them both to be able to go down and into the water. It went on to say that once they were in the water "Philip *baptized* him". The next part (vs 39) reminded us of what we had earlier read in Matthew, "they came up out of the water", here we had two men who were able to go down into the water and then came up out of it. This *baptism* surely must have to do with **large** amounts of **water** and the ability for those participating to go completely **into** this **water** in order for them to **come out** of it.

By this time many members of the class felt that we had enough information to come to a complete understanding. Still some of the class wanted to continue on to insure that we knew what the Bible meant about this word. We began to read the book of Romans and in Chapter 6 some additional ideas were presented to clearly add more to our understanding. Verse 2 says “we died to sin”. How does one die to sin and still live? In verse 3, Paul goes on “don’t you know that all of us who were **baptized into** Christ Jesus were **baptized into** his death?” The class asked ‘when we are *baptized into* Christ Jesus and *into His death* how does this take place?’ Paul says in verse 4 “we were **therefore buried** with him **through baptism** into death”. Our answer from this is that we need to be buried during this *baptism*, so that we can enter into death. This then would explain what we read in vs 2 about dying and in vs 3 about “into His death” With Paul’s next words “just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life”, we began to understand how we may die to sin and still live. For it next says, “because anyone who has died has been freed from sin”. That explains that this “death” where we are “buried”, frees us from sin as we are “raised” to a new life *in* Christ. We, as a class felt very strongly that we had come very close to our understanding. We just needed to read a little more to validate our knowledge.

In Romans Chapter 8, in verse 1 “therefore, there is now no condemnation for those **who are in** Christ Jesus”. How does one get **in** Christ Jesus? From Galatians 3:27 we read “for all of you who were **baptized into** Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ”. So from this we learn that to get **into** Christ we must do this *baptism*. We found many other references that validated what we had already learned. Then in I Peter Chapter 3 beginning at the end of verse 20 “in it (looks back to the previous section with reference to Noah’s Ark) only a few people, eight in all, were saved **through water**, and this water symbolizes *baptism that now saves you* also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward GOD.”

We had finished our study. The Bible had provided us the scriptures and the knowledge to come to a complete understanding of the word baptism (baptized). A few questions were brought out, not to put off our conclusions, but more to solidify them. Many members of the class have had the opportunity to hear others state or read that they have been saved by simply **asking** GOD to come **into** their lives. These people have said that it just felt right or felt good. The question that came out of this is, just because I feel good about what I did, does that mean that GOD feels good or right? Isn’t it better and more reasonable to do what He has commanded us to do?

The eunuch was a person who wanted a better understanding of the scriptures. When he had this knowledge, he and Philip went down into the water and then came out. In light of how different groups use *baptism*, lets insert those methods with the one described with Philip and the eunuch. Would this be best described using “Philip poured the eunuch”, “Philip sprinkled the eunuch” or “Philip immersed the eunuch”? Which one fits the Bibles description? Let us review what we have learned to see the correct answer.

We have learned and now understand that to be *baptized* one must **repent** of and **confess** their sins. There needs to be **plenty of water**. Plenty of water was needed so that we could go **down into** it. We needed to be **buried in this water**. This *baptism* needed to be done in the name of the **Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit**. After being **buried** we needed to **come up out** of the water. Our sins were now forgiven. During this burial we had **entered into the death of Christ**. With our coming out of the water, we **entered into** a life that was considered **righteous**, because we were now in the risen Christ. Once we came out of the water we were to receive the **gift of the Holy Spirit**.

Through this study of GOD'S word, my wife and I along with the members of the class learned that Christianity is not necessarily a "feel good" religion, but one based on the obedience to GOD'S commands and then feeling good about obeying them. That very day we both obeyed GOD'S command and became one with Christ, through the death (to our sins), burial (the end of our sin controlled lives) and resurrection (the coming up out of the water a new person). We knew GOD had added us to those that were saved.