

## **1 Peter 3:21 “Water Baptism and Salvation”**

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*The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ: (1 Peter 3:21 KJV)*

*Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, (1 Peter 3:21 ESV)*

*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 Peter 3:21 NASB)*

*[A]nd 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. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, (1 Peter 3:21 NIV)*

### **Does Peter Teach That Water Baptism Saves?**

Baptismal remission is buttressed primarily by three specific verses in the Bible. The first is Acts 2:38, the second is 1 Peter 3:21, and these are linked to Jesus' words in Mark 16:16. These three verses are cited as though they exist in a mutually supportive bond, and as proof that the apostolic teaching is baptismal remission.

One writer, Talmadge French<sup>1</sup> asserts that the case for baptismal remission is made by a proper understanding of the word *eis*, and the proper connection of Acts 2:38 with 1 Peter 3:21:

Peter, to the contrary, makes such a strong case for baptism that he says Noah was “saved,” not by the Ark, but “by water”! God, of course, saved them, but it was through the agency of water, in that the water lifted them above the judgment. The Apostle points out that the water is the antitype of water-baptism that “doth also now save us.” Why? Because of the Name of Jesus! Baptism in Jesus' Name (Acts 2:38) is “for the remission of sins,” or, as indicated by the work *eis* (Gk). In order to access remission. This literally means into the remission of sins, but not because, or as a result, of sins already remitted.<sup>2</sup>

First, before we look at the exegesis, one thing that stands out to me, French uses circular reasoning to prove baptismal remission. He first assumes that water-baptism is the means of sin's remission. In order to prove that “for” in Acts 2:38 means that sin is remitted by baptism, he cites 1 Peter 3:21, as further support that water-baptism saves.

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<sup>2</sup> Talmadge French, Theology Column, *Indiana Bible College Perspectives*, Vol. 13, No. 3, p. 7.

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But, in his conclusion about 1 Peter, he circles back to Acts 2:38 to prove that Peter teaches water-baptism saves us. Both verses are interpreted in a way that appears to support French’s *a priori* assumption – baptismal remission. It seems baptismal remission is automatically assumed to be true. Only then, are all the verses of Scripture interpreted as confirming that assumption.

French ultimately supports his doctrine of baptismal remission by the claim that the correct baptismal formula must be in the saving name Jesus -- “because of the Name of Jesus.” I also believe that baptism should be administered “in the name of Jesus” (Acts 2:38). But, I don’t share his belief that saying the name of Jesus during the act of baptism causes baptism to remit sin. Peter never spells out a doctrine of the “Name of Jesus” that affects the remission of sins, either in Acts or his epistles. French assumes this as explicitly taught although it is not.

French also chooses a specific usage of the word “for” (*eis*) – “in order to access remission” – because, I believe, it best supports his assumption of baptismal remission. It is not incorrect for him to make a grammatical choice about which form of *eis* is correct. What is questionable is to interpret Acts 2:38 as though his (and the UPCI’s) is the only grammatical option available. There is equal support to translate *eis* as “because” of the remission of sins.<sup>3</sup>

As we address 1 Peter 3:21, we must be very careful to discern, as best we can, Peter’s intention for writing this epistle to his first audience. It must be said, this is a very difficult text for all Greek scholars. Many scholars have set forth various ways these words and phrases should be translated. It is wise to be skeptical of anyone who exclusively claims the right interpretation. Even more, it is not wise to build one’s whole view of baptism or salvation on this passage. It should be understood in light of the New Testament’s overall teaching concerning baptism.

In the near context, Peter explains how “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.” The stress is on the “bring you to God” reality and his desire is to offer his readers confidence that God is indeed at work to save them, even in their suffering as Christians. Then, Peter says that Jesus was “put to death” physically, literally, and then the Holy Spirit raised Him from the dead. It is this message of the Gospel that is central to Peter’s thought in 1 Peter 3:18-22. Centering his subject on the dying and rising of Jesus, Peter uses an analogy to illustrate this work of the Christ.

He says it is just like what God did for Noah’s family in the time of the Flood. God told Noah to prepare an Ark because of a great flood of judgment was about to come on the Earth. The Ark was God’s provision for safety from the Flood. Peter says, “wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.” The word “wherein” is *eis* (into) and not *en* (in), as might be expected. This is because “Noah and his family enter the Ark, and are

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<sup>3</sup> Cp. my paper “Does the Word ‘For’ in ‘For the Remission of Sins’ in Acts 2:38 Signify that Water-baptism Remits Sin?”

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saved within it.”<sup>4</sup> *Eis* here conveys the double sense of “in” and “into.” Being in the Ark saved them. They were “saved by,” or through (*dia*), “water.” Trusted and reputable commentators disagree as to what Peter means here.<sup>5</sup> He could use *dia* to mean they were “brought safely through the water,” or he could mean they were, “saved by water,” as though the waters were the means of salvation. In the first interpretation Noah’s family was saved from the waters (and the death they would cause) by the Ark. In the latter, they were saved from death by the waters that raised the Ark to safety.

There is a sense in which both are true. The Flood judged most, but “a few” were saved by it. Now we know that even the few would have died, if not for the Ark. And this is what Peter is pointing out. Just as some were slain by the water, others were delivered by it, that is, those in the Ark. In the case of the later, the “waters” saved them.

Peter then clarifies by saying, “The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us.” (KJV) Scholars find, “the syntax is notoriously difficult,”<sup>6</sup> in this passage. There are several (possible) ways scholars have interpreted it: 1) Grudem, based on David Cook’s work,<sup>7</sup> believes this phrase should be translated “escaped through water.” Grudem supports this by citing passages throughout the Bible where this form of *diasozo* is translated as “escape to.”<sup>8</sup> 2) Clowney, based on Meredith Kline’s work on covenant, sees this language as covenantal. The waters of baptism symbolize the oath of God in covenant as the one baptized passes through the waters. Covenants in ancient times took this form. God made an oath to Abraham while passing through the divided sacrifice in Genesis 15. This covenant motif is seen in baptism:

When baptism is compared to the waters of the flood or to the waters of the Red Sea, the threatening symbolism of water is brought into view. Israel was brought through the waters of the sea and of the Jordan; Noah was brought through the waters of the flood. Christians are brought through the waters of death, the flood of destruction, in order that they might be established upon the rock, secure in the resurrection life of Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Another view, 3) J.N.D. Kelly who translates it “were brought to safety by passing through water.” He uses *dia* (genitive in local sense) to point back to Moses passing

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<sup>4</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 49, (Waco, TX: Word Publishing, 1988), p. 212, citing Dalton, *Proclamation*, 207.

<sup>5</sup> The issue behind the options is between whether the genitive (*dia*) is to be taken in the instrumental or local senses. The grammar is not clear, and other contextual issues must decide the translation.

<sup>6</sup> Michaels, p. 213.

<sup>7</sup> Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishers, 1992), p. 161, citing David Cook, “1 Peter iii. 20: An Unnecessary Problem,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, Issue 31, (1980), pp. 72-78.

<sup>8</sup> Grudem, *Op. Cit.*, “This is a common sense of the verb *diasozo* in this form (aorist passive/deponent: so Gn 19:19; Jos. 10:20; Jdg. 3:26; 2Ki. (LXX 4 Ki.) 19:37, A text; Is. 37:38 [all with *diasozo* plus *eis* in the sense ‘escaped to . . .’]; Acts 27:44; 28:1.

<sup>9</sup> Edmund Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, The Bible Speaks Today, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 166.

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through the Red Sea and Joshua passing through the Jordan. In these events, the waters saved them by drowning or cutting off their enemies, without harming them as they passed through. All are good possibilities of what Peter means.

French claims that the agency of Noahic salvation was not by the Ark, but by the Flood waters *alone*. But obviously, Peter can't mean the waters alone saved Noah. As any Sunday school child knows, it was the Ark that save Noah. He has to mean something more than mere water saved Noah, because it was the Flood that was God's judgment. If not for the Ark, the waters would have been a judgment and death. But, because of God's gift of the Ark, the waters were transformed from judgment to deliverance.

I believe Peter is saying, just as Noah's family was “saved by the waters” because they were in the Ark, so we are “saved” by the waters of baptism because we are in Christ. It was not the waters that saved, but the Ark – and ultimately, God. God made a covenant oath to save Noah, and the Ark passing through the waters signified it. In the same way, it is not the waters, or the act of baptism itself that saves, but Christ. The waters of baptism signify and seal<sup>10</sup> the oath of salvation, rather than causing it. If not for Christ, the waters of baptism would be a judgment to us. Instead, baptism received through faith in Christ transforms the waters into a sign of deliverance through Jesus.

This can be seen by Peter's further explanation: “It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” One commentator puts it well: “baptism saves because we are appealing to God to cleanse our conscience based upon the resurrection of Christ.” The waters of baptism are death, except for faith in Christ. It is not baptism that saves us, but Christ. He is the believer's Ark. When we are in Christ, the waters of baptism symbolize our salvation just as the waters of the first Deluge symbolize the salvation of Noah by the Ark. The waters of baptism are a *picture of salvation in Christ* just as the waters of the Flood depict salvation under Noah in the Ark.

Peter says “the like figure,” which in Greek is *antitupos*, the word for anti-type. An anti-type is “something formed after a pattern,” [Strong's], “a thing resembling another, its counterpart; something in the Messianic times which answers to the type” [Thayers']. *Antitupos* means a “corresponding to something that has gone before.”<sup>11</sup> *Antitupos* is used only twice in the New Testament, in our text, 1 Peter 3:21 and Hebrews 9:24:

For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies (*antitupa*) of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. (ESV)

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<sup>10</sup> “Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church; but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life.” *Westminster Confession of Faith*, XXVIII, 1.

<sup>11</sup> *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 75. The Bible often uses *antitype* and *type* to refer to the same things. This means we must use *typos* carefully since it can mean both “original” and “copy.”

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The Temple and Tabernacle were copies (*antitupos*), or what we would call today, *images* or pictures of the true or heavenly things. The writer of Hebrews is saying that all the appointments and instruments of Israel’s holy places were only figures, copies, or representative images that correspond to the reality of Christ. The reality is Christ in heaven appearing in the presence of God for us. Christ finished his work of dying and rising and is now interceding as our Great High Priest in Heaven (Hebrews 4:14-16).

This is how Peter speaks. The waters of baptism are the counterpart, representative image or picture of the waters of the Flood. The Geneva Bible says:

Lest his readers mistakenly attribute a magical or mechanical power to the sacrament, Peter states that the means of salvation is not performance of the external rite, but what it symbolizes – union with Christ in His death and Resurrection.<sup>12</sup>

Some commentators go as far to say Peter is not referring to water baptism here, but is speaking about spiritual baptism into Christ:

Peter is not at all referring to water baptism here, but rather a figurative immersion into union with Christ as an ark of safety from the judgment of God. The resurrection of Christ demonstrates God’s acceptance of Christ’s substitutionary death for the sins of those who believe (Ac 2:30, 31; Ro 1:4). Judgment fell on Christ just as the judgment of the flood waters fell on the ark. The believer who is in Christ is thus in the ark of safety that will sail over the waters of judgment into eternal glory (cf. Ro 6:104).<sup>13</sup>

But, reading this verse as though it is speaking of water baptism, we still must understand that it is the *antitupos*. The question is: To what is baptism corresponding? Is baptism corresponding to the Flood? Is it corresponding to the Ark? Or is it corresponding to the whole event in which God saved eight souls from the Flood by the Ark? *I believe it is the latter.*<sup>14</sup> Grudem says, “the word *which* (*ho*) at the beginning of the verse refers back to ‘escaping through water’. Baptism corresponds to escaping through water in that the water of baptism is in some ways a counterpart to the waters of the flood.” Peter says that Christ brings us to God by dying and rising again (v. 18). This is what the event of Noah illustrates. The Ark went into the Flood waters, but by God’s sovereign power, rose above them and saved its passengers. Jesus entered the “flood” of sin and death, yet by the Spirit, the sovereign power of God, He rose above them and thereby saves those who are “in Him.”

We must understand verse 21 in its larger context by reading verses 18-22. In verse 18 Peter is talking about the reality that Christ died once for our sins and brings us to God by dying and rising from the dead. Then he illustrates this through how God saved his

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<sup>12</sup> New Geneva Study Bible, (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), p. 1975.

<sup>13</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005), p. 1915.

<sup>14</sup> Grudem, *Op Cit.*, p. 162.

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Noah’s family. Peter then uses this story to picture how Christ saves us. The waters of baptism are an antitype corresponding to the waters of the Flood. Nonetheless, it is also an antitype of Christ – it is a picture of how Christ saves us. Baptism represents the true reality, but is not that reality itself. In this way, *baptism represents both the salvation of Noah by the Flood and our salvation now through faith in Christ*. Understanding this clears up the typology confusion into which many have fallen. Through the illustration of God saving Noah from the Flood, Peter shows how Jesus saves us. And both of these real saving events are pictured or typed in the work of water baptism.

Peter says that it is not the act of physical washing that saves. It is not a figure of “removing filth from the flesh,”<sup>15</sup> What does this mean? “It is unlikely that the present passage intends to say anything so banal as that baptism’s purpose is not to wash dirt of the body. What early Christian would have thought that it was?”<sup>16</sup> The “filth of the flesh” is spiritual corruption. That is how James speaks about it: “Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” (James 1:21 ESV) Peter says this filthiness is not removed by baptism. Baptism is something else.

Baptism is an “appeal,” “answer,” or “pledge, according to various translations.” Most commentators say it is “an appeal (*eperotema*) to God for or from a good conscience (*suneidaseos*).” The questions are:

Does baptism ask God for a clean conscience? Is baptism an act responding from a cleansed conscience? Or does baptism declare to God and others that we have a cleansed conscience?<sup>17</sup>

The importance of a “good conscience” goes back to verse 16 where Peter asserts “keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.” It doing good Peter’s readers are to suffer, while giving an answer to everyone who asks “the reason for the hope that you have.” They are to present this answer with gentleness, respect and a clear conscience. Peter reminds them in verses 21-22 that their baptism assures of a good conscience before God through Jesus’ resurrection. That is, Christ has died, risen, and ascended to mediate for them (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 8:6). He presents his righteousness before the Father for all who trust in him (Phil. 3:9; Heb. 9:24-28). Thereby he guarantees them a good or clear conscience before God (Heb. 9:14). The sign of baptism pictures this truth and assures their hearts.

I believe Peter is saying that baptism is not a figure of the removal of sin, but rather it is the appeal or prayer to God from a good conscience. It is a pure heart cleansed by the blood and imputed righteousness of Christ. That is why Peter doesn’t simply say that baptism cleanses the heart from sin. He wants “. . . to avoid a magical conception of the

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<sup>15</sup> Some commentators believe this is a reference to circumcision. I see that as problematic.

<sup>16</sup> Michaels, p. 216.

<sup>17</sup> Written on September 26, 2008, by Brent Kercheville. Submitted to Biblical Studies, The Bible, Translations, Read online Oct. 29, 2008, at: <http://www.christianmonthlystandard.com/index.php/1-peter-321-appeal-response-or-pledge/>

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operation of baptism and in order to stress the fact that the new purity is a gift of God’s grace.”<sup>18</sup>

*Eperotema* (appeal, answer, or pledge) is commonly used in the Septuagint<sup>19</sup>, as a “question addressed to God.” It could be an appeal to God for a good conscience, or the appeal from a good conscience. Some say it is the former: “Hence we may translate 1 Pt 3:21: ‘Not the putting away of outward filth, but prayer to God for a good conscience.’”<sup>20</sup> A better case can be made that Peter is saying “baptism is not asking God for ‘a good conscience’”; it is rather ‘out of a good conscience,’ or a pure heart, that a person submits to baptism.”<sup>21</sup>

Hebrews 10:22 states, “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” There is a clear distinction between the inward and outward cleansing. The outward cleansing of baptism represents the inward, spiritual cleansing of the Holy Spirit:

A ‘good conscience’ is the product of the Spirit’s purifying work in a person’s heart on the basis of ‘obedience’ to the Christian gospel, but ‘good conscience’ by itself does not save. Only God can save, and God’s willingness and power to save are visibly and audibly invoked in baptism.”<sup>22</sup>

Paul associates this good conscience (*suneidaseos*) with faith (1 Tim. 1:19). The phrase “baptism now saves you” could be understood in the same way as Jesus’ words, “your faith has saved you” (Matt. 9:22, *et.al.*). It saves in the sense that it is trusting in the one who saves. Since Jesus teaches “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (Jn. 6:44) and Paul teaches that faith is “a gift from God,” (Eph. 2:8) the Bible does not teach we earn salvation *by* our faith. Neither is baptism’s effectiveness the physical act, but in the faith toward God, which it exhibits. “Although it does not wash away sins, it ‘saves’ those with a ‘good conscience’ by appealing on their behalf to God the only Savior.”<sup>23</sup>

Whatever “baptism now saves you” means, it means “it saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” That is how Peter further explains it. The appeal of a good conscience toward God is “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Here Peter emphasizes that baptism is connected to Jesus’ resurrection. Noah salvation through water – rising above the waves of judgment – is symbolized by baptism. And it pictures salvation through the resurrection of Christ, where we who are in Christ rise to a newness of life. Baptism is the appeal or prayer of good conscience toward God on the basis of

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<sup>18</sup> Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 2, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), p. 688.

<sup>19</sup> The Greek Old Testament – the Bible of the Apostles.

<sup>20</sup> Kittel, Vol. 2, p. 688.

<sup>21</sup> Michaels, p. 216.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Michaels, p. 218.

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Jesus’ rising and ascension to the place of Mediator, the Great High Priest, who represents us before the Father in Heaven. It is a conscience unimpaired and untainted by sin. It is a good or clear conscience because it is made right with God on the basis of the dying and rising of Jesus Christ.

Baptism brings us to safety, not as a “removal of the filth of the flesh,” but as a spiritual appeal or prayer to God to be saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul tells us the gospel “saves.” He means that the message of the Gospel tells us about Jesus’ saving work, which saves us if we trust in it. This is what Peter means. Baptism is a visual presentation of the Gospel. It tells us in picture form what Christ did for us. If we trust in what baptism displays, we will be saved. That’s because trusting in baptism is like trusting in the Gospel. Baptism “saves” just as the message of the Gospel saves, by telling us in picture form about the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Entering into baptism is the same as receiving the Gospel message by faith. It is not the literal act of washing, but it is the faith or appeal of the conscience to God – the believing in Jesus’ death and resurrection – that effects salvation.

In the final analysis, neither baptism nor faith ‘saves’ only God saves, and such human acts as faith and baptism are simply ways of approaching God to receive salvation. Years of ecclesiastical tradition and popular reflection have fostered the notion of baptism as cleansing, or the washing away of sins (Acts 22:16), but this is exactly what Peter says it is *not*.<sup>24</sup>

It is improper to take I Peter 3:21 in a simplistic manner, without considering the theme and context of the surrounding verses. We must also recognize Peter’s analogy and intention for using it, and then interpret all of this in the light of what Peter teaches elsewhere in Scripture (Acts 10,11,15) about salvation.<sup>25</sup> If we ignore this contextualization, we will diminish the richness and the truth of Scripture in an attempt to support a prejudiced interpretation, teaching or belief system.

Peter does not teach that the act of water baptism or the element of water in baptism saves us. He teaches that Christ saves us. God saved Noah’s family as they placed their faith in Him to save them by the Ark. To say that only the waters saved Noah without the Ark is the same as saying that only baptism saves us *without Christ*. So for us, God now saves us, as we trust in Jesus Christ as God’s saving provision from the judgment to come. Baptism is a backward and forward picture, of both these great saving events. It is *not the reality* of those events. It is the surety that salvation is ours through the Lord Jesus Christ.

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<sup>24</sup> Michaels, p. 222.

<sup>25</sup> Read <http://www.inchistalone.org/PurifiedByFaith.htm> for more detail.