

Baptism for the Remission of Sins

Acts 2:38

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Acts 2:38 (NKJV)

38 Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Acts 2:38-39 is the single most important passage of Scripture regarding baptism. Our assessment is not arbitrary or biased. When Jesus delivered the Great Commission to His Apostles, He told them to *"tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high"* (Luke 24:49). The coming of the Spirit in power on Pentecost was the official start of the proclamation of the Gospel to the whole world, beginning in Jerusalem. Peter's entire sermon, including the invitation, was preached under the power of the Spirit that Jesus promised. It is no exaggeration to say that this sermon must be viewed as the epitome of the Gospel message, because it is the official launching of the Great Commission by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Role of Faith in Conversion

"Faith" is conspicuously missing in this passage. However, no one would deny that Peter's audience had to "believe" to be saved. This should serve as an important lesson for us not to think that any one verse gives the whole mechanism of salvation. There are a variety of passages that seem to sum up the Gospel, yet they do not all contain all the same details. Romans 10:9-10 indicates clearly that confession with the mouth is necessary for salvation. Yet, it is the only passage that states this clearly. Other passages mention only believing. Others mention only repentance. But, the problem here is one of perception, not reality. None of the various statements in Scripture regarding salvation were intended to be a theological treatise on salvation. Rather, each summary statement was custom tailored to the specific need of the audience, and addressed what was lacking in them. In this case, believing is implied, because "repentance" and "baptism" would not be done by someone who did not believe what Peter was preaching. Besides, it was obvious to Peter that these men already believed what he preached, that Jesus whom they killed was indeed the promised Christ. Otherwise, they would not have cried out, *"men and brethren, what shall we do?"* Now that they had believed Peter's Gospel message, they wanted to know how they could be delivered from the guilt of sin. Peter did not tell them that their sins were already forgiven them the moment they had believed. He told them what they must do to find remission of

sins, particularly the sin of crucifying the Messiah. Faith is not mentioned in this passage because it is obvious they already believed the Gospel message Peter preached.

Baptism in Jesus' Name

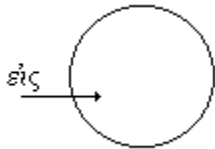
Many suppose that being baptized in Jesus' name means that the baptizer must pronounce the name of Jesus over the one being baptized. But, that is not the usual meaning of the phrase "*in the name of*" in Scripture. To do something "*in the name of*" another usually means in the *place* of another, or by the *authority* of another (cf. Matt. 10:41-42, Matt. 21:9, Acts 4:18, Acts 9:27). Consequently, to be baptized "*in the name of Jesus Christ*" means to be baptized with the baptism Jesus Christ commanded the Apostles to preach and practice on His behalf. There are no examples in Scripture of a particular formula being spoken over someone being baptized; only that it was done by the authority of Jesus Christ. The idea of baptism "*in the name of Jesus Christ*" is that the person baptizing stands in the place of Christ Himself, and acts on His behalf and by His authority. Consequently, it is as though the subject is being baptized by Christ Himself. Remember, John said that *Jesus* would baptize in the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8). That is, Jesus Himself is the one performing the baptism. A human stands in Jesus' place and submerges the recipient in the water, while simultaneously Jesus baptizes them in the Holy Spirit. That another acting on Jesus' behalf in baptism is equivalent to Christ Himself baptizing is clearly seen in the language of Scripture. "*Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John (though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples)*" (John 4:1-2). Jesus practiced baptizing by proxy using His disciples from the very beginning. So, when He commanded the Apostles in the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations, "*baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,*" there is every reason to think the Apostles understood this as a continuation of baptizing by proxy, but in Jesus' absence.

There is no contradiction between this passage and the Great Commission in Matthew 28, where the Trinitarian statement appears. The Trinitarian statement is the natural continuation of the previous statement: "*And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,"*" (Matt. 28:18-19). Because Jesus was sent by the Father, He carried the authority to speak on behalf of the entire Trinity. And since Jesus authorized the Apostles to baptize in His absence, they were necessarily baptizing "*in the name of*" the entire Trinity. Consequently, to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ is the same as being baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, because the authority of the Trinity was passed to Jesus, who then passed it to His Apostles regarding

baptism. What is important here is not the words spoken by the one baptizing, but the confession of the one being baptized (Rom. 10:9-10).

Baptism for the Remission of Sins

The text of Peter's sermon states plainly that baptism is "for the remission of sins." The Greek word translated "for" is the preposition, "εἰς." It is extremely common in the New Testament, appearing some 1774 times.



The preposition εἰς implies *progression*. It is most often translated "into" or "unto" in the KJV. The general sense is progression to a point reached. The inherent forward progress is always present when used with an action verb. The progressive force of εἰς is sometimes even apparent with state of being verbs — which do not themselves imply progress (cf. Rom. 1:16). The meaning of the preposition εἰς is illustrated by the diagram to the left. The arrow represents the progression, and the circle represents the destination. In the prepositional phrase, the circle is the object of the clause. The verb describes the kind of action; εἰς indicates the progress of the action to the object; the object indicates the point of destination or result.

The best way to understand the significance of this preposition is to examine the prepositional phrases in several other passages. Εἰς is used in many ways, but always implying progression to a point reached. It is frequently used of arrival at a specific destination. "Wise men from the East came to [εἰς] Jerusalem" (Matt. 2:2). Εἰς is also frequently found in passages that refer to the results of salvation. The typical sense is something named leads to or brings to [εἰς] salvation. Below we have listed several examples from the book of Romans, all related to the benefits of salvation, as in Acts 2:38.

Rom 1:16 KJV

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto (εἰς) **salvation** [result] to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.

"It is the power of God unto salvation" means the power of God directly leads to salvation.

Rom 5:16 KJV

16 And not as it was by one that sinned, so is the gift: for the judgment was by one **to** (εἰς) **condemnation** [result], but the free gift is of many offenses unto (εἰς) **justification** [result].

“The judgment was by one to condemnation” means that judgment leads to condemnation. “The free gift is of many offenses unto justification” means the gift leads to justification.

Rom 5:18 KJV

*18 Therefore as by the offense of one judgment came upon all men **to** (εἰς) **condemnation** [result]; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men **unto** (εἰς) **justification** [result] of life.*

“Judgment came upon all men to condemnation” means that judgment leads to condemnation. “Even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life” means that Christ's righteousness leads to justification.

Rom 5:21 KJV

*21 That as sin hath reigned **unto** (εἰς) **death** [result], even so might grace reign through righteousness **unto** (εἰς) **eternal life** [result] by Jesus Christ our Lord.*

“Sin hath reigned unto death” means that sin leads to death. “Grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life” means that grace leads to eternal life.

Rom 6:16 KJV

*16 Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin **unto** (εἰς) **death** [result], or of obedience **unto** (εἰς) **righteousness** [result]?*

“Sin unto death” means sin leads to death. “Obedience unto righteousness” means obedience leads to righteousness.

Rom 6:19 KJV

*19 I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh: for as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity **unto** (εἰς) **iniquity** [result]; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness **unto** (εἰς) **holiness** [result].*

“Iniquity unto iniquity” means that “iniquity” leads to more “iniquity.” “Righteousness unto holiness” means that righteousness leads to holiness.

Rom 6:22 KJV

*22 But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit **unto** (εἰς) **holiness** [result], and the end everlasting life.*

“Fruit unto holiness” means that bearing fruit leads to holiness.

Rom 7:10 KJV

10 And the commandment, which was ordained to (εἰς) **life** [result], I found to be unto (εἰς) **death** [result].

“Ordained to like” means the commandment was intended to lead to “life.” That it was “unto death” means that in Paul, because of his inability to keep the Law, it lead to “death” for him because it condemned him who could not keep the Law.

Rom 10:10

10 For with the heart man believeth unto (εἰς) **righteousness** [result]; and with the mouth confession is made unto (εἰς) **salvation** [result].

“Man believeth unto righteousness” means that belief leads to righteousness. *“Confession is made unto salvation”* means that confession leads to salvation.

These are just a few of many examples which illustrate clearly that the preposition εἰς indicates progression to a point. In Acts 2:38, *“repent and be baptized ... for (εἰς) the remission of your sins”* plainly means that repentance and baptism lead to, or result in, the “remission of sins.”

Those who teach that baptism is not directly linked to the second birth claim that εἰς does not always imply progression, but can simply mean “because of,” referring back to a former “remission of sins.” Some Greek Grammars written by Evangelicals typically include a “causal” (because of) meaning for εἰς and use Acts 2:38 as an example. The sense would be; *“repent and be baptized ... because of the forgiveness of sins.”* The Baptist Greek grammarian, A. T. Robertson, comments regarding εἰς are typical.

“But then another usage exists which is just as good Greek It is seen in Mat 10:41 in three examples, ‘eis onoma prophetou, dikaiou, mathetou’ where it cannot be purpose or aim, but rather the basis or ground, on the basis of the name of prophet, righteous man, disciple, because one is, etc. It is seen again in Mat 12:41 about the preaching of Jonah (eis to kerugma Iona). They repented because of (or at) the preaching of Jonah. The illustrations of both usages are numerous in the N.T. and the Koiné generally (Robertson, Grammar, p. 592). One will decide the use here according as he believes that baptism is essential to the remission of sins or not. My view is decidedly against the idea that Peter, Paul, or any one in the New Testament taught baptism as essential to the remission of sins or the means of securing such remission. So I understand Peter to be urging baptism

on each of them who had already turned (repented) and for it to be done in the name of Jesus Christ on the basis of the forgiveness of sins which they had already received.”¹

Robertson alleged that εἰς occasionally means “because of” in the New Testament. But he gave only two examples, neither of which requires his interpretation. Our contention is that εἰς **NEVER** means “because of.” Robertson has misinterpreted the few passages he uses for his examples. Of the 1774 occurrences of this preposition in the New Testament, not a single example has been proven to have such a meaning. Let's examine Robertson's two alleged examples in context.

Matt 12:41

41 "The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at (εἰς) the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.

There are two possible interpretations of the English clause, “repented at the preaching of Jonah.”

1. Robertson's understanding, that the people of Nineveh repented *because of* Jonah's preaching.
2. That the people of Nineveh repented *UNTO* (towards) the preaching (message) of Jonah.

The difference between these two interpretations of the English translation is based on whether the word “preaching” refers to the *act* of preaching or the *message* preached. Robertson's view implies that “preaching” refers to the action of preaching. Our view demands that the word “preaching” refers only to the *content of the message*. That is, the people of Nineveh repented (changed course) unto, or into conformity with, the content of Jonah's preaching.

“The preaching” is an articular noun, not a verb or even a participle. The misunderstanding here appears to be the result of translating the Greek articular noun (to kerugma) as an English participle (preaching). This is at best misleading. It is better translated, “the message,” with the Greek articular noun translated as an English articular noun. Furthermore, it seems obvious that Jesus was referring to Jonah 3:2. “Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and *preach* unto it the preaching that I bid thee” (LXX). The Greek translation of the Old Testament (LXX) uses precisely the same articular noun in Jonah 3:2 — “the preaching” — that we find in Matt. 12:41. In the

¹ Robertson, A. T., Word Pictures, Acts 2:38

clause, “preach unto it the preaching,” it is clear that “preach” is the verb and “the preaching” is the content of the message. “The preaching that I bid thee” obviously refers to the specific message God commanded Jonah to preach. This is best translated, “preach unto it the message that I bid thee.” Therefore, Jesus meant that the Ninevehites “repented unto the message” that Jonah preached in accordance with what God commanded him. The people of Nineveh repented εἰς (unto) the *content* of Jonah's message, the very words of God. So, the question is this: Did the Ninevehites repent “because of” the content of the message? Or did they repent “unto” (into conformity with) the content of Jonah's message? Either could be true because both make perfect sense. The common usage of εἰς (progression to a point reached) is perfectly compatible with this verse, and in fact makes more sense because it indicates *the direction of their change of course* implied in the word “repent.” Therefore, Matt. 12:41 cannot be proof that εἰς means “because of.” There is no reason to suspect that εἰς is not used here in its normal sense of progression to a point reached.

The second example Robertson cites is Matt. 10:41. Let's look at this verse in context.

Matt 10:40-42

40 “He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.

41 “He who receives a prophet **in** (εἰς) the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward. And he who receives a righteous man **in** (εἰς) the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward.”

42 “And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water **in** (εἰς) the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward.”

Robertson claims that the three occurrences of εἰς in verses 41-42 mean “on the basis of” or “because of.” But, there is another interpretation consistent with the overwhelming usage of εἰς which is strongly supported by verse 40. **Notice that the central truth Jesus taught here was that ultimately the good deed is done UNTO εἰς Christ Himself.** The sister passage to this one is Matt. 25. “Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, **inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.**’” (vs. 37-40). This is precisely the concept Jesus had in view when he said in this passage, “He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.”

The question then is this: What does it mean that one “receives” a prophet “εἰς the name of” a prophet, or a righteous man, or gives cold water to a disciple “εἰς the name

of” a disciple? Did Jesus mean the good deed was done “because of” the name of the prophet, the righteous man, or the disciple? Is that what people will be rewarded for? That would imply one does the righteous deed merely because of the *status* or *identity* of the person himself! But this flows counter to the principle in verse 40! It is much more likely, and consistent with the context, that Jesus meant one receives (provides housing for) a prophet or righteous man **as an act UNTO them as UNTO Christ** because they are Christ's representatives! The concept Jesus had in view here could be paraphrased as follows: “*The one who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. So, if someone receives my prophet as an act UNTO (εἰς) a prophet of mine, he will receive a prophet’s reward. And if he receives a righteous man as an act UNTO (εἰς) a righteous man of mine, will receive a righteous man’s reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water as an act UNTO (εἰς) a disciple of mine, surely, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.*” The idea is that “the name of” refers to someone's coming as Christ's representative, NOT to their own personal status or title. (Such recognition of status or title was soundly condemned by Jesus — cf. Matt. 20:25-28 & Matt. 23:8-12). This extends even to acts of kindness to children simply because they too are Christ's disciples. Our interpretation puts the emphasis on the motive behind the action — doing the kindness as unto Christ Himself because the person belongs to, or represents, Christ. This view is much more consistent with the context and Jesus' overall teaching on the subject, and it interprets the preposition εἰς consistent with the rest of its 1700+ other occurrences.

The fact is, the claim that εἰς can mean “because of” or “referring to” is totally foreign to its biblical usage. There is not a single passage in the 1774 occurrences of εἰς where the idea of progression to a point is not compatible with the context, (at least in the overwhelming majority of cases where action verbs are used, as are “repent” and “be baptized”). The attempt to inject the meaning “because of” or “in reference to” into Acts 2:38 is an attempt to deny the plain meaning of the passage, that repentance and baptism are UNTO (or lead to) the remission of sins. That some modern Greek lexicons and dictionaries include such meanings for εἰς is simply the result of the author’s or editors’ bias against linking baptism with the remission of sins. No one has successfully proven that any New Testament occurrence of εἰς means “because of” or “in reference to.” Even the Greek scholar, Daniel B. Wallace, whose personal bias is decidedly against our interpretation of baptism leading to the remission of sins, concedes that the evidence for the *causal* (because of) use of εἰς “fell short of proof.”² Of the 1774 occurrences of εἰς in the New Testament, not a single instance could be proven to mean “because of.”

² Wallace, Daniel B., Greek Grammar, Beyond the Basics, p. 370

But, let's allow Robertson a little leeway, and suppose that in one or two passages εἰς was proven to mean "because of" or "in reference to." It is an exegetical fallacy of enormous proportions to base the meaning of Acts 2:38 on an obscure usage of one word, when it goes against the overwhelming evidence to the contrary of that word's usage in the New Testament! With the huge number of passages where εἰς is used with the sense of progression to a point reached, it is inconceivable that Peter's hearers would imagine he was using the preposition in some obscure way contrary to the common usage. They would certainly understand εἰς in its common usage. "Eἰς the remission of sins" could only be taken to mean "unto the remission of sins." That is, repentance and baptism lead to the remission of sins. The person arguing for a very uncommon or unnatural understanding of a word or phrase always has the burden of proof to show from the context why such an unusual understanding is implied. Yet, no such reason can be found in this context. The only reason offered by our opponents is that this would clash with their interpretation of other passages regarding faith and works. So, they bend this passage to conform to their theology, rather than allowing this passage to contribute to their theology.

The fact is, even if a *causal* use of εἰς could be proven from other passages, the context in Acts 2:38 is decidedly against it. There are two action verbs that are connected to the "remission of sins" by the preposition εἰς. They are "repent" and "be baptized." Eἰς relates to both verbs in the same way. If Peter meant that they should do these things *because of* their **former** "remission of sins," he would be implying that they were forgiven not only before their baptism, but also before they had repented! Is that what Scripture teaches? Are we forgiven first and then we repent in reference to, or because of, our former forgiveness? Hardly!

Some have tried to resolve the problem by disconnecting "repentance" from "baptism" in this verse. In other words, first repent, and then (later) be baptized referring to the remission of sins you received when you repented. But, as we have shown, εἰς never means "because of" or looks backward. The progression is always forward. Also, both verbs are aorist imperatives and have the same syntactical relation to the preposition εἰς. Both are connected by καὶ (and) and are requirements for the remission of sins. "*Repent **and** be baptized*" cannot be divorced from each other or from the result, the remission of sins.

Others attempt to repunctuate the sentence, making the words, "*and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ,*" a kind of parenthetical statement unnecessary to Peter's point, as follows: "*Repent (and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ) unto the remission of your sins.*" In this way, the preposition εἰς would connect repentance with the remission of sins, but not baptism which is parenthetical. This argument has the

same problem as the one mentioned in the previous paragraph. Wallace writes that *“its subtlety and awkwardness are against it.”*³

Finally, after explaining why all the other attempts to get around Acts 2:38 have failed, Wallace offers his own attempt at being faithful to the Greek yet maintaining his theological (Baptist) view of baptism. Wallace postulates that in the Jewish mind, the idea of water baptism and Spirit baptism were inseparably linked. Wallace thinks that Peter referred to both the reality (Spirit baptism) and the symbol (water baptism) when he mentioned “baptism” in the name of Jesus, and that *“only the reality removes sins.”*⁴ Wallace is correct that the early Jews and Christians saw a very close association between water and Spirit baptism, **to the point of their occurring simultaneously**. But the problem with including both “Spirit” and “water” baptism in Peter's command to “be baptized” is that Peter promised the Holy Spirit **as the result of water baptism**. *“Repent and be baptized ... for the remission of your sins **and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.**”* If both water and Spirit baptism are included in the command to “be baptized,” then Peter would be making a rather redundant statement, saying that receiving the Holy Spirit would result in their receiving the Holy Spirit! Besides, “be baptized” is an imperative (a command). How can one obey a command to “receive the Spirit” unless it involves a physical act? We are totally passive when it comes to receiving the Spirit. It is something God alone does for us.

It is far better to accept that “baptism” in this verse refers only to water baptism. Receiving *the gift of the Holy Spirit* is one of the results of water baptism. Peter linked baptism and the remission of sins together in time by the use of εἰς. The promise *“and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”* is a promised result of repentance and baptism unto the remission of sins.

Wallace is correct to say that the water of baptism does not itself remit sins. The remission of sins is an act of God. Sins are not literally washed away by water. That the remission of sins occurs **WHEN** one is baptized through the act of God explains not only this verse, but other problematic verses as well, such as Ananias' statement to Paul, *“arise and be baptized and wash away your sins”* (Acts 22:16). Ananias did not expect the water of baptism to wash away Paul's sins but he did expect that Paul's sins would be washed away **WHEN** Paul was baptized in water and not before!

It is therefore apparent that water baptism, according to Peter, is not itself *the means* of remission of sins but that **it leads to** God's remitting our sins. This agrees with the New

³ Ibid.

⁴ Wallace, p. 371

Testament teaching that the second birth occurs at the *TIME* of our **obedience to the Gospel** and demonstration of our faith and repentance by submitting to baptism. Therefore, water baptism does not literally cause the remission of sins but *leads to* the remission of sins because that is when God chooses to perform the “*circumcision of Christ*” (Col. 2:11). Acts 2:38 can be interpreted just as it is worded without implying in any way that salvation is caused by works. Water baptism is the outward symbol of the act of rebirth that God accomplishes on the inside at the time of our baptism. Our obedience to the Gospel, through submitting to water baptism, results in God’s regenerating the inner man. Hence, we are born again **IN** the water, but not **BY** the water.