

Baptism and the Forgiveness of Sins

An Analysis of Acts 2:38

Though countless theologians have tried to dismiss it, the importance of Peter's proclamation in Acts 2:38 cannot be overstated. Just previous to this verse, the apostle had pronounced the house of Israel guilty of crucifying Jesus, the Lord and Christ (v. 36). Struck with remorse, they asked Peter and the other apostles what they should do (v. 37). In keeping with Joel's prophecy that everyone who would call on the name of the Lord would be saved (v. 21) and with the Great Commission (cf. Matt. 28:19; Mk. 16:16), Peter replied, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). It is unfortunate that so many Bible students attempt to destroy the significance and simplicity of this passage—relegating baptism to a mere ritualistic observance or a grace-denying work. These could not, however, be further from the truth. A careful, open-minded analysis of the passage shows baptism and the forgiveness of sins to be coupled by divine will and edict.

The chief disagreement over this verse's interpretation lies in the translation of the Greek word *eis*—"for" in most English translations ("**for** the forgiveness of your sins"). Many assign the meaning "because of" to *eis* making the passage read, "Repent, and each of you be baptized... **because of** the forgiveness of your sins"—implying that forgiveness of sins comes before baptism. This, however, is unwarranted on several grounds:

1. Greek Grammars/Lexicons: George Winer, in *A Grammar of the Idiom of the New Testament*, shows that *eis* is "the opposite of *ek*" which means "out of." Thus *eis* means "into." He, therefore, adds that *eis* "denotes any aim or end" and "the purpose and end in view." He goes on to list Acts 2:38 as an example of this usage—making repentance and baptism **for the purpose of** the forgiveness of sins. With this, lexicographers—like Grimm, Thayer, Arndt, and Gingrich—all agree (cf. *Baptism in the Scheme of Redemption*, L.A. Mott).

2. Versions: Not one English word-for-word translation of the New Testament inserts "because of" for *eis* in the passage:

"**unto** the remission of your sins" (ASV)

"**for** the remission of sins" (KJV, NKJV)

"**for** the forgiveness of your sins" (NASB, ESV, NIV)

It is interesting to note that the translators of the 1973 edition of the New International Version rendered *eis* as “**so that** your sins may be forgiven.” Similarly, two Baptist scholars, Charles B. Williams and Edgar J. Goodspeed, translated *eis* as “**that** you may have your sins forgiven” and “**in order to** have your sins forgiven” respectively.

3. New Testament Parallels: While Greek scholarship and English translations should be consulted, one of the most effective means of correctly interpreting the Bible is by comparing parallel passages. The following verses are either identical or similar to Acts 2:38 in the Greek text:

“Therefore repent and return, **so that** (*eis*) your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19).

Repent	and	be baptized	for	the forgiveness of your sins
Repent	and	return	so that	your sins may be wiped away

The same word *eis* is translated “so that” in this parallel passage, indicating that the end of repentance and conversion is the wiping away of sins. It follows then, in Acts 2:38, that the forgiveness of sins is the aim of repentance and baptism.

“For this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out **for** (*eis*) forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28).

Repent and be baptized	for	the forgiveness of your sins
Blood... poured out	for	forgiveness of sins

The construction of these phrases is nearly identical, yet none would assume that Jesus’ blood was poured out “because” man’s sins had been forgiven but that they might obtain the remission of sins.

Based on the testimony of the Scriptures, one would naturally come to the conclusion that baptism is “for” or “to obtain” the remission of sins, which accords perfectly with the rest of Bible-teaching on salvation (cf. Mk. 16:16; Acts 22:16; Gal. 3:26-27; 1 Pet. 3:21).

The obvious message of Acts 2:38 is that forgiveness of sins is obtained by those who, having believed on Jesus as Lord and Christ and experienced godly sorrow (cf. Acts 2:36-37), repent and are baptized. To neglect obedience to these conditions is to deny Bible teaching and forfeit the salvation of one’s soul.

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