

The Meaning of Immersion

At the start of the New Testament, John the Baptist – as he has become known – commenced a preaching campaign. He claimed to be the one who had been promised as being sent to prepare the way for the Messiah. He invited individuals to confess and repent of their sins and proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God. He also threatened God's wrath on the Pharisees and Sadducees who, despite having positions of authority in Jewish society, had (in practice) turned away from God. Many ordinary people heeded his call – and those who positively responded were immersed at locations where there was "much water", because immersion clearly needed enough depth of water (John 3:23). This complete immersion is a vital point to notice.

Immersion is here seen as a public sign of an individual's acknowledgement of their sins and a belief in God's Kingdom. It also represented the way by which they formally identified themselves with the preaching of John to become his disciples. It may surprise us to discover that the use of immersion in these ways has no direct Old Testament precedent. However, washing by individuals and washing of artefacts is very evident in the provisions of the Law of Moses for the triple purposes of consecration, ritual cleansing and more mundane hygienic good practice. (See for example Exodus 19:10-11 and Leviticus 17:15)

At the start of his ministry, Jesus came to John and insisted on being immersed himself by John. This event was uniquely accompanied by a response from heaven which clearly identified Jesus as the promised Messiah (Matthew 3:13-17). His preaching complemented that of John: he called sinners to repentance and denounced the Jewish rulers. John proclaimed the advent of the Kingdom of God and the Messiah; Jesus claimed and demonstrated in many ways that he was the Messiah. Jesus followed the precedent of John and required that his followers showed their repentance and commitment to his teaching by submitting to immersion – as a formal start to their discipleship and so established its essential role in the plan of salvation. Here are three examples: Jesus said to the disciples "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is immersed will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:16)

Then Jesus said to the disciples "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, immersing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:18-20)

Jesus answered Nicodemus "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." (John 3:5)

The Acts of the Apostles demonstrates how the disciples of Jesus implemented these instructions and describes the immersions of those who heard and believed the gospel message. When the people heard the apostle's preaching: "they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' Peter replied, 'Repent and be immersed, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins' ... Those who accepted his message were immersed, and about three thousand were added to their number that day." (Acts 2:37-41)

Other examples in the Acts include those Samaritans who responded to the preaching of Philip (Acts 8:12-13), as did an official from Ethiopia (Acts 8:38). The Apostle Paul was immersed by Ananias (Acts 9:18). Then came a Roman centurion called Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:47-48), Lydia and her household (Acts 16:14-15), an unnamed Philippian jailer and his household (Acts 16:32-33); and a number of disciples of John the Baptist (Acts 19:5). These all followed a similar pattern: they heard the gospel preached, they believed, they repented and then they became identified with the Name of Jesus by being immersed in water.

In the letter to the believers in Rome, the Apostle Paul explains the symbolism of the act of immersion: "Do you not know that as many of us as were immersed into Christ Jesus were immersed into His death? Therefore, we were buried with Him through immersion into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection ... now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him" (Romans 6:3-4, 5, 8; see also Colossians 2:12-13).

Acceptance of the gospel involves the recognition of mankind's mortality as a result of sin. Immersion in water represents the symbolic death of a repentant sinner, but their emergence from the water represents the central

hope of the gospel message – resurrection to eternal life. The act also identifies the believer with Jesus who (in his case, literally) passed through the same process of death and resurrection. Finally, immersion marks a formal and radical turning point in the life of a believer. Their past old life of sin is behind them, with the challenges of a new life of discipleship and commitment to Jesus in prospect before them. This contrast is made clear by the Apostle Paul in a passage in Ephesians (*one of many such teachings in the New Testament*): “Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh... that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” (Ephesians 2:11-13)

A further aspect of the symbolism of immersion is expressed by Paul when recounting his own conversation with Ananias when he was about to be immersed: “And now why are you waiting? Arise and be immersed, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” (Acts 22:16; see also Hebrews 10:22)

The New Testament directs attention to two Old Testament incidents which both exemplified and foreshadowed the three symbolic aspects of immersion, that is ‘washing clean’, the ‘death and burial of sin’ and a ‘resurrection’ to a ‘new beginning’.

Paul directs us to think of the miraculous passage of the Israelites through the Red Sea as a ‘national immersion’. (Exodus 14 and 1 Corinthians 10:1-2) For many years the Israelites had dwelt in Egypt, which had initially provided sanctuary from a famine in the land of Israel. Sadly, the attitude of the Egyptians changed and the Hebrews became slave labourers in a land which was full of idolatry. Eventually, the Pharaoh reluctantly agreed that they should depart and return to the land of Israel. They left the bondage of Egypt but Pharaoh had ‘second thoughts’ and sent his army in pursuit. They apparently trapped the fleeing Israelites at the Red Sea. God miraculously intervened: a dry passage was created for the Israelites to cross but, when the Egyptians tried to follow, the waters returned and their army perished. Thus, in figure, Egyptian bondage had been ‘buried in the water’. The Israelites were ‘cleansed and saved’ by the same waters and the nation was making a ‘new start’ as God’s chosen people – which was confirmed by the giving of The Law and the acceptance of the covenant at Sinai.

In similar fashion, Peter invites us to regard the events of the flood in Noah’s time as foreshadowing immersion (Genesis 6-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22). The world had become corrupt and rebellious in God’s sight, which brought about the devastating judgment of a great flood. The whole earth was immersed in water and it was only one man, his immediate family and representative animals that were saved by means of the ark which, following God’s instructions, Noah had constructed. Once again sin and rebellion had been put to death by ‘burial in water’. Noah, his family and the animals had been ‘cleansed and saved by water’ and they were able to make a ‘new start’ in the unfolding purpose of God.

It has been shown that Jesus commanded his followers to follow his example and be immersed to mark the commencement of their discipleship. It should follow the hearing and acceptance of the gospel message and it symbolically demonstrates mankind’s need to be washed and cleansed from sin. Immersion – a burial in water – represents an understanding of the mortality of mankind. Emerging from the water shows belief and trust in the promise of eternal life to the faithful. The practice of christening babies does not meet God’s requirements.

Furthermore, immersion shows a desire to be identified with Jesus by enacting the same process of death and bodily resurrection which he experienced. Finally, immersion should mark both an end and a beginning in the life of a disciple:

- *an end to a life without Christ, without hope, destined for the finality of death, but also
- *the beginning of a new life ‘in Christ’: a life of dedicated service, with the hope of eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

N.B. The meanings of the words immersion and baptism need to be measured against this Bible teaching about adults being immersed. Please beware of overtones of traditional understanding taking you away from the clear message of the Bible. For a full explanation, either look at your copy of ‘What the Bible teaches’ which we have given you, or send for one – or request the pdf of the chapter about this vital subject.