

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 9

Baptism and Problem Passages: Acts 22:16

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Acts 22:16 is a passage that often provokes debate due to its apparent connection between baptism and “washing away” of sins. But that idea is connected to other phrases in succession in the passage. How should Acts 22:16 be interpreted amid these other phrases and the verbal actions described? This episode takes listeners into some Greek grammar for the answer.

Transcript

Welcome back to the Naked Bible podcast. In this episode, we want to continue with our series on problem passages related to baptism. Today we'll be talking about Acts 22:12-16. That passage is a portion of the apostle Paul's testimony of his own conversion experience, and it reads as follows:

¹² “And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, ¹³ came to me, and standing by me said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. ¹⁴ And he said, ‘The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; ¹⁵ for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’

There are a few things to observe about this passage. There's a verbal sequence going on in here. We have "rise," "be baptized," followed by "wash away" and "call on." Now, the question is, what's the relationship of these actions to one another? That's important for interpretation. What we have in the first one is a Greek participle. It's an aorist active participle. Then we have two verbs that are also aorist tense (they're imperatives—commands). And then we have bookending those two verbs another participle, also aorist, and this one is in the middle voice. If you don't know Greek, all of that is meaningless. But I think I can explain the significance of this succession quickly and easily.

There are two issues to think about and understand. First, what do the terms mean that I just used (aorist tense, active voice, middle voice)? What does all

that mean? Second, what's the relationship between these actions (two participles and two verbs with the verbs sandwiched between the participles) when it comes to Greek grammar? Now, don't get scared—this really is explainable!

Let's take the first item—the terminology. In Greek, the aorist tense simply captures an action at a point in time, as opposed to describing an action that is ongoing. There are three grammatical voices in Greek: active, middle, and passive. The term "voice" is a grammatical one used to describe the relationship of a verb's action to its subject and object. The active voice simply describes the subject doing the action of the verb. To illustrate, I would say something like, "The doctor (that's the subject) injected the patient with the vaccine." The doctor is the one doing the injecting; that's an active voice. The passive voice means that the action was done to the subject by an outside thing or force or person. Again, to illustrate using the same example, we'd say "The doctor (there's our subject) was injected with the vaccine" by... whoever—someone either seen or unseen, in whatever we happen to be reading. The middle voice also has the subject doing an action like the active, but it describes doing an action when the action affects the subject itself in some way or is related to some self-benefit or self-relationship for the subject. To illustrate using the same example we would say, "The doctor injected himself with the vaccine." So there the subject does the action but the action sort of springs back upon the subject or affects the subject in some way.

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The verb forms in question in Acts 22:16 are predominantly middle voice. The subject is doing the action with respect to himself in some way. That'll be important. But before we get to why it's important, we need to move on to the second thing to think about, and that is the time of participles in meaning and translation in relationship to normal verbs. Dan Wallace, who is a noted Greek grammarian, in his book *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* has this to say:

The aorist participle, for example, usually denotes antecedent time to that of the controlling verb. But if the main verb is also aorist, this participle may indicate contemporaneous time.

Now to unpack that, we have aorist participles, and what Wallace is saying is that usually denotes a time before the action of the verb (the verbs that it's associated with). *But*, he says, if the main verb is also aorist, all these actions could be happening at the same time. And that's actually what we have. Our situation is that the participles and verbs are all aorist, so both these scenarios are possible. We could have a situation where the action of the participles (the first and fourth actions in our four-action sequence) are to be understood as being in some way prior to the action of the verbs, or they could all be happening at the same time—roughly contemporaneous.

So let's apply all that to what we know from the passage. Again, according to Wallace, the predominant relationship is this antecedent idea for participles. So if

took that approach, we would take verse 16 (our problem verse) to say this. Let me quote it again and add this grammatical information. I would translate it:

And now, why do you wait? Having risen up (there's our participle with the antecedent action), **be baptized and wash away your sins, having called on his name.**

Now if you translate it that way, that clearly puts the faith act (calling upon the name of the Lord) *before* the baptism. But it's a little awkward at the beginning to say "having risen up." One has to presume that Paul stood up at some point in the conversation when Ananias came to where he was, or perhaps to greet or embrace him. Or it could just be for rhetorical effect on the part of the author. It isn't clear.

What about the other alternative? We would say:

And now, why do you wait? Rise up, be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.

And that's pretty much the way it was translated in the way that we began with. All the actions are sort of contemporaneous with each other. This sounds a little bit better and it feels like a slightly more coherent succession of actions, but it still leaves us wondering if the water was washing the sins away—something we know from other podcasts that we've done that would be incongruent with the Old Testament analogous rite of circumcision, which didn't save anyone.

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I think the contemporaneous alternative *does* sound better, but does not involve baptism resulting in forgiveness of sins, and I have two reasons. One is a common contextual sense, I guess you would say... common sense. The other relates to the grammatical voice used in the text. What I mean by the common-sense context is this: Perhaps Ananias wanted to hear Paul's statement of faith in Jesus right when he baptized him. We, the reader, know that Paul has already believed in some sense. He got knocked off his horse on the way to Damascus. He acknowledges... He calls the force of that power "the Lord," and that power says "I'm Jesus." So we know there's something already going on. But maybe the contemporaneous sense here is just that Ananias needed to hear Paul confess Christ. That would make for a clear context for the contemporaneous nature of all these actions. Ananias wanted to hear Paul confess Jesus on the spot for himself, trusting that his faith/confession would be real. The fact that Paul would know Jesus had specifically told Ananias where to find him and had engineered all these circumstances would also confirm Paul's faith, too. So it makes good sense to describe all of that in one scene in a series of contemporary actions.

It is at this point that the grammatical voice is important. All of the actions after the initial "rising up" are middle voice. That is, the acts of being baptized, washing away sins, and calling on the Lord's name are in middle voice. They're actions

done with respect to the person or the subject himself. Now that means that they have something to do with the person's will or volition, because the subject itself is generating the action, and that there's some benefit for the subject by virtue of these personal acts of volition. Put it in another way: Had these forms been in a grammatical passive voice, where the subject of the verb is acted *upon* by an external force, then someone could argue when it gets to the "washing away" verb that the water itself was acting on the subject "washing away sin." But that isn't what we have. As it stands, there's something about the person (the subject itself) that speaks to how the subject incurs the action of the verb. Now, I would suggest, then, that these verbs do not indicate that the water (an external item or force) results in washing away the sins. Rather, it is the will of the subject—the decision to believe. Or, as one of the actions actually states, the decision to call upon the name of the Lord. That's the key.

Here's the overall point: Having the actions of being baptized, sins washed away, and calling on the Lord described contemporaneously makes sense, given that the forms are middle. Since baptism had to be administered by someone, casting the action with the middle voice makes it clear that it is not the external water that is the issue or that is in view. Rather, what's in view is the decision to be baptized, which involves calling on the name of the Lord—also a decision—and which results in sins being washed away. The scene includes individual faith and, therefore, faith cannot be excluded from what's going on, as though the mere act of getting wet brings salvation and forgiveness. The middle voice indicates it is the one being baptized that must call on the Lord's name, not someone else, not someone external to him or her on their behalf. Therefore, the grammar helps explicate the passage and shows its theology to be consistent with the view we've talked about in previous episodes of the podcast.

Until next time and our next problem passage, thanks for listening.