

## Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

### Episode 10

### Baptism and Problem Passages: Acts 2:38

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Our next problem passage related to baptism is Acts 2:38. The interpretation of this passage involves the Greek preposition *eis* as well as the overall context of the book of Acts when it comes to repentance and baptism.

### 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 2:38. This verse appears after Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost, right after he's just charged the Jews listening with putting Jesus, the Messiah, to death. The audience is understandably grief-stricken over what they've done, and so we read (beginning in verse 37):

**<sup>37</sup> Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" <sup>38</sup> And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.**

The controversial part is verse 38: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." Are we to take that wording as indicating that baptism confers the forgiveness of sins? There are a few things to consider before drawing that conclusion—features of the text and the wider context of the book of Acts that are too frequently ignored with respect to this verse.

First, the verse is really only controversial if one commits the blunder of divorcing the command to be baptized from the prior command to repent. Infants cannot repent and, as we've seen in earlier podcasts, there's no precedent for the idea that parents can believe for children or that anyone can believe for anyone else so that the result is salvation for that person who didn't believe in their own heart. So that much is transparent. This verse, whatever it might mean, therefore offers no support for the idea of baptismal regeneration of infants. We need only ask the question of whether that's what circumcision accomplished for infants to demolish the whole idea—observing that analogous connection that Paul draws

between circumcision and baptism in Colossians 2:11-12 that we've spent so much time on in earlier episodes in this series.

Second, since repentance is part of the equation here, we have in view adults, or at least persons who can make a faith decision to repent in the name of Jesus Christ. This leads to the observation that, again, whatever the wording "be baptized for the forgiveness of sins" might mean, it cannot be divorced from repentance. Responsible interpretation cannot be blind to the first half of the verse when interpreting the second half of the verse.

Third (and I think most important), the prepositional phrase "for the forgiveness of sins" is fairly flexible in interpretation. The preposition "for" is the Greek preposition *eis* which, according to Greek grammarians, might have as many as a dozen possible nuances in meaning. But more narrowly, commentators and scholars have argued for basically two semantic nuances for this preposition in Acts 2:38. The first of those we'll call "purpose." In this option, the verse would read:

**Repent and be baptized each one of you at the name of Jesus Christ  
for the purpose of the forgiveness of your sins.**

Now this view clearly casts the physical act of baptism as critical for conferring forgiveness of sins. But does that honor the circumcision parallel we've spent so much time on in earlier podcast episodes? Even in the Old Testament, the issue for salvation was not circumcision itself, as multitudes of Jews who were circumcised became apostates and idolaters. The Old Testament writers spoke of the importance of the circumcised heart—that is, loyal faith in Yahweh (for instance, Deuteronomy 10:16 or Deuteronomy 30:6). One would have to wonder what role repentance has if baptism is essential for forgiveness.

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Consider these two questions: Could someone become a follower of Christ by repenting and then not being baptized? Or, could they become a follower of Christ by being unrepentant but yet still being baptized? I would suggest it would be easy to demonstrate that repentance outweighs baptism in New Testament theology. You're not going to heaven without turning to Christ in repentance. But could you get to heaven without being baptized? I think the answer to that question is readily apparent when we consider the rest of the theology of Acts and the analogy of circumcision. To sketch what I mean here, in all the passages where repentance and baptism are mentioned together (here in Acts 2:38 and then Acts 3:19 and 26:20), repentance precedes baptism. Elsewhere in the book of Acts, salvation is described as a gift of God without respect to (or even mention of) water baptism. For example, you have Acts 10:43 (and you'll want to look at verse 47 when you do that), Acts 13:38-39, 48, Acts 15:11, Acts 16:30-31, Acts 20:21, and Acts 26:18.

Lastly, in regard to circumcision, let's pose the same two questions we just asked to circumcision. Could someone be a follower of Yahweh by repenting and not

being circumcised? Yes. We have examples like Naaman (the leper in 2 Kings 5), who clearly came to see Yahweh as the true God before returning to Syria. But he was never circumcised. What about the flip side? Could someone be a follower of Yahweh by not repenting but still being circumcised? Well, the Old Testament bears abundant witness—namely, the exile into Babylon—that tells us that God does not view a rebellious heart (the uncircumcised heart) as demonstrating loyalty to him, regardless of whether the person was physically circumcised. Yahweh puts this in the gravest terms to the prophet Hosea, where he tells the prophet that Israel is *lo ammi*—not my people—because of their disloyalty, rebellion, and refusal to repent (Hosea 1:9).

The purpose explanation for the controversial phrase in Acts 2:38, then, has little to stand on. The next option that you'll typically read in commentaries and academic material is what we'll call the "causal" view. In this option, the verse would read:

**Repent and be baptized each one of you in the name of Jesus Christ because of (or on the basis of) the forgiveness of your sins.**

This possibility suggests very strongly that one is to be baptized only on account of repentance, which is what caused (or produced) the forgiveness of sins. This view preserves a doctrine of salvation by grace through faith—conversion—and would be consistent with Old Testament adult circumcision, where someone decided to forsake other gods and become a follower of Yahweh, subsequently receiving circumcision to enter the community of faith and to learn about Yahweh and how to be rightly related to him. One instance where the preposition *eis* bears this semantic nuance (interestingly enough) is Luke 11:32, which was written by the same author as the book of Acts. In Luke 11:32 we read:

<sup>32</sup>**The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at [MH: Here's our preposition aes] the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.**

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So I would conclude that the most coherent interpretation, then, is that Acts 2:38 focuses on repentance, with other elements ensuing in relation to repentance. That is, repentance ought naturally to lead to a decision to be baptized. The changed heart, shown both in terms of trust in the name or person of Jesus and the willingness to be baptized are both associated with the forgiveness of sins. But forgiveness is not conferred by the outward act, but in response to the inward act. So the circumcised heart (the repentant heart) is one that will show itself in the outward act of fidelity to Jesus, which was water baptism. This, of course, does not nullify the validity of infant baptism—presuming that infant baptism conforms to the Old Testament theology of circumcision (something we've covered at length in earlier podcast episodes on baptism). The ritual of

circumcision did not confer salvation or predispose the infant to belief in Yahweh. Rather, it merely placed the child in the community of faith that had received the revelation of the true God (Yahweh) and how to be rightly related to him.