

How to Enter the Race

IF AN ATHLETE wishes to participate in a competition, he or she cannot simply turn up at the stadium and expect to be admitted to the starting line. For most, some specific standard needs to be reached or they must win a number of preliminary heats in order to qualify. In a similar way, those who wish to take part in the race for eternal life, and to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, must do the same.



The Bible makes it very clear that in order to enter the race for eternal life, first a person must believe the gospel message and have faith in God.

Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him (Hebrews 11:6).

This faith means believing that God exists, and that He will fulfil the promises that He has made. The next step is to repent of old sins, in

other words, be sorry for disobedience to God in the past, and commit to taking one's life in a new direction. This is demonstrated in the next step, which is being baptised.

Shortly after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension to heaven, crowds of people were gathered listening to the Apostle Peter as he preached the good news about Jesus. They acknowledged the error of their former ways and asked him:

*"Men and brethren, what shall we do?"
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" (Acts 2:37-38).*

In other words, for a person to have their sins forgiven and the hope of eternal life, baptism is a necessity.

What is Baptism?

The Bible makes it clear that baptism is the full immersion of an adult in water. For example, when John the Baptist carried out baptisms in Israel, he did so in the river Jordan:

Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins (Matthew 3:5-6).

If baptism for the forgiveness of sins needed just a sprinkling of water on the head, there would have been no need for a deep river. Jesus was also clearly in the water of the Jordan river when he was baptised:



When he had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water (Matthew 3:16).

In order to come up from the water he must have been down in the water beforehand. The book of Acts describes the baptism of a man from Ethiopia in a similar way:

Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?"... So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. Now when they came up out of the water the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing (Acts 8:36–39).

These verses show that biblical baptism is complete immersion in water rather than just a few drops on the head. As we saw earlier, belief

and repentance must come before baptism. Another example is in the words of Jesus:

He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:16).

If a person needs to believe in God and His Son, and repent from his or her previous behaviour, then baptism is only for adults. Interestingly, Jesus himself was baptised at the age of thirty, and not as a child.

What Does Baptism Symbolise?

Why does the Lord Jesus require this from those who wish to have their sins forgiven and to have the hope of eternal life? After all, immersing oneself in water is something people do every day, perhaps in the bathtub or at the swimming pool. Why is baptism any different?

The Bible establishes that baptism is not simply the washing of the body:

...which now saves us – baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God) (1 Peter 3:21).

The act of baptism is thus not for cleansing the body, but the demonstration of a good conscience, of this commitment to a new life obeying God. It is also meant to associate oneself with the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, as the Apostle Paul explains:

Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with him through baptism 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 (Romans 6:3–4).

By being baptised we are, in symbol, participating in the death of the Lord Jesus as we go down under the water; in fact, if we stayed under the water we would actually die! But in this way we can have our sins forgiven, and we rise out of the water in a picture of Jesus' resurrection, with the hope of everlasting 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, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin (v5–6).

After Baptism, What Next?

Baptism is just to get us started on the race for life. The Bible explains that after being baptised and committing

their life to the Lord Jesus, a man or woman must live as closely as possible to his example. The picture is one of being 'dead' to our old lives of disobedience to God.

Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord (v11).

The Apostle Paul also wrote the Letter to the Colossians, where he used a different picture, one of focusing our minds and effort on Godly, heavenly things:

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Colossians 3:1–4).

Baptism is the qualifying process, joining this race for the prize of everlasting life.

The job of the Christian then, is to dedicate their lives to remaining on track, waiting for Jesus to return and to bring the reward:

When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (v4).

Behold, I am coming quickly, and my reward is with me, to give to every one according to his work (Revelation 22:12).

