

• *Eight people were rescued through water*

Eight people were rescued through water, says Peter. The first Greek words of verse 21 may be translated 'which also...'. The 'which' refers to 'water' mentioned in verse 20. We may translate: 'This water ... also...'

'This water – which is an illustration of baptism – now saves us also, not as a putting away of filth from the sinful nature, but as an appeal for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ'^{□1}.

□1 3:21

• *'Through' has two meanings*

At the time of the flood, Noah and his family were 'saved through water'. The phrase in verse 21 is nicely ambiguous! The Greek 'through' means both 'through' in the sense of a change of location, and 'through' in the sense of 'by means of'. Noah and his family were brought to safety through the flood-waters that drowned the Mesopotamians. At the same time, because they were in the ark, it was the water itself which lifted them up above the doomed world around them. They were brought safely 'through' the water; and the water that drowned others lifted them to safety. They were brought to safety by means of the water! The element that caused the destruction also caused the salvation!

• *A change of location*

• *By means of*

All of this, Peter says, is an 'illustration' of what happens when a person comes to salvation in Jesus and is baptized. The Christian's baptism may be used by God to lift him up above the waves of sin, guilt and condemnation. When water-baptism is rightly used with faith, much spiritual blessing may come. The flood-waters lifted the small family to safety above the drowning world beneath them. Something similar may happen in water-baptism.

• *An illustration of baptism*

1. Peter explicitly denies any doctrine of salvation by ceremony

1. **Peter explicitly denies any doctrine of salvation-by-ceremony.** He denies that water-baptism has any direct power to cleanse the sinful nature of men and women. He explicitly says: it is not a putting away of filth from the sinful nature. I do not think that Peter's point is that water-baptism does not save us as an **ordinary** washing of the body. Surely Peter is saying something deeper and more profound than that! 'Flesh' here surely refers to 'sinful nature' as often in Paul's writings^{□1}, in John's writings^{□2} and in 2 Peter 2:10, 18; Jude 23. The phrase 'filth of the flesh' makes it certain that 'flesh' has the meaning 'sinful nature' in 1 Peter 3:21. Water-baptism has no direct action in cleansing the sinful nature. Any doctrine of salvation-by-ceremony must be firmly rejected. There is no grace in the water of baptism!

□1 see Galatians 5:16, 17
□2 see John 3:5

• *Water baptism has no direct action in cleansing the sinful nature*

For some expositors, water-baptism (provided that there is no wilful resistance) achieves the eradication of original sin, the eradication of all personal sins, and the impartation of a new spiritual nature – even in newborn infants! But there are millions of 'water-baptised' people, perhaps sprinkled in infancy, who in no way show any evidence whatsoever of having a new nature. What sort of 'regeneration' is it that has not the slightest effect upon the life and character of the person concerned? Any such 'baptismal regeneration' must be a very useless, ineffective 'regeneration' indeed! On the contrary, 'new birth' comes directly from God^{□1}, takes effect through God's word^{□2} and endures forever! The administration of water does not in itself bring about any new birth. In fact, nothing physical or material brings a new nature into the heart of man or effects any new birth.

□1 see 1:3
□2 see 1:22-25

• *On the contrary, 'new birth' takes effect through God's word and endures forever*

• *Baptism as a means of new birth – a superstition that has gripped the church from the 2nd century onwards*

The preoccupation of the church with baptism as a means of new birth stems from the superstition about water that gripped the church as early as the second century. Very early in the church Christians fell into superstition about baptismal water. Justin Martyr in the second century thought the administration of water gave 'power to regenerate'.^a For Irenaeus in the second century, water-baptism is 'rebirth unto God'.^b Tertullian at about the same time said 'Nobody can be saved without baptism'.^c But if this refers to the administration of water, it is simply superstition – as a little reflection on Acts 10:47 will reveal. The early church tended towards superstition at this point; it has affected the church ever since.

2. Water-baptism is an expression of faith

2. **Water-baptism is an expression of faith.** Peter explains how baptism can be a means of ‘saving’ us, lifting us above judgement. It does so because it may be ‘an appeal^d for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ’. Baptism is a way of publicly expressing faith in Jesus. The baptized person is declaring his faith, and calling upon God for a conscious experience of forgiveness. The baptized person is already right with God, but is looking for a conscious experience of forgiveness. He wants a good conscience. He or she wants to feel forgiven and clean by the Holy Spirit.

3. Water-baptism is a prayer

3. **Water-baptism is a prayer.** The baptized person is believing God’s promises and calling upon God for a good conscience; so baptism is a kind of prayer. Acts 22:16 illustrates Peter’s point. Saul of Tarsus had already come to faith in Jesus; he was already ‘justified’, right with God. ‘Rise and be baptised, and wash away your sins, calling on his name’. Paul was already a child of God. He is now to be baptized – and to use his baptism as an occasion to appeal to God for a good conscience! He must call on the name of the Lord. God will hear his prayers and his conscience will be cleansed from any sense of guilt. He will feel forgiven.

• *Saul of Tarsus*

• *The Jerusalem crowd in Acts 2*

Acts 2:38 also illustrates Peter’s point. The crowd in Jerusalem had already come to faith (as verse 37 shows). They are ready to do anything God asks of them. Peter tells them to express their faith by being baptized. The result will be a sense of forgiveness, and the outpouring of the Spirit upon them, sealing their salvation.

• *Brought into a new world – like Noah*

Just as Noah’s family went through water into a new world, so faith in Jesus expressed in baptism brings us into a new world also! Baptism does not save us from ‘the flesh’ as if baptism were a magic power. Rather it is an expression of faith looking for the experience of God’s forgiveness.

• *The ‘ark’ of salvation is not a boat – it is Jesus*

Next Peter goes a step further. The ‘ark’ of salvation is not a boat; it is Jesus Himself at the right hand of God. ‘*He is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, having subjected to himself angels and authorities and powers*^{a1}. Noah was rescued by walking into a boat. The Christian is lifted up above the feeling of guilt by putting his faith in Jesus, and expressing that faith in water-baptism. God is then likely to pour out the Spirit upon him and ‘seal’ to him in his conscience, the forgiveness of sins.

□¹ 3:22

• *Baptism is an appeal for good conscience through Christ’s resurrection*

The last phrase of verse 22 confirms our interpretation of 3:19. Jesus has made a journey into heaven. In doing so He has conquered all spiritual powers. 1 Peter 3:22 confirms 3:19. The risen Lord Jesus Christ has died for our sins; His sacrifice has been accepted to give us freedom from guilt. When we get baptized we appeal for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Footnotes

a *Adversus Omnes Haereses* 3:17:2.

b *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 3.

c *De Bapt.* 12:1.

dOne meaning of *eperotao* is ‘to request, to appeal’; I take it that *eperotema* has a related meaning.



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