

Peter's Teaching on Baptism and Salvation

In 1 Peter 3:21, the phrase, “baptism now saves you” must be understood within the full context of Scripture. Bearing in mind that Peter was the source of Mark’s gospel, it is important to consider what that book has to say about salvation and baptism. For it is in Mark 16:16 that we read Yeshua’s declaration that:

“He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.”

This order of belief first and baptism second is consistent through Scripture (e.g. Acts 2:38; 10:48). And there are many places, like Ephesians 2:8, that refer to salvation by faith alone, without mentioning baptism at all.

Peter was a firsthand witness to multiple encounters where Yeshua explicitly granted full salvation to individuals on the spot based entirely on faith (Mark 5:34; 10:52; Luke 7:48-50; 23:43). Peter personally experienced the limitation of physical acts versus the power of faith during his famous walk on the Sea of Galilee that failed when his focus wavered and upon his rescue by Yeshua, he was told “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:31).

On the night of Yeshua’s last Passover, when Peter resisted Yeshua’s attempt to wash his feet, and then swung to the opposite extreme of ritualism by calling for Yeshua to wash his hands and his head. That led Yeshua to reply that “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean” (John 13:10). In that way, Yeshua taught Peter that a foundational, permanent spiritual cleansing had already taken place within him. Nothing else was needed to secure his salvation, but he only needed the daily, relational “foot washing” of confession and humility.

So, clearly, Peter understood salvation to be a matter of faith alone. This greater context aligns with his teaching at the end of chapter 3 of his first epistle.

Peter just finished talking about people in verse 20 who believed Noah and entered the ark, demonstrating their faith. Then, the flood waters came, and depending on your translation, it may read that the people “were brought safely through water” (NASB) or “saved by water” (KJV). The Greek preposition *dia* allows for both renderings. The problem with “by water” in this context is that it was the agent of condemnation of evil, not salvation of the righteous, which was found in the ark. This understanding informs our understanding of Peter’s teaching on baptism, for the same preposition *dia* is used verse 21, so that “through the water” parallels “through the resurrection.”

In verse 21, he now calls baptism an antitype (Gr. *antitupon*, translated as “corresponding to” in the NASB). A type is an event, person, object or concept that foreshadows a future spiritual reality, which is the antitype.¹ In this case, the type is the water of Noah’s flood and the antitype is baptism. The literal translation of this verse is: “Which [water], even baptism, as an antitype, is now saving you.”

The waters of the flood confirmed God’s prior judgment upon humanity, as described in Genesis 6, which confined the rebellious spirits described in 1 Peter 3:19-20. Baptism declares a similar victory over the corruption of sin and the demonic spirits that influence us. The end of verse 21 and verse 22 explicitly state that this saving power comes through the resurrection of Messiah,

¹ Other examples include Hebrews 9:24, where the writer says that the earthly Tabernacle was an antitype (copy) of the true heavenly sanctuary. In 1 Corinthians 10:6, Paul says the events that happened to Israel in the wilderness happened as types (examples) for us as patterns of warning. In Romans 5:14, Paul calls Adam a type of Yeshua.

who has gone into heaven “with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.” So, baptism not only serves as a sign of a person’s salvation, it is a declaration of alignment with the ultimate Victor over the spiritual realm.

Water is the common element. However, Peter’s statement on saving in verse 21 explicitly rules out the idea that the physical water has magical, properties that can wash away moral guilt. He uses the Greek word *sōzei*, meaning to save, deliver, rescue, or preserve. In the New Testament, “salvation” can refer to three different dimensions:

- **Justification:** Legal deliverance from the guilt and penalty of sin (eternal salvation).
- **Sanctification:** Ongoing deliverance from the power of sin in daily life.
- **Deliverance:** Physical or spiritual rescue from a corrupt environment or judgment.

Here, *sōzei* is in the present active tense of the verb, which describes something occurring in a continuous manner in the present, best translated as “is now saving.” That is a clear reference to sanctification, so that Peter is talking about an ongoing, daily deliverance that the believer experiences in the here and now. If he was referring to the salvation of justification (being legally declared righteous before God), he would have used the manner of other New Testament writers who used the past tense (aorist) or perfect tense—because justification is a finished, once-for-all legal reality the moment you believe (e.g., Romans 5:1, “having been justified”).

Peter immediately reinforces the exact scope of this salvation so his readers do not confuse it with a supernatural soul-saving ritual. He says it does not wash dirt from the body, but is “the appeal of a good conscience toward God.” The Greek word for “appeal/pledge” is *eperōtēma*. In ancient Roman legal and business contracts, this was a formal question asked during the sealing of a covenant: “Do you pledge to fulfill the terms of this agreement?” The legal answer was a binding commitment. Therefore, baptism is a person’s formal, public response to the Gospel. It is an appeal and a pledge of allegiance to live for God. It “saves” because it is the outward manifestation of an inward, saving faith. And that makes the physical act of immersion merely the external sign, not the internal engine of salvation.

This points directly to sanctification as the dimension of salvation that Peter is addressing in this passage. A person who has been justified by faith still has to live daily in a broken world. Baptism serves as a formal, covenant pledge—a public declaration of allegiance to Yeshua. By making this pledge, the believer breaks ties with the old world, experiences the subjective peace of a clean conscience, and walks in the power of Yeshua’s resurrection.