

“For The  
Remission  
Of Sins”

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Acts 2:38

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## For the Remission of Sins

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In Acts 2:38, the apostle Peter has just charged his audience with the sin of crucifying the Son of God. He then tells them they must “repent and be baptized for the remission of sins.” Most of the denominations say the phrase “for the remission of sins” means “*because* of the remission of sins”—that is, be baptized *because* your sins have already been forgiven. Does Peter mean repent and be baptized “*because* your sins have been forgiven” or repent and be baptized “*in order that* your sins be forgiven”? There are at least three ways to address this question.

First, the broad context of Acts 2 provides the first line of response. It is quite clear that Peter’s audience has been convinced of their sin. They have just seen the miraculous effects of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles; they have just heard Peter’s soul-stirring, scripture-filled sermon highlighting their guilt in executing Jesus of Nazareth. Verse 37 says Peter’s audience is “cut to the heart” and they cry out, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (NKJV). It is clear they are a people under conviction of conscience. They have just come to realize they killed the long-promised Messiah. Their response is not that of a people who have already experienced the “times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord” in the forgiveness of their sins. Quite the contrary! Their response is that of a people who know they are under sin’s condemnation and are pleading for a way to escape. “Men and brethren, what shall we do to be forgiven of our sins?” is the essence of their cry. Peter’s response in verse 38 is precisely the response that a guilty people, not a forgiven people, would be seeking to hear. And Peter’s response is just the response that an inspired man would give to a people he knew to be in that condition. “Repent,” he says, “and be baptized!” Why, Peter? “In order for your sins to be forgiven.” Hence, the broad context of the narrative teaches us that baptism is not “*because* God, for Christ’s sake, has already forgiven your sins,” but baptism is *for* (i.e. “in order to receive”) the forgiveness of sins. This conclusion is the most logical one considering the spiritual condition of Peter’s audience and the tone of their request in verse 37.

Second, the immediate context of verse 38 itself requires that “*for* the remission of sins” means “*in order to* receive forgiveness.” We focus on the specific words “Repent and be baptized...” These words contain two commands, paraphrased thus: 1) you must repent, 2) you must be baptized. These commands are joined by “and” which couples them as a grammatical unit. As such, both commands are equally important and together share the same aim and result. That is, “Do these two things—*for the remission of sins.*” Thus, whatever the reason the Lord commanded them to repent is also the reason the Lord commanded them to be baptized.

Why does this matter? Because those who say that Peter tells the people to be baptized because they are already forgiven also believe the opposite about repentance. In their view baptism follows forgiveness while repentance precedes it. This view, however, puts Peter at odds with himself because it assigns differing purposes to the two grammatically joined commands, repent and be baptized. It makes Peter use the word “for” to mean “in order to” regarding the repentance part of the command, and “because of” regarding the baptism part. “Repent *in order to* receive forgiveness, and be baptized *because* you have been forgiven.” Can anyone believe that the ordinary rules of language will bear out such an interpretation as this—to make the word “for” have two different, even opposite meanings in the same place at the same time? This obvious contradiction is clearly one of the reasons you virtually never hear Acts 2:38 quoted or alluded to by “faith only” preachers, including the popular ones of “Christian radio.” Just take your pick of them.

The third point focuses on the single word “for.” This point is a bit more technical, and that is why it is introduced only after introducing the two above arguments which any Bible student may easily deduce from his or her English translation. But this third point is worthy of notice. The matter at issue here is not whether Peter is giving the purpose (the reason why) of baptism. It is generally agreed that he is giving his audience the purpose for being baptized. Rather, the question is whether the reason lies in the future or in the past at the time of baptism—forgiveness as a result of baptism, or baptism as a result of forgiveness. Hence, the following discussion of the word “for.”

“For” in our translation is the rendering of the little Greek word *eis* (pronounced “ace”). This little word is capable of a variety of nuances—one of which is purpose, the very issue under consideration. The scholars are virtually undivided on the significance of this word as it relates to purpose. Here is a brief summary: *eis* is a preposition whose basic meaning, when expressing purpose, is “for, in order to, toward” (see virtually any Greek lexicon). This summary is not comprehensive but it is sufficient to demonstrate that, when expressing purpose, *eis* has a prospective, “forward-looking” significance rather than a retrospective, “backward-looking” significance. In fact, it carries this idea in all of its nuances and not just when expressing purpose. Conversely, when the Greek language expresses the idea of “because of (something),” it does not use the word *eis* at all. Instead, it uses the little word *dia*—a word that does not even appear in Acts 2:38.

It is true, however, that the English word “for” can have either a prospective or a retrospective meaning, depending on how it is used. For example, when a mother says to her son, “Son, please go to the store **for** a loaf of bread,” she uses the word “for” with a prospective meaning—i.e. go to the store **in order to get** a loaf of bread (focus toward the future purchase of bread). But if we say, “When the son comes home with bread, the mother jumps for joy,” we use the word “for” with a retrospective meaning—i.e. she jumps **because of** the joy that already seized her just prior to her “jumping” (focus toward joy previously received). It is this latter usage that people have in mind when they say baptism is because of the remission of sins in Acts 2:38. However, while the two above examples demonstrate that the English word “for” does indeed have such flexibility, *eis* indeed does not. Therefore, since the English word “for” can have either of these meanings, but *eis* cannot, then we must construe “for” (when a translation of *eis*) to have only the meaning *eis* is capable of having in such cases. We may not shift to a meaning that “for” can sometimes have but *eis* can never have. Therefore, Peter commands his audience to repent and be baptized in order that they may have the forgiveness of their sins.

Furthermore, this prospective idea of “for” is also evident in the words of Jesus when instituting the Lord’s Supper in

Matthew 26:28. Jesus speaks of “My blood...which is shed for many *for the remission of sins.*” Virtually all can see the prospective idea in the word “for” in this passage. That is, the outpouring of Jesus’ blood on the cross is for the purpose of establishing a provision which was previously non-existent, but after his blood was shed, it is available to all who will obey the gospel.

Significantly, both the phrase in Matthew 26:28 and the one in Acts 2:38 are exactly the same words—in both English and Greek! Both employ the word *eis* in a prospective sense—one speaking of Jesus establishing the provision of forgiveness, the other speaking of repentant sinners gaining access to that provision. Why people can easily see the prospective idea of “for” in Matthew 26:28, but they cannot see anything but a retrospective idea in Acts 2:38, can be due to nothing but the blinding influence of the “faith only” doctrine? Let the denominational world give up its allegiance to Martin Luther’s “Faith Only” and heed the words of the Lord through His inspired apostles!



