

## For The Remission Of Sins – Acts 2:38

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50 days after Christ's crucifixion and about 10 days after His ascension, the apostles gather together in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Acts 2:1-4 tells us that on this momentous day, the apostles received the Holy Spirit. As promised, this great Helper, sent by Christ, called to their remembrance the words of Jesus and guided them into all truth that He had yet to teach them (cf. John 14:26, 16:12-15). Consequently, these brave men were able to preach the "wonderful works of God" with authority and power from Christ (Acts 2:11). On this occasion, Peter stood up and preached Christ crucified, accusing the listening Jews of rejecting and murdering God's Messiah, and boldly declaring that God raised this Jesus from the dead to be both Lord and Christ. Upon hearing this message, the Jews were absolutely devastated – "cut to the heart" – and so turned to Peter and the rest of the apostles to ask what they could do to escape the wrath of God (Acts 2:37). In response to this earnest plea, Peter gave a simple command – a command bound first in heaven, now to be bound on earth by the apostles (Mark 16:19) – "*Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ **for** the remission of sins*" (Acts 2:38). In other words, repent and be baptized in order to obtain forgiveness of sins, to be "saved" (Acts 2:40,47).

Some religious teachers argue that the little word **for** in this passage means not "to obtain" but "because of," striving to prove that baptism is not a condition of forgiveness but an outward sign that a person has *already* received the remission of sins. In other words, some claim that Peter told his audience to be baptized because they had *already* been forgiven, not because they still needed to be saved. An appeal to the language of Acts 2:38 reveals the error of this theory.

1. Researching authoritative Greek lexicons (such as Thayer's or Strong's) reveals that *for* (Greek, *eis*) does not mean "because of," but denotes purpose rather than cause. In fact, Thayer notes that the Greek phrase here translated "*for the remission of sins*" literally means "*to obtain the forgiveness of sins*" (*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 94). Consequently, the New Revised Standard Version translates this phrase, "*Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven.*" Interestingly enough, Edgar J. Goodspeed, the Baptist theologian and Greek scholar who translated the *American Translation* of the New Testament, evidently drew much criticism from his denominational peers for abandoning faith-only theology in striving to accurately translate the text of Acts 2:38 – "*Peter said to them, 'You must repent, and every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, in order to have your sins forgiven...'*" (cf. Reese, *New Testament History: Acts*, 78).

2. "*For the remission of sins*": this *exact* same phrase (identical in the original Greek) is used in Matthew 26:28 by Jesus Himself – "*For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.*" Christ's blood was shed on the cross of Calvary "for the remission of sins," to "[take] away the sins of the world" (John 1:29). Surely no one would argue that Jesus sacrificed Himself because the sins of the world were already forgiven, but so that the world might *obtain* the forgiveness of sins!

3. Just looking at the context of Acts 2:38 shows that a causal use of *for* does not make logical sense: the Jews were not rejoicing in their saved condition, but were cut to the heart because of

their tremendous guilt and shame. These sinful persons wanted to know what they needed to do in order to be saved, and Peter responded by inspiration of the Holy Spirit to that earnest question. After all, the text goes on to say, “*And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation.” Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them*” (Acts 2:40-42). They already believed in the risen Christ but they were not yet “saved” until they responded to Peter in being baptized!

4. Lastly, if Peter really meant that his audience should be baptized because they had already been forgiven of their sins, then Acts 2:38 necessarily teaches that *repentance was also commanded because they had already been saved* – after all, he said that repentance was “for the remission of sins,” too. However, the Scriptures clearly teach that repentance (a change of will/mind and a turning toward God caused by sorrow for sin) must come before salvation, not after it – “*godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation*” (II Cor. 7:10 NIV; see also II Chron. 7:14; Matt. 9:13; Luke 13:5; Acts 3:19).

Upon examining all of these factors, Acts 2:38 simply cannot be properly handled to advocate the doctrine that baptism follows the salvation of a believer in Jesus. Jesus Himself commanded that “*he who believes and is baptized will be saved*” (Mark 16:16). Following His Master, and by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Peter clearly commands that believers must repent and be baptized in order to obtain the forgiveness of sins, i.e. in order to be saved.

And Peter never changed his story! “*There is also an antitype which now saves us – baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ*” (I Peter 3:21).