

# Must One Be Baptized For the Remission of Sins?

## A Study of Acts 2:38

Jesse L. Sewell was born in 1818 and became a Baptist preacher. He started preaching the truth about Acts 2:38. He was convicted of heresy and was to be excluded from the Baptist Church. The moderator told him to write, "For teaching heresy." Sewell would not, but he did write that he was being thrown out of the Baptist denomination for preaching "baptism for the remission of sins" according to Acts 2:38.

Just what is so threatening about Acts 2:38? It is only one verse out of many which record the first Gospel sermon. Peter shows that God approved of Jesus and His teachings by the many miracles Christ wrought. Yet, the Jews killed Him. God raised Him up from the dead and exalted Him to the right hand of His Throne. After Peter accused his audience of killing God's Son, Jesus Christ, "*they were pricked in their hearts*" (Acts 2:37). These murderers wanted to know what they needed to do about their heinous guilt before God. "*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; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'*" (Acts 2:38, NKJV).

The conflict over this verse has to do with whether it really teaches baptism for the remission of sins or not. Many denominations teach that one is saved at the point of faith. The sinner is saved by faith only and then they are baptized "for (*eis*, Greek) the remission of sins." "Eis" is pronounced "ace" or "ice." According to some denominational preachers, Acts 2:38 could mean one is baptized for the purpose of salvation or "because your sins have been remitted." For example, a man goes to prison "for" murder. What does "for" mean? Did he go to prison in order to commit murder or because he had already committed murder?

The New Testament was originally written in Koine or common Greek. The Greek words translated "for" are *eri*, *dia*, *gar* and *eis*. *Eis* is found 1600 times in the New Testament. The word *dia* means "because of" or "on account of", but the word *eis* never means "because of."

The only way most Bible students are going to be able to discern the meaning of *eis* is by use of Greek lexicons. A lexicon is a dictionary of ancient languages, such as, Koine Greek. How do lexiconographers define the word *eis*?

- "eis, a prep. Governing the accusative, and denoting entrance into, or direction, and limit: into, to, towards, for, among,...eis aphasin hamartion, to obtain the forgiveness of sins, Ac. 2:38..." (Thayer, 183).
- "For forgiveness of sins, so that sins might be forgiven" (Arndt and Gingrich, 228).
- "Direction toward, motion to, on, or into" (Liddell and Scott).
- *Eis* - "stressing result rather than purpose, this word has the sense of 'with a view to' or 'resulting in.'" (C.F.D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 70)

- “...it implies motion into or towards” (Berry’s Lexicon, 31)
- Paul Southern: “The word expresses entrance, direction, limit. It means into, unto, to, upon, towards, for. In other words, it looks toward purpose, end, goal.”
- Edward Robinson: “Of an intent, purpose, aim, end...In the sense of unto, in order, to or for...eis aphasin hamartion.”
- John Parkhurst: “eis - the final cause or purpose of anything...and is translated for...”
- “with a view to” (Young’s Analytical Concordance to the Bible, 362)
- “The purpose and end in view ...Acts 2:38...” (Winer’s N.T. Grammar, p. 398)

According to these lexiconographers, *eis* points forward not backward. Baptism is *eis* (for) the remission of sins. Salvation is after baptism, not before baptism. Many scholars of the Greek New Testament concur with this definition of the word *eis*.

- H.B. Hacket, D.D., Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles: “unto the remission of your sins.”
- Southern Baptist Theological Seminary defined *eis* in a letter: “unto remission of your sins.”
- University of Chicago Divinity School, Allen Wikgren: “for (lit. “to”) the forgiveness (or “remission”) of your sins.”
- D.A. Penick, Prof. of Classical Language, Univ. of Texas: “Normally ‘eis’ looks forward and I know of no case in the New Testament where it looks back.”
- Johann F. Lange, German Lutheran, “...the former (aphesin) namely, is indicated by the word eis (for the remission, etc.) As the immediate purpose of baptism, and as the promise unseparably connected with it...” (Comm. On Act, 53).
- “Its original meaning (basic meaning) is ‘motion into’; its derived meaning (in quite general use in all Greek from Homer and N.T.) is ‘for purpose of.’ Hence Eis aphasin in Acts 2:38; means for (the purpose of) remission (forgiveness)” (George J. Bryan, College of William and Mary).
- “...because eis denotes purpose and not cause...in Greek you would use the preposition dia” (Henry V. Shelly, Univ. of Washington and Lee).
- “...eis expresses either the purpose or the result...Therefore the noun after eis expresses a state or an act that cannot be earlier than the time of the verb’s action and usually is future to it” (Kendrick Grobel, Prof. of Biblical Theology, Vanderbilt Univ.).
- “The truth will never suffer by giving the ‘eis’ its true significance. When the Campbellites translate ‘in order to’ in Acts 2:38, they translate correctly. We conclude without hesitation in accordance with such authorities as Hackett, Winer, Meyer that the proper rendering of ‘eis’ for the remission of sins in Acts 2:38 as in Matthew 26:28 is ‘unto,’ ‘for,’ that is ‘in order to.’ If it ever means ‘with reference to’ in a sense of a retrospective and commemorative reference to a past event, we have failed to find an example” (J.W. Wilmarth, Baptist Quarterly, July 1887).

Not a single one of these scholars, even among the Baptists, are willing to define the Greek word *eis* to mean “because of.”

The good news is that you do not need to know Greek or have access to all of these scholars or lexicons to know how *eis* is used in the New Testament. If we look at how *eis* is used in other passages, we gain a clear understanding that it looked forward and involves purpose. For example, Matthew 26:28 reads, *"For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for (eis) the remission of sins."* Without the shedding of blood, there can be no remission (Heb. 9:22). Christ did not shed His blood because the remission of sins had been provided, but so that after His Death sins could be remitted. In like manner, Acts 2:38 teaches that without repentance and baptism there is no remission of sins, because they are for the remission of sins. Look at these other passages to see if it would make sense to substitute "because of" or "in order that" in the place of *eis*. In the following passages, does *eis* point to the future or to the past?

- Acts 3:19 - *"Repent therefore and be converted, that (eis) your sins may be blotted out,"*
- Rom. 10:9,10 - *"For with the heart one believes to (eis) righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made to (eis) salvation."*
- Heb. 10:39 - *"Faith unto (eis) the saving of the soul"*
- Acts 10:43 - *"whoever believes in (eis) Him will receive remission of sins."*
- Acts 2:22 - *"Jesus. A man approved among (eis) you..."*

What about the many English translations? Did any of the translators believe that the Greek word *eis* translated "for" should be rendered "because of"? You should take a look for yourself.

- Today's English: "so that your sins will be forgiven"
- Simple English: "so that your sins may be forgiven"
- King James: "for the remission of sins"
- Goodspeed: "in order to have your sins forgiven"
- Young's: "to remission of sins"
- New King James: "for the remission of sins"
- International Standard: "for the forgiveness of your sins"
- New International Standard: "for the forgiveness of your sins"
- Tyndale (1534): "for the remission of synnes"
- Bishops' Bible (1568,1602): "for the remission of sinnes"
- Rheims (1582): "for remission of your sinnes"
- Douay (Catholic): "for the remission of your sins"
- English Revised (1881): "unto the remission of your sins"
- American Standard (1901): "unto the remission of your sins".
- New American Standard: "for the forgiveness of sins"
- Phillips: "so that you may have your sins forgiven"
- New English Bible: "for the forgiveness of your sins"
- Challoner Rheims (Catholic): "for the forgiveness of your sins."
- Knox (Catholic, 1945): "to have your sins forgiven"
- American Bible Union Version (Baptist): "unto the remission of your sins"
- Centenary Translation (Baptist): "for the remission of sins"

- Modern Speech: “with a view to the remission of your sins”
- Geneva Bible (1557): “for the remission of synnes”
- Braid Sctos: “for the pittenawa 0' yere sins.”
- C. B. Williams: “that your sins may be forgiven”
- Authentic (Schonfield): “for the forgiveness of your sins”
- Contemporary English (1995): “so that your sins will be forgiven”
- Amplified New Testament: “for the forgiveness of and release from your sins”
- New World Translation (JW): “for forgiveness of your sins”
- Haweis (1795): “for the remiffion of fins”
- Ferrar Fenton: “for a release from your sins”
- New English (1961): “for the forgiveness of your sins”
- Basic English: “for the forgiveness of your sins”
- Revised Standard (1946-1951): “for the remission of your sins”
- Emphasized: “into the remission of your sins”
- Modern English: “for a release of your sins”
- H. B. Montgomery (1924): “for the remission of your sins”
- Wesley’s Translation: “for the remission of sins”
- Moffatt: “for the remission of sins”
- 20<sup>th</sup> Century: “for the forgiveness of your sins”
- Living Oracles: “in order to the remission of sins”
- Syriac Version: “for the remission of sins”
- Moulton: “unto the remission of your sins”
- McKnight: “in order to the remission of sins”
- Weymouth: “for remission of sins”
- Rotherham: “unto the remission of sins”
- Darby’s: “for remission of sins”
- Webster: “for the remission of sins”
- Anderson: “in order to the remission of your sins”
- International English: “so that your sins may be forgiven”
- Today’s English: “so that your sins will be forgiven”
- German Translation: “(for, unto) order to the forgiveness of sins”
- Italian Translation: “into the remission of sins”
- Spanish Translation: “for the purpose of the remission of your sins”
- French Translation: “in order to obtain the remission of your sins”
- Indian Translation: “in order to the forgiveness of sins”
- First German Bible: “for (in order to, unto) the forgiveness of sins”
- Emphatic Diaglotte: “for the forgiveness of sins”
- Wycliffe (1308): “in to the remission of youre synnes”
- Berry Interlinear: “for remission of sins”

These 60 translations bear overwhelming witness from translators that baptism of penitent believers is to be for the purpose of remission of their sins. One must repent and be baptized in order to have remission of sins or salvation.

Long before there ever was even a need for any of these English translations, early Christians read Acts 2:38 from the Koine Greek. How did they view baptism? Did they teach that a sinner was baptized in order to have salvation or did a saved man get baptized because he was already saved? Read what they wrote about it centuries ago.

- JUSTIN MARTYR wrote about ninety years after Matthew wrote his gospel: *"this food we call eucharist, of which none are allowed to be partakers but such only as are true believers, and have been baptized in the laver of regeneration for the **remission of sins**"* (Orchard's History, Vol. I, p. 241).
- THEOPHILUS: *"The things proceeding from the waters were blessed by God, that this also could be a sign of men being destined to receive repentance and **remission of sins**, through the water and bath of regeneration-as many as come to the truth and are born again"* (c. 180); (Ante-Nicene Fathers, 2.101).
- IRENAEUS (C. 180): *"When we come to refute them [the Gnostics], we will show in its proper place that this class of men have been instigated by Satan to a denial of baptism which is regeneration to God. Thus, they have renounced the whole faith...For the baptism instituted by the visible Jesus was for the **remission of sins**"* (1.346).
- MARTYR (110\_165 AD): *"there is no other way [to obtain God's promises] than this to become acquainted with Christ, to be washed in the fountain spoken of by Isaiah for the **remission of sins**, and for the remainder, to live sinless lives."* (Justin Martyr, Trypho chap. 44)
- CYRIL (345 AD): *"'Repent,' saith he, 'and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, for the **remission of sins**, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.' O unspeakable loving-kindness of God! They have no hope of being saved, and yet they are thought worthy of the Holy Ghost. Thou seest the power of Baptism!"* [Acts 2:38] (Cyril of Jerusalem, 348AD, "On Baptism," Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 7, pg. 16).
- CLEMENT (150-200 AD): *"... lest haply they might suppose that on the cessation of sacrifice there was no **remission of sins** for them He instituted baptism by water amongst them, in which they might be absolved from all their sins on the invocation of His name"* (Clement, "Recognitions of Clement," Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 8, pg. 88).
- HERMAS (200 AD): *"And I said, 'I heard, sir, some teachers maintain that there is no other repentance than that which takes place, when we descended into the water and received **remission of our former sin.**' He said to me, 'That was sound doctrine which you heard; for that is really the case'"* (Hermas, "The Shepherd," Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 2, pg. 22).
- CYPRIAN (C. 250): *"In the baptism of water, there is received the **remission of sins**"* (5.497).
- *"If he was not baptized, neither are any of us baptized. Yet, if there is no baptism, neither will there be any **remission of sins**. Father every man will die in his own sins."* (Disputation of Archelaus and Manes (c. 320); (6.228).
- FIRMILIAN: *"But indeed you are worse than all heretics..... although they confess that they are in sins, and have no grace, and therefore come to the Church, you take away from them **remission of sins**, which is given in baptism, by saying*

*that they are already baptized and have obtained the grace of the Church outside the Church, and you do not perceive that their souls will be required at your hands when the day of judgment shall come" (Firmilian, "The Epistles of Cyprian," Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 5, pg. 396).*

On the day of Pentecost, the Jews were commanded by Peter to *"repent and be baptized for the remission of sins."* Some argue that they were to be baptized because they were already saved. So far, we have seen evidence from lexiconographers, scholars of the Greek New Testament, sixty different translations, and the writings of the early Christians that baptism was in order to procure remission of sins.

Those who propose that *eis* meant "because of" recognize a problem with applying it to the word "repent." They hold that one must repent and believe in order to obtain remission of sins and then be baptized because they have been saved. So they point out that Acts 2:38 agrees with their teaching because of the difference in number and person in reference to the verbs: repent and be baptized. The text literally says they were to repent (you all) and be baptized (each one). Since the words "repent" and "be baptized" are different in both person and number in the original text, it is contended that the phrase "for the remission of sins" cannot refer to both of these verbs. Further, it is believed that since "remission of sins" is plural than it must only agree with "repent" (you all) and not with "be baptized." Therefore, they would prefer to translate Acts 2:38 as follows: "Repent ye unto the remission of your sins and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ."

Again, we must ask if translators agree with this? We can find no such translation of Acts 2:38. Well then, what do the scholars of New Testament Greek think of this rendering of Acts 2:38?

- Thayer (192): points out that it is common for "hekastos" to be used with plurals of all types (Acts 2:8; 3:26; Rev. 2:38; 20:13).
- Bruce M. Metzger was the editor of the Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament. He wrote, "In reply to your recent inquiry may I say that, in my view, the phrase 'eis aphasis hamartion' in Acts 2:38 applies in sense to both of the preceding verbs."
- F.W. Gingrich, professor of New Testament Greek at Albright College, wrote, "The difference in person and number of 'repent' and 'be baptized' is caused by the fact that 'repent' is a direct address in the second person plural, while 'be baptized' is governed by the subject 'every one of you,' and so in third person singular. 'Every one of you' is, of course, a collective noun."
- Arthur L. Farstad, chairman of the New King James Executive Review Committee and general editor of the NKJV New Testament, has stated, "Since the expression 'eis aphasis hamartion' is a prepositional phrase with no verbal endings or singular or plural endings I certainly agree that grammatically it can go with both repentance and baptism. In fact, I would think that it does go with both of them."
- John R. Werner is the International Consultant in Translation to the Wycliffe Bible Translators. He wrote, "Whenever two verbs are connected by 'kai' 'and' and then followed by a modifier (such as a prepositional phrase, as in Acts 2:38), it is

grammatically possible that modifier modifies either both the verbs, or only the latter one. This is because there is no punctuation in the manuscripts, so we don't know whether the author intended to pause between the first verb and the 'and'. "It does not matter that, here in Acts 2:38, one of the verbs is second-person plural ("y'all") and the other is third person singular ("is to"). They are both imperative, and the fact that they are joined by 'kai' 'and' is sufficient evidence that the author may have regarded them as a single unit to which his modifier applied".

- Translator's Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles: "So that your sins will be forgiven (literally 'into a forgiveness of your sins') in the Greek may express either purpose or result; but the large majority of translators understand it as indicating purpose. The phrase modifies both main verbs: turn away from your sins and be baptized."
- "IN ORDER TO THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS (Matt. 26:28; Luke 3:3) we connect naturally with both the preceding verbs. This clause states the motive or object which should induce them to repent and be baptized. It forces the entire exhortation, not one part of it to the exclusion of the other." (H.B. Hackett, D.D., Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, p. 53).
- Simon J. Kistemaker: "In Greek, the imperative verb repent is in the plural; Peter addresses all the people whose consciences drive them to repentance. But the very be baptized is in the singular to stress the individual nature of baptism." (105).
- Robert Halley: "The signification of 'eis' must correspond in its relation to both words, 'repent' and 'be baptized'...If it be, 'repent for the remission of sins,' it must also be, 'be baptized for the remission of sins.'"
- D.A. Penick: "Metanoesate - repent ye. The writer then wishes to be more emphatic, so he says 'hekastos baptistheto' - let each one of you be baptized. This distribution of the plural subject and predicate by the use of 'hekastos' an a third person singular is quite common in all Greek and is frequently used in the New Testament."
- McGarvey: "Repent ye, (collectively) and be baptized (individually) every one of you" makes it the more forceful...A contractor hires carpenters to build a house and says: 'All of you come, and let each of you bring his tools.' 'All' in the sentence is the same as 'EACH OF YOU', yet 'ALL' is plural and 'each one' is singular, but despite the number, refers to the same" (Comm. On Acts).

After weighing the evidence, how could one continue to doubt that baptism is necessary to put one into salvation? Pendleton sums things up well when he wrote, "This little word EIS, is a strange word, indeed, if what they say of it is true. It will take a man INTO a country, INTO a city, INTO a ship, INTO heaven, INTO hell - INTO any place in the universe, except the water! Poor word! Afflicted, it seems, with hydrophobia" (3 Reasons, 121). According to Acts 2:38, the sinner is required to both repent and be baptized if his sins are going to be remitted or forgiven.