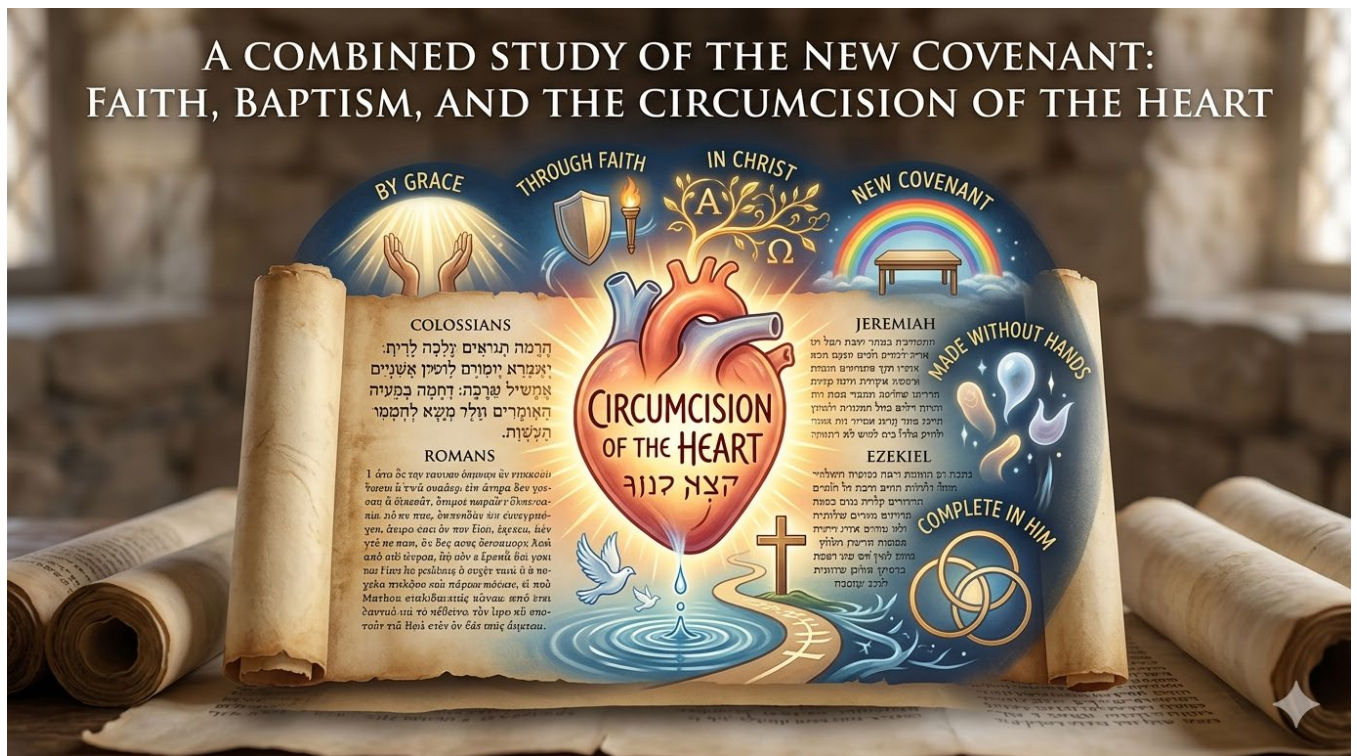


# A Combined Study of the New Covenant: Faith, Baptism, and the Circumcision of the Heart



By: Victoria Holbrook

In understanding the fullness of our salvation, the Apostle Paul begins Colossians 2 by expressing his deep desire to encourage and knit together the believers in strong ties of love. His goal is to build our confidence in God's ultimate plan, which is Christ Himself. Paul emphasizes that we must not just accept Christ, but we must actively follow Him, letting our roots grow deep down into Him and building our lives squarely on Him. It is through this vital connection that our faith grows strong in the truth, causing us to overflow with thankfulness. To protect this faith, Paul warns us not to be captured by empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense that stem from human thinking and the spiritual powers of this world rather than from Christ. He reminds us that we are completely whole through our union with Christ, who stands as the sovereign head over every ruler and authority.

This completeness is anchored in a definitive spiritual reality. In Colossians 2:11, Paul declares, "In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ." It is crucial to notice that Paul uses the past tense here: we *were* circumcised, not *will be*. This implies that our sinful nature was already cut away in Christ's death, rather than by any future event of baptism or anything we can achieve of ourselves. When we came to Christ, we underwent a spiritual surgery that required no physical procedure. Paul then connects this to baptism in verse 12, stating we were "buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead." Going under the water serves as a vivid physical representation of dying and being buried with Christ, while coming out of the water symbolizes being raised to a new life. The power, however, is not in the water itself; we are buried and raised strictly through our faith in the operation of God and what He has already done.

Paul underscores this total forgiveness in verses 13 and 14, reminding us that we were once spiritually dead because of our sins and our uncut sinful nature. Yet, God made us alive with Christ, forgiving all our trespasses and blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that stood against us. He completely took that record of charges away by nailing it to the cross, paying the ultimate penalty for our sins and publicly disarming the spiritual authorities through His victory. Because this work is entirely finished, Paul warns in verses 20 through 23 against subjecting ourselves to human-made rules like "Don't handle, don't taste, don't touch." These legalistic regulations might carry a temporary show of wisdom and require severe body discipline, but they provide absolutely no help in conquering evil desires. Our alignment with Christ is a finished spiritual reality, and our outward baptism simply demonstrates to the spiritual world what Jesus already accomplished on the cross.

This New Testament reality perfectly fulfills the deep prophetic promises found throughout the Old Testament regarding the circumcision of the heart. In Ezekiel 11:18–21, God declares that He is the one who will give His people singleness of heart and put a new spirit within them, taking away their stony, stubborn hearts and replacing them with tender, responsive hearts so they will obey His decrees. This is mirrored in Jeremiah 31, where God promises a New Covenant where He will put His instructions deep within them and write them directly on their hearts. Furthermore, Jeremiah 32:39–40 reiterates that God will give His people one heart and one purpose to worship Him forever, promising an everlasting covenant where He will place the desire to worship Him so deeply inside their hearts that they will never leave Him. Across all these prophecies, we see that God is the sole author of this heart surgery. He alters our inner desires to bring us into loving obedience; the internal transformation by His Spirit always precedes and produces our outward compliance.

Paul masterfully ties these Old Testament promises to the gospel of grace in his letter to the Romans. In Romans 2, Paul confronts those who rely heavily on religious identity and boast in the law, yet fail to teach themselves. He explicitly dismantles the reliance on physical rituals in verses 28 and 29, explaining that a person is not a true Jew merely by outward birth or physical circumcision. Instead, true circumcision is an inward reality of the heart, produced entirely by the Holy Spirit and not by the literal letter of the law. Paul then concludes in Romans 3 that because everyone has sinned and fallen short of God's glorious standard, God freely makes us right in His sight by His grace. This justification comes as a free gift through the blood shed by Jesus, and sinners are made right with God the exact moment they believe.

To completely settle the timeline of how physical rituals relate to faith, Paul points directly to Abraham in Romans 4:10–11. He poses the crucial question of whether Abraham was counted righteous before or after he was physically circumcised. The scripture reveals that God accepted Abraham and declared him righteous because of his faith long *before* he underwent the physical ritual. Physical circumcision was subsequently given merely as a sign and an outward seal of the righteousness and faith that Abraham already possessed while he was still uncircumcised. When we piece these scriptures together, the conclusion is beautifully clear: just as Abraham was fully justified by faith before receiving the outward sign of circumcision, a New Testament believer is fully justified and spiritually circumcised by the Holy Spirit the moment they place their faith in Jesus. Outward water baptism is a beautiful, necessary act of obedience, but it functions exactly like Abraham's circumcision—as an outward sign, representation, and seal of a completed spiritual work that God has already performed without human hands.

Understanding this finished spiritual reality also corrects misunderstandings surrounding the spoken formula used during water baptism. Some claim that a baptism is invalid unless a pastor explicitly speaks only the name of "Jesus" over the water, pointing to Peter's sermon in Acts 2:38. They argue this overrides Jesus's direct command in Matthew 28:19 to baptize "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." However, this creates an unnecessary contradiction in scripture. In the ancient Greek world, the phrase "in the name of" was a common legal idiom meaning "by the authority of" or "into the possession of." It was never meant to be a rigid verbal formula that must be recited aloud like a magical incantation. When Peter told his listeners to be baptized in the name of Jesus, he was directing them to submit to the authority and ownership of Jesus the Messiah, which is perfectly consistent with entering into a relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Apostles did not disobey Jesus's command in Matthew 28; they understood that because the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily in Christ, baptizing into the name of the triune God is functionally identical to baptizing under the authority of Jesus. Turning a phrase meant to denote ownership and spiritual authority into a rigid verbal checklist reduces a beautiful step of obedience into a human-controlled ritual.

Finally, the history of the early church provides definitive proof that water baptism was never intended to act as a mandatory "baptism of circumcision" or a strict formulaic ritual for salvation. In Acts 15:1, a group of legalistic teachers began confusing the believers by claiming, "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved." If water baptism were simply a New Testament replacement for physical circumcision—carrying the exact same mechanical requirements to finalize salvation—Paul would have easily resolved this massive crisis by telling these teachers that the Gentile converts had already received their circumcision through the water. Instead, Paul fiercely resisted them. He traveled to the Jerusalem Council to defend the gospel of grace, bringing along a young Greek convert named Titus. Paul explicitly writes in Galatians 2:3–4 that even though Titus was a walking, breathing Gentile Christian—who had undoubtedly already been water-baptized—he was not compelled to be physically circumcised. Paul refused to compromise with those who tried to sneak in and steal their freedom in Christ. By standing his ground, Paul proved that water baptism does not replace or carry the mechanical requirement of physical circumcision. The early church explicitly ruled that salvation is by faith alone, requiring no physical procedures, spoken formulas, or human rituals to make a believer complete in Jesus Christ.

## **Biblical Baptism Study: Setup, Action, & Outcome**

### **Part 1: The Lexicon (The Core Roots)**

Before looking at the narrative, we must understand the words God chose to define this reality. The Greek language reveals a profound shift from a temporary act to an eternal identity.

- **Bapto (βάπτω): The Root Verb.**
  - *Meaning:* To dip or to dye temporarily.
  - *Concept:* It refers to a brief immersion that does not fundamentally alter the nature of the object.
- **Baptizo (βαπτίζω): The Primary Verb for "Baptize."**
  - *Meaning:* To submerge, immerse, plunge, or drench.
  - *Concept:* In ancient Greece, this was used to describe cloth being dipped in dye to permanently change its color. It implies a total, irreversible transformation of state or identity.
- **Eis (εἰς): The Preposition of Entry.**
  - *Meaning:* Into, unto, or in.
  - *Concept:* Rather than just denoting a sterile label or a static direction, it signifies actually entering into a deep relationship or coming into direct, dynamic contact with something.
- **Onoma (ὄνομα): The Name.**
  - *Meaning:* Name.
  - *Concept:* In biblical times, a person's "name" was not just a collection of letters; it represented their entire character, authority, majesty, and literal presence.
- **Loutron (λουτρόν): The Bath.**
  - *Meaning:* Washing, washing place, or bath.
  - *Concept:* Used in Titus 3:5 ("washing of regeneration"). It serves as a vivid visual for the deep spiritual cleansing taking place.
- **Palingenesia (παλιγγενεσία): The New Birth.**
  - *Meaning:* Regeneration or new birth.

- *Concept:* The complete spiritual restart a person experiences when they come to faith.

## Part 2: The Three-Part Framework

### 1. The Setup (Old Testament Shadow)

In the Old Testament, God used physical water and washing practices to foreshadow a deeper reality. These were essential staging grounds, but they were largely *bapto* moments—external, physical, and temporary.

- **Noah and the Flood:** Water washed away a corrupt world, acting as a physical divider between an old judgment and a fresh start.
- **Moses and the Red Sea:** Leading the people through the parted waters, permanently separating them from their old life of Egyptian slavery.
- **Levitical Ceremonial Washings:** Strict rules requiring priests to wash repeatedly to deal with ceremonial uncleanness. It was a constant reminder that humanity was "dirty" and needed cleansing to approach God.
- **Naaman the Syrian Leper:** Commanded to dip in the Jordan River seven times. His physical cleansing pointed toward a much greater, holistic restoration.

### 2. The Action (The Work of Jesus)

Every plan requires action, and Jesus came to complete and fulfill what the Old Testament set up. He bridges the gap between physical water cleansing and spiritual baptism.

- **Fulfilling the Imagery:** Jesus steps into history, steps into the Jordan River, and lives out the perfect life required by the Law.
- **The Ultimate Action:** He goes to the cross, is buried, and rises again.
- **Our Union:** Because of His historic actions, New Testament baptism becomes an active symbol of our union with His death, burial, and resurrection. He provides the "dye" that makes the transformation possible.

### 3. The Outcome (New Testament Reality)

The outcome is prophecy fulfilled, eternal security, and a total shift in who we are. This is where *baptizo*, *eis*, *onoma*, and *palingenesia* fully take over.

- **Total Transformation (Baptizo):** Like cloth dipped in dye, the believer is permanently changed. You do not emerge from the water as the same "color" you went in; your identity is forever altered and fused with Christ.
- **The Combined Reality ("Baptizing them *into the name*"):** When believers are baptized *eis to onoma* (into the name)—whether of Jesus Christ, or the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—it conveys far more than a public ritual. It means being fully immersed and swallowed up **into the authority, ownership, character, and spiritual reality of the Godhead**. You are brought out of isolation and placed directly into His presence.
- **Spiritual Restart (Palingenesia & Loutron):** The outcome is the "washing of regeneration" performed by the Holy Spirit. It is a complete internal reboot, not an external ritual.
- **Eternal Reign:** The ultimate end of the narrative—walking in newness of life today, secure in the promise of reigning eternally with Christ.

### Study Summary

God **setup** the necessity of cleansing through Old Testament water shadows. Jesus performed the **action** by dying and rising to defeat sin. The Holy Spirit secures the **outcome**, permanently transforming (*baptizo*) and regenerating (*palingenesia*) our identity for eternity by plunging us *into the name (eis to onoma)*—the very presence, authority, and ownership of God.