

Greek Grammatical Structures Similar to *Eis Aphesin...* in Acts 2:38 © 2005, Douglas Jacoby

... Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ **for** the forgiveness of your sins... (Acts 2:38)

The matter under investigation: Possible N.T. parallels to *eis aphesin ton hamartion humon...* in Acts 2:38, where *eis*, meaning “for, unto,” is followed by a noun indicating purpose, result, or effect. There are two general grammatical patterns that will be translated with purpose clauses:

1. Since *eis* is a preposition, regardless of how the various passages have been translated, the original construction follows the pattern: imperative verb + *eis* → noun. The noun may be a substantive, or an infinitive, as in Acts 3:19. Some translations of Acts 2:38 say “for the forgiveness of your sins.” Others read “so that your sins may be forgiven.” Both are grammatically defensible.
2. The other pattern is an imperative or subjunctive verb followed by *hina* (so that) or its functional equivalent. In this case the construction is: verb + *hina* → purpose clause.

Intentionality

The main theological point under examination in this study is *intentionality*. Is being baptized without deliberately doing so in order to be saved still efficacious? In how many of these cases does the person in view *consciously* do something in order to receive a benefit, blessing, or result? To put the question another way: Would the blessing or result still accrue if the person did not consciously perform the action in order to receive it?

For facility of identifying where the grammatical structures are parallel, words of purpose have been made **bold**. All scriptures are taken from the NAS.

Roughly parallel grammatical constructions

John 3:21 But he who practices truth comes to the Light, **so that** his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.

Here the “so that” appears to refer to the result (others seeing the work of God) more than to intention (looking good).

John 12:35 So Jesus said to them, “For a little while longer the Light is among you. Walk while you have the Light, **so that** darkness will not overtake you...”

The recurring question is one of intentionality. If someone were to walk in the light yet without fear of the darkness overtaking him, would he be safe?

Acts 3:19 Therefore repent and return, **so that** your sins may be wiped away, **in order that** times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.

The question at hand, whose answers seems ambiguous, is whether one's sins may be wiped away if his or her repentance were done without the conscious hope of forgiveness by virtue of that repentance.

Eph 4:29 Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, **so that** it will give grace to those who hear.

If our speech is not purposively and consciously intended to edify and give grace to others, can it still do so? Yes, it is possible to edify others even unintentionally. The result issues in the action more than in the intent.

Phil 2:14-15 Do all things without grumbling or disputing, **so that** you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world

Again, the grammatical construction is the same as that of Acts 2:38. If we are not argumentative but without the conscious hope of appearing blameless to others, will our light still shine? In reference to Phil 2, the Sermon on the Mount suggests that it is *better* by far if our acts of righteousness are not done for the public effect. Once again, we have a case in which the purpose is linked to the action but not necessarily in a conscious way.

Col 4:6 Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, **so that** you will know how you should respond to each person.

The action is speaking graciously. The result is knowing how to respond to each person. And once again, whether or not we intentionally speak graciously in order to grow in our wisdom vis-à-vis presenting the gospel, it seems we will grow either way—with or without that specific result in mind.

1 Th 4:11-12 Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, **so that** you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.

It seems reasonable to infer that anyone engaged in productive work will be at least somewhat aware of his good example, and decreased dependence on others for material help. And yet whether or not this is the conscious intention, the result will accrue.

Heb 3:12-13 Take care, brothers, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still "Today," **so that** none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Daily encouragement and exhortation are likely to yield positive benefits, whether or not avoidance of sin on the part of the one being admonished is in mind. As with many of these passages, it is natural to assume that the result *would be* quite often in mind—but not necessarily.

Heb 10:36 For you have need of endurance, **so that** when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

Doubtless many, if not most, Christians persevere with eternal salvation in mind. But what if they persevered without the reward in mind? Would they still receive what was promised?

James 5:16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another **so that** you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

Here the case for intentionality seems to be stronger. How could anyone pray for healing if he didn't have the healing in mind? Insofar as baptism is a sort of prayer—an "appeal" to God for a good conscience (1 Peter 3:21 NAS)—intentionality is implicit, even if not explicit.

1 Pet 3:1 In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands **so that** even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives.

1 Pet 3:7 You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, **so that** your prayers will not be hindered.

In neither cases above is intentionality integral to the result: in the first passage, the salvation of the unbelieving spouse; in the second, the effectiveness of one's prayers.

Exactly parallel grammatical constructions

There are at least two N.T. Greek passages where the grammatically construction is identical to that of Acts 2:38, following the pattern *imperative verb* + *eis* → *object*.

Matt 26:28 For this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many **for** forgiveness of sins.

This study will not address the nature of the Eucharist—to what extent it is similar to baptism in conferring grace—though a literal reading of the passage suggests that communion is necessary for salvation. The point is that Jesus poured out his blood for the forgiveness of our sins. Had he bled and died for any other reason, would our salvation have been secured at the Cross?

Acts 3:19 Therefore repent and return, **so that** your sins may be wiped away, **in order that** times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.

Here we also find the same construction as that of Acts 2:38.

Conclusions

What conclusions can we draw from this short study?

1. In very few, if any, N.T. passages does a result or result clause following a biblical command require intentionality on the part of the one obeying the command. That is, the blessings of God are contingent on obedience, not on obedience *plus* conscious desire for the blessing that will come as a result of that obedience.
2. That baptism requires a conscious understanding of its result is an inference. It is not explicit in the scriptures. This inference may be suggested in Colossians 2:12 and it is certain in 1 Peter 3:21 (NAS, NRS, DBY, NAB), though not in other versions (ASV, NKJV, NJB).
3. The command of Acts 2:38 is clear and unequivocal: one must be baptized in order to be saved. That is the word of God. The inference, that one must understand what he is doing in baptism, is only an inference. It does not have the same authority as the word of God itself. The history of the

Reformation Movement has been troubled by interpretation. The three “self-evident” bases for doctrine—Direct command, Binding example, and Necessary inference—are not as self-evident to everyone as we might like them to be.

4. In support of this distinction—and in support of accrued benefits despite faulty understanding—consider also Gen 22 and Heb 11. "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, ¹⁸of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." ¹⁹He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." Abraham received the promise—despite faulty reasoning. Nonetheless, God didn't discount Abraham's obedience.
5. If God allows those who have been baptized without a conscious view to forgiveness of sins to be saved, we will praise him for his grace. But given the ambivalence of the matter of inference, it seems wise to hold to a careful and considered interpretation: ideally, one should know what baptism is all about before getting into the water. However, it can only be asserted, not proved, that full understanding is a biblical requirement.