

Baptism

1 Peter 3:18-22

18 . . . Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, 19 in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, 20 because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. ²¹ Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. (1 Peter 3:18-22 (ESV))

As we know, "Baptism" is a very solemn and revered "Sacrament" within the Christian Church, so important that here in verse 21 God has declared it to be interwoven within the very fiber of salvation itself. And because God has placed that importance on it, then so also must you and I hold "Baptism" in the highest of reverence.

And yes, in the various denominations we get caught up in disputes and arguments about the mode in which "Baptism" is to be administered, some sprinkling and others immersing. And those differences are significant within the hearts and minds of the church leaders. But as we study these particular scriptures today, I'll not argue one mode over the other, but instead ask that you search these scriptures and determine what God instructs us on the matter. And on another occasion, we will delve into that part of this precious sacrament.

For our study today, we know from these scriptures, that the "Baptism" spoken about here was first initiated into the Christian Church by John the Baptist, even before the Church was fully established, making it one of the foundational stones on which the Christian Church has been built.

And yes, throughout the Old Testament, similar ceremonial washings were common within the Jewish traditions and in temple worship. But John the Baptist was the first to bring baptism as we know it out of the temple and out of the synagogue setting into the public forum, baptizing people in the Jordan River, and seemingly wherever else water could be found.

And in those days, as John baptized the people who came to him, he first preached the necessity of “repentance”, that “repentance” is a required “prerequisite” condition of soul before baptism can be truly effectual; because as we are told in these scriptures, the water itself has no special or miraculous powers within itself to save a person’s soul, but rather, water is simply God’s chosen cleansing agent for the remission of sin. The real work is done as these words in verse 21 tell us,

²¹ Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (1Peter 3:21)

Again, the water itself can do nothing of real value inside or outside of the body. As these words tell us, it is only through the mysterious work of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus that our “Salvation” takes place within us. Our freewill surrender of ourselves over to be baptized is simply, as these words tell us, our “appeal to God for a good conscience”.

Consider those words for a moment, “an appeal to God for a good conscience”. Those words, at first, seemed to me to be out of place and a somewhat odd purpose for baptism. But oh, they are not! As you and I come into this miraculous condition of salvation, we are filled to over-flowing with wrong and sinful memories, sinful habits and behaviors. And the “guilt” of them needs to be removed, erased even from our thoughts, else we could not take a step further into this wonderful salvation that God has given to us.

And let me assure you that that really does take place, the “guilt” really is completely removed. When we truly repent and give our hearts to Christ in salvation, the “guilt” for our sins is completely, and let me emphasize the word “completely”, is “completely” wiped away from our souls. Yes, we do have memories of those past sins and conditions, but the “guilt” for them is “completely” removed and will never affect us again.

That is the very definition of “Justification”. “Justification” is the removal of our sins to the point that we become “just as if we had never sinned”.

Why do I find reason to mention this? It is because one of the greatest failures of today’s treatments for emotional disorders involves the “digging up” of old memories, not for the purpose of repentance of them, but rather for the process of “chewing” on them for a while and then doing some sorts of secular behavioral modification techniques with them in the hope that the person will then not remain depressed over them.

But folks, God has a very different plan in mind. He promises us in 1st John 1 that

⁹ If we confess our sins (repent), he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9 (ESV))

In Isaiah 6, the Prophet Isaiah suddenly found himself standing in the presence of God. And He saw God's Holiness, high and lifted up. And the presence of God's holiness caused Isaiah to immediately begin repenting of his sins. And as Isaiah repented, God had an angel take a coal from before His throne and touch Isaiah's lips with it, cleansing him from all "guilt" for his sins.

Folks, this is an essential part of salvation. And our understanding of it is essential to our being able to live and to enjoy a vibrant and effectual Christian life. We must understand that though our sins be as scarlet, with repentance and salvation, our guilt for all of our past life has been forgiven and has been completely wiped away. And we need never bring them up against ourselves again. And neither should anyone else!

And as the words of this verse 12 proclaim, one of the mysterious works of "Baptism" is that you and I gain "a good and clear conscience" from all those past sins.

And here in this passage, for the benefit of our understanding, God is comparing and equating the cleansing of "Baptism" to that which took place with the "Great Flood" that washed away all the sin in the world. In those days, the world was wicked beyond measure. And God used the waters of the flood to cleanse the earth of all of its sin and of its sinful conditions, saving only the eight, Noah and his family.

And it is important for us to fully understand God's intent in bringing about the "great flood". It had everything to do with "sin" and with the removal of "Sin"! Unfortunately, for most of us, sin does not have the importance and meaning and impact that it has to God. You and I foolishly "wink" at many of the forms of sin that take place around us each day. Our minds and our hearts have become so accustomed to sin's presence and our senses so dulled to its nature, that sometimes we hardly are aware that sin is taking place.

But not so with God! To Him, sin is ever and always a vile and egregious thing, acts and behaviors that grieve the Spirit of God, so much that He cannot abide with it in any fashion or circumstance. God said exactly that in Genesis 6 just before He brought the great flood upon the earth. Listen to His words!

⁵ The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. ⁶ And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his

heart. ⁷ So the LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." ⁸ But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. (Genesis 6:5-8 (ESV))

Here in this passage, God opens up a window into His Holy and righteous heart. Here, we can see His love, His grace, His mercy and His justice flowing through His mind and His thoughts as He observes the people He created and all their sinful behaviors. And brokenheartedly, He regrets that He ever made man. And He concludes that He must "blot them out" from the face of the earth.

And but for His great "mercy and grace" He would have done that, destroyed them all. But Noah found favor in His eyes.

And yes, God's mercy and grace extended on for many years after He said these words, perhaps for as many as 120 years while Noah worked diligently to build the Ark. And though it is not said, I do believe that had others who were watching Noah work stopped their sinful ways and repented of their sins, there might have been more people in that Ark. But sadly, sin "blinds" men's hearts to the truth and no one else repented, leaving only Noah and His family to survive.

But then, we find from these mysterious words here in verses 19 and 20, written several thousand years after the flood, that the story for those people who watched, and probably mocked as Noah built the Ark, might not have ended as it seemed. Perhaps God afforded those on-lookers one final opportunity. Who knows? Listen!

19 in which he (the Lord Jesus) went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, 20 because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.

As we said in the message last week, these are strange and mysterious words, seemingly offering a possibility of some form of reprieve. And as I mentioned in that message, I personally am still not sure what God means by those words!

Be all that as it may, the focus in this passage is about "Baptism", and these words in verse 20, tell us that Noah and his family were brought safely through water, and that Baptism is a likeness of that safe journey. And just as the earth was cleansed from its sin and Noah and His family were delivered safely from certain destruction, Baptism is being said here to accomplish a similar form of cleansing and deliverance.

And yes, we must always be quick to add that it is just as these words tell us, baptism is not intended for the cleansing of the outside of a person, and neither can baptism actually cleanse sin from men's souls. Baptism is simply the evidence of the inner-cleansing that has already taken place within our souls, made possible through the shed blood of Christ on the cross, His death and His resurrection.

And again, as we said a few moments ago, the flood reveals much about the heart of God, His justice in cleansing the earth of sin and of its sinful conditions, but giving these few people, eight in all, the grace to pass through the waters and have a new beginning, a "second chance" to "get it right".

The flood is the evidence of the ever-present gracious "Providence" of God, His deliberate involvement, His "hand" at work in a very personal and intimate way, destroying the sinful, but saving the few.

And He has given you and me the same opportunity He gave to Noah, that by turning our hearts to Him we also will be carried safely through the floods that will come into our lives.

And God has given us baptism as an outward symbol so that we can show back to Him and to all who would witness it that we have repented of our sins and that we have chosen His saving grace to get us safely through the floods.

Before we close, I want to resay some of the things we have said today concerning God's plan and His commands about "Baptism". And the first question is "Are we really required to be baptized?" "Must we be baptized?" And what does God say to us in His word?

Again, as we mentioned earlier, even before Jesus began His ministry, John The Baptist was going about calling men to repentance and to baptism. And Jesus came to John also, and we read in Matthew 3,

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him.

14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.

(Matthew 3:13-15 (ESV))

Here, Jesus tells us that it is fitting to be baptized because it "fulfills all righteousness." And then also in Hebrews 10, we read

²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Hebrews 10:22 (ESV))

Concerning these particular words, one commentator wrote,

The inner cleansing of the soul results in a good conscience, a consciousness of sincerity, of good intentions and desires, which will instinctively seek after God. And that good conscience is the effect of baptism, when baptism has its perfect work, when those who have once been grafted into the true Vine abide in Christ, when those who have once been baptized in one Spirit into one body keep the unity of the Spirit, Christ dwelling in them, and they in Christ.

And in Acts 2

³⁸ . . . Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38 (ESV))

So then, yes, “Baptism” is something that you and I must do in obedience to Christ. And our obedience must not be a matter of reluctant compliance, but rather, it must come from an exuberant heart of love for our Lord and Savior and a deep gratitude towards Him for saving our souls. And as we do that, then we will surely be rewarded with a good and clear conscience.

³⁸ . . . Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38 (ESV))