

“BAPTISM SAVES YOU”

I. INTRODUCTION

We are returning to this passage again today, after looking at its first half, and especially at the question raised by verse 19, last week. Today, we turn our attention to the other question raised by this text: what does Peter mean when he says, “Baptism...saves you”? Such a statement makes many Christians feel uncomfortable. I imagine that most of you looked at the title of this morning’s sermon and found it somewhat troubling, even though it is taken directly from this text. We don’t like this statement because it sounds too much like the belief that we describe as baptismal regeneration. It seems like Peter is saying that people are saved by being baptized. Does he really mean that? And if not, then what does he mean? This is a troubling question for Christians who take the Bible seriously, because we know that the Bible says that there is only one way of salvation: salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the clear teaching of Scripture. And it is even taught right here in this letter. 1 Peter 1:5 says that Christians are “being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” And chapter 1:9 says that salvation is “the outcome of your faith.” There is absolutely no disputing the fact that the Bible teaches that salvation is by faith alone. So how should we understand 1 Peter 3:21? What is Peter saying about baptism here, and why does he say it this way? In what sense can he say that baptism saves?

II. BAPTISM AND SALVATION

Perhaps the first thing to point out as we consider this text is the fact that this is not the only NT instance in which baptism is described as a means by which saving grace is bestowed. There are a number of passages that contain very similar teachings. In Mt. 28:19, Jesus says that baptism is one of the means by which disciples are made. Gal. 3:27 says, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” And in Acts 2:38, Peter replies to the crowd’s question about how they can be saved with these instructions: “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.” As you can see, the NT has no problem referring to baptism as something that God uses to effect salvation. The NT speaks about baptism as more than just a sign of salvation, but as a means of salvation.

And this is underscored in our text by the connection that is made between baptism and God’s deliverance of Noah at the time of the flood. Peter says that baptism “corresponds” to God’s salvation of Noah and his family in the ark. The Greek term translated as “corresponds” is the word “antitype.” This is one of the words from which our word typology is derived. Typology is an aspect of biblical studies in which OT figures and events foreshadow what will happen in the NT. There are two components in

typology: the type and the antitype. The type is the initial thing, while the antitype is the later thing that corresponds to it. For example, in Romans 5, Paul says that Adam was a type of Christ. (v. 14) Paul is saying that Adam foreshadowed Christ, because both serve in a representative role in God's plan of salvation. Adam was the type and Christ is the antitype. In our text, the flood is the type and baptism is its antitype. The flood served as a foreshadowing of baptism.

As an aside, the whole notion of typology is founded upon the belief that God is sovereign over history. It is the same God who is working out his purposes all across the span of history. And as he works out his plan of redemption, he makes certain events or individuals or things serve as foreshadowings of what he will do in the future. Typology testifies to the fact that God truly is the Lord over all history.

Now, how is it that the flood functioned as a type for baptism? Well, the only people who were saved from the flood were those on board the ark. Everyone else was swept away by the great deluge. For those people, the waters of the flood meant death. But those same waters functioned in a different way for Noah and his family. For them, the waters kept the ark afloat. And in this sense, they were saved through the waters of the flood. This is how the flood corresponds to baptism. In both the Lord uses water as a means of deliverance. In the OT, Noah and his family were brought to safety through the waters of the flood. In the NT, Christians are brought through the waters of judgment by baptism.

That is what Peter is saying. God saved Noah through the flood. God saves us through baptism.

And this brings us back to the question that we asked earlier: how can we reconcile this with the fact that the Bible also teaches that salvation is by faith alone?

III. BAPTISM AS A MEANS OF GRACE

As we read a littler farther in verse 21, we see that Peter clarifies what he means when he says “Baptism saves you.” He points out that it is not the outward washing in baptism that saves us, but the spiritual reality that baptism represents. We are saved by our union with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. The apostle Paul says something very similar in Rom. 6:3-4, which says: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” Baptism is a God-given sign of our union with Jesus Christ by faith. Baptism saves us, not because of any power inherent in the sign itself, but because of what God promises in the sign of baptism. In baptism, God represents and guarantees his promise of salvation to all who believe in Jesus Christ. Baptism has no value for someone who does not have a living faith. Baptism is a God-given sign and promise of what we receive by faith.

This is why the NT speaks of baptism as a means of salvation. The sign of baptism is a God-given sign, and God does not give empty signs. When a God-given sign is accompanied by faith, then the person who has received the sign also receives the reality that the sign represents. He receives what God promises in that sign. In baptism, God promises new birth, forgiveness, and the power to live a new life. You can be sure that you really have these things when your baptism is accompanied by a living faith. And this is equally true for both infant baptisms and adult baptisms. Adults who come to faith in Christ without having been baptized as infants receive the reality that baptism represents before they receive baptism as the sign of that reality. That was what happened with Abraham. He received the reality that was represented by the covenant sign of circumcision before he received the sign of that reality. On the other hand, those who are baptized as children receive the sign before they are able to give evidence that they have received the reality represented by the sign. That was what happened with Abraham's son Isaac. He received the sign of circumcision as an infant, long before he was able to express faith in God's promise.

I want to take a moment here to speak to the children in our congregation. Children, I want you to think of your baptism as the most important thing in your life. I want you to look to your baptism in order to understand who you are and how you should live. Your baptism is God's promise to you that if you truly believe that Jesus died for your sins,

then you will indeed be saved. It is a guarantee that, if you trust in Christ as your Savior and Lord, then you really have what baptism symbolizes: you have forgiveness of all your sins; you have been born again; and you have the Holy Spirit living within you, enabling you to live a new life. Children, take hold of what God has promised in your baptism. Do not neglect this precious gift.

Every Christian really should think of his or her baptism as the most important thing in his or her life. Baptism is the God-given sign of what the Christian life is all about. Now of course, we wouldn't want to make the mistake of saying that there is an unbreakable bond between baptism and the salvation that it represents. It is certainly possible to have the sign without having the reality that it signifies. Many people are baptized who do not live a life of faith. Baptism has no value for such people. On the other hand, it is equally possible to have the reality without having the sign of that reality. The thief on the cross was not baptized, but we can be sure that he was saved. There is not an inseparable connection between baptism and salvation. But this should not cause us to think that baptism is unnecessary. God commands the church to use the sign of baptism in order to put a visible difference between those who belong to the world and those who belong to the church. Baptism tells Christians who they are. And for this reason, every Christian should be baptized, and so should the children born to Christian parents.

IV. CONCLUSION

Why does the Bible say “baptism saves you”? Because baptism is one of the means by which God applies his grace to the lives of his chosen people. Baptism saves in the same sense that the Word of God saves. God uses his Word to save people, and he also uses baptism to save people. Some people hear God’s Word without being saved. In the same way, some people are baptized without being saved. But for all whom God has appointed to eternal life, he uses his Word and he uses baptism, along with the other means of grace (which are the Lord’s Supper and prayer), to convey that eternal life to them. So don’t ever think of your baptism as a mere formality. Instead, think of it as it is so powerfully described in this illustration given by Pastor Robert Rayburn:

“This is the way I try to help people understand in my congregation what Baptism is and what actually happens in that moment. Suppose we were to have an infant Baptism here next Lord’s Day; and suppose on this moment alone of all the moments in the history of the Church since the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ this was a sacrament by sight and not by faith: Just as the minister was prepared to begin, with a loud, tearing sound the roof of the building parted; and lo and behold, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself descended to where I am standing right now. There were seraphim hovering above his shoulder. We were all on our faces before the glory of God, but he told us to arise. He took the baby in his arms and

He pronounced the Divine Triune Name over the child and made the promise of His Gospel and covenant to this child by name and then by name summoned him or her to the life of faith and godliness and consecration. He then spoke a word to this child's parents about the sacred stewardship He was now entrusting to them and how they would answer to Him for this child's faith and this child's life on the Great Day. Then He spoke a word to this congregation about your responsibility and then a word to the minister about his. Then He blessed the child and poured water on its head and ascended back into Heaven and with a loud crash the ceiling came back to where it was before and everything was as it was. Let me tell you a few things that would inevitably be true. One is that that child, though he or she would be too young to have any personal recollection of that moment, would remember his Baptism forever and better than he would remember any other event in his life because scarcely a day would pass without his parents telling him what happened in the church when he was three weeks old and what the Lord Christ said and demanded and promised. He would live as he grew up – at 3, at 4, at 6, at 8, at 12, at 18, at 26 – he would live under the specter and under the mercy, the glory of Baptism. His whole life would be colored and shaped and formed by it. That's what Baptism is. That's exactly what happens in the Baptism of a child or adult when it happens in this church. The only difference is that it is by faith that you see it and not by sight." (Rob Rayburn, cited in Jeffrey Meyers, *The Lord's Service*, pp. 273-4)

Sermon on 1 Peter 3:18-22 (#2)
OT Reading: Genesis 6:5-7:5

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Rev. Andy Wilson

Your baptism marks you out as someone who belongs to the living God. In baptism, the Lord summons you to a life of faith and godliness. In baptism, God promises to give you cleansing, new birth, and new life, if you will only lay hold of Christ by faith. And that is how baptism saves you.