

What Baptism Does

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As all of us know, the devil is a skilled and wily adversary. He is very, very good at getting men to reject God, even though the price of separation is eternal punishment. Because of Satan's wiles, the majority of people on the planet will make the worst decision that it is possible to make. We have no reason to question his competence.

However, the very competence of Satan makes it possible for us to understand and even predict his schemes. He doesn't waste his time flailing around at irrelevant things. Instead, he attacks people where they are most vulnerable and where his attacks will do the most damage. One of the places where this is most obvious is in the area of salvation. Salvation is not some minor subject in the Bible. Indeed, it is one of the major themes of Scripture, and the word explains in great detail what all men everywhere must do if they wish to be saved. The Scriptural record could not be clearer.

However, this same clarity is not apparent in the minds and lives of men. Even among those who claim to be believers, the question, "What must I do to be saved?" will elicit a dozen different answers, even though there's nothing in the text that would generate such massive confusion. When I consider what the word teaches about salvation, and what people choose to do instead, the only way I can explain the difference is by pointing to the influence of Satan. After all, either people have obeyed the plan of salvation that God has set out, or they haven't. Those who have will be saved; those who haven't, won't. It is to Satan's advantage, then, to make the whole subject as confused and confusing as possible, so that sincere people who believe they are saved will be sincerely wrong and lose their souls instead.

The only way for us to resolve this confusion is by returning to the Scripture and learning what it teaches us about salvation. In particular, let's focus this morning on one of the central concepts of salvation—what baptism does.

Baptism and Sin

The first area where we should consider the effects of baptism is the area of sin. After all, sin is mankind's biggest problem. Salvation is so important precisely because it saves us from our sins. What does baptism have to do with it? First, the Scripture teaches us that baptism **WASHES AWAY SINS**. We learn this from the words of Ananias to Saul of Tarsus in Acts 22:16. When Saul and Ananias first meet in Damascus, Saul is one of the most sinful people we could imagine. He has spent years, perhaps, persecuting the Lord's church, hauling men and women into prison for the crime of confessing Christ, torturing them until they blasphemed, and voting for the steadfast to be put to death.

However, on the road to Damascus, Saul quite literally saw the light. Jesus spoke to him from heaven, and he realized that the One whom he had so steadfastly opposed truly was the Son of God. All of the things he thought he was doing for God, he actually had been doing against God. His sin was so great that he acknowledged himself as the chief of sinners. What did he have to do to get rid of his sins? He had to wash them away in the waters of baptism.

In similar fashion, the word tells us that baptism **CLEANSSES**. Look with me at Ephesians 5:25-26. In this section, Paul's aim is to teach husbands how to love their wives. He accomplishes this aim by personifying the church as the bride of Christ and describing all the things that Christ has done for the church. In reality, of course, the church is not a person. The church is an abstraction. All of the things that the passage says Christ did for the church, He actually did for the Christians who individually make up the church. One of the things that Christ has done for Christians, as mentioned here, is that He cleansed them through the washing of water. In a New Testament context, this washing of water can only refer to baptism, and only those who have been baptized have been cleansed by Christ.

Third, baptism **SAVES**. Peter says so in as many words in 1 Peter 3:21. Of all of the passages of Scripture that teach what baptism does, this is perhaps the clearest, and nowhere is the work of Satan more evident than in the difficulty that so many have in understanding this text. When Lauren is looking at an unfamiliar translation of the Bible, one of the things that she likes to do to determine the faithfulness of the translation is to turn to this verse. If the translation is an accurate one, this verse will say, "Baptism saves." If the translation is instead a paraphrase shaped by some man's opinions, it will say something to the effect of, "Baptism doesn't really save." This verse is so inconvenient for those who teach that baptism is unnecessary for salvation that they will write it right out of the Bible if they get a chance.

Of course, bad translations don't change the truth. If we want to be saved, we must be baptized. What's more, this verse helps clarify some of the passages we've looked at already. When the Scripture says that baptism cleanses us, it doesn't mean that it washes away the filth of the flesh. Instead, we are cleansed from our spiritual filth, from the accumulation of sin and guilt that we have built up during our years of disobedience to God. The only reason why Peter would need to clarify this point is the possibility of mistake. No one could think that a step of the plan of salvation was just a normal bath unless it looked like a bath, unless baptism involved literal immersion in water.

Finally, baptism **REGENERATES**. This is clearly taught by Titus 3:4-5. The word "washing" here is the same word in the Greek that we saw in Ephesians 5:26. It is *loutron*, which means "bathtub." In other words, this passage teaches us that we are saved by the mercy of God through the bathtub of regeneration. The point here is not that our baptistery, or any other baptistery, contains the magic water of salvation. Instead, baptism is the means that God has

chosen to save us. Baptism is only effective because God has decreed that it is effective, but now that God has commanded us to be baptized, no other mode of salvation will do. We must be baptized to be saved from our sins.

Baptism and Christ

In addition to its effect on sins, baptism also has a transformative effect on our relationship with Christ. To begin with, baptism **UNITES US WITH CHRIST**. Paul explains this in Romans 6:3, 5. The central idea of Christianity is that Jesus died on the cross for our sins. However, if that's all we know, there's a link missing from the chain between Christ and our salvation. After all, what does the death of a man who was executed by the Romans 2000 years ago have to do with us today? The Romans killed lots of people. Why is Jesus important?

This verse spells out the connection between Jesus and us. He was an innocent man, but He was murdered anyway. After His death, He was literally buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. Unlike Jesus, we are guilty. We deserve to die for our sins. However, when we are baptized, we are making a choice to avoid that. We are choosing to die symbolically in the watery grave of baptism, so that in that grave, we can be united with the death that Jesus has already died. Through baptism, we are sharing His death with Him, and once we have symbolically died, we no longer face the death penalty for our sins. We need not pay that penalty ourselves because Christ's death has paid it for us.

Similarly, baptism **RAISES US WITH CHRIST**. Let's consider together Colossians 2:11-12. There's a lot here, but let's focus on the idea of being buried and raised with Jesus. What makes Christ different from all of the other men whom the Romans killed is that He didn't stay dead. Instead, on the third day, God raised Him from the dead. The fact that He was literally dead and was literally raised proves to us that through Him, we who are spiritually dead can be spiritually raised. When we come up out of the waters of baptism, we aren't just coming up wet. We are coming up spiritually resurrected. All the sins that we have committed before belong to an old man of sin who died in the water. We have been given a new life. We get to start over with a clean slate. Of course, this process only functions if we have faith in the working of God, if we believe in His power to save us. With that faith, though, baptism raises us.

Finally, baptism **CLOTHES US WITH CHRIST**. Look at Galatians 3:27. This passage reminds me of a mean trick that Lauren played on me a few years ago when we were visiting her parents. The shower in the guest bathroom wasn't working, so I took a shower in her parents' master bathroom instead. I was just stepping out of the shower when Lauren comes barging into the bathroom without knocking just to see what I would do. I'm already a bit nervous about showering in this bathroom to begin with, so when the door comes flying open, I'm convinced it's my mother-in-law on the way to the potty, and she's about to catch me without a stitch on. I squeal like a girl and set a world speed record over to the bath towel before I realize that it's just my wife, because I was so ashamed of being caught naked.

In a spiritual sense, we are all naked before God. Every sin we have ever committed is evident to Him, and when we think of how exposed we are, we should feel embarrassed and ashamed. Just as my first instinct was to grab a towel, our first instinct should be to put some clothes on, and the only spiritual clothing that's available comes from Jesus. Only His grace can cover up the shame of our sin, and we can only clothe ourselves through the act of baptism.

Baptism and the Church

Finally, though, baptism changes our relationship with the church. First of all, baptism **ADDS US TO THE CHURCH**. We learn this from a study of Acts 2:41, 47. V. 41 tells us that the 3000 who were saved through baptism were added. V. 47 tells us what they were added to—the number of all who had believed, the assembly of the church. This is important because it tells us what truly makes us a part of the church. Before I go on, let me hasten to add that I appreciate our visitors, and I especially appreciate those who regularly visit our assembly. However, simple attendance here during our regular service times does not make someone a member of our local congregation, and it does not make someone a member of the universal church, that is, the assembly of every soul who has been saved by Jesus. The only way that someone can become a member of this church, or of the Lord's church at all, is through baptism. The law of God does not allow us to admit to fellowship someone who is not a baptized believer. Conversely, except in the case of the Christian who is sinning willfully, a local church does not have the right to reject the one who has been baptized for the forgiveness of his sins. God automatically adds the one who has been baptized, and we must do the same.

In a more general sense, baptism **JOINS US TO THE KINGDOM**. This becomes apparent when we consider John 3:3, 5. Even though this passage does not use the word "baptism", it's evident that when Jesus discusses being born of water and the Spirit, He's talking about baptism. The Holy Spirit, operating through the word, moves us to seek our salvation, and we lay hold of that salvation when we are immersed in the waters of baptism. Our new selves are conceived in study and born in baptism. Once we are baptized, two things become possible that were impossible before. We can see the kingdom of God, and we can enter the kingdom of God. This refers first of all to the church, as we discussed earlier, but here, the word "kingdom" has an additional sense. It refers to what John Meyer describes from time to time as "that upward and better kingdom", heaven itself. Unless we are baptized, we will not see heaven, and we will not enter heaven, and friends, the alternatives to heaven are not good. Only baptism can secure our eternal destiny.