

BAPTISM

A Washing for All Time



No one likes the thought of being wet for a long time. Think of a toddler squirming in a squishy diaper or an adult caught in a cold April shower. What uncomfortable pictures flash before the mental video screen! The very thought makes us shiver.

For a child of God, the picture of being wet for a lifetime evokes a far different reaction. Instead of discomfort and chills, the Christian senses the warmth and comfort that radiate from the promises that are ours through the water of Holy Baptism. Through this washing of water and the Word, the holy God comes into our lives and leaves us “wet” for life. God comes to us through this Sacrament and engulfs us in his powerful grace. Although this washing happens only once, it is so powerful that it drenches our parched souls with the sweet refreshment of forgiveness over and over again. Baptism is a washing with lasting effect. It’s no wonder Luther, the great reformer, once said, “Every Christian consequently has enough to learn and to practice all his life in regard to Baptism” (*Large Catechism*, Janzow translation, p. 103).

Can Baptism mean so much throughout my entire life? Scripture says so. In fact, God has much to say about this washing of water with the Word. The various forms of the word *baptize* occur over one hundred times in the New Testament. The apostle Paul states, “You were washed, you were sanctified, you

Baptism is a once-in-a-lifetime event,
but the blessings are eternal.

were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11). Read carefully, and rejoice. Notice the passive verbs. You were *cleansed*. You were *set apart*. You were *declared innocent before God’s throne*. Notice the past tense. It is an accomplished fact. Let skeptics snicker, but no one can change what God has declared. In Baptism we have been united in Jesus and washed clean. The water of Baptism will affect our lives forever. If God makes a promise, it stands sure and solid. “God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind” (Numbers 23:19).

Think of your baptism every morning as you face the mirror with water dripping from your face. Remember that God has washed you clean through the blood of Jesus and poured that forgiveness upon you through Baptism. “Be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). Through the water of Baptism, we have been washed for life. This precious water warms and comforts us.



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BAPTISM

A Divine Washing



“So what’s the big deal? I don’t understand why Grandma is so upset about this. She keeps telling me it is a baptism and not a christening. What’s the difference? A church rite is a church rite. Besides, he’s our baby, and Grandma should quit pressuring us to have him baptized so quickly. I’d rather plan for a weekend when the whole family can get together for dinner.”

Sound familiar? Is Baptism more than a simple church rite? Is it a divine washing? Yes! In Baptism, God works a creation miracle at the font. The apostle Paul explains what this miracle means to us when he writes: “It is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (2 Corinthians 1:21,22). Baptism is clearly an important part of God’s plan for the church. Jesus showed that as well when he commanded the church, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . . and teaching them” (Matthew 28:19,20).

What makes Baptism a divine washing? The water is not special. How we apply the water is not an important issue either. The word *baptize* simply means to use water in any of a variety of ways. The practice of washing with water was an integral part of Old Testament ceremonial worship life. Jesus took

Baptism is more than a simple church rite. At the baptismal font, the Holy Spirit performs a miracle.

that rather well-known custom and gave it a special place in the New Testament church. He told the church to baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

What makes Baptism a divine washing and what gives Baptism its power is the connection of water and the Word—the name of the one saving God. As the Catechism teaches us, “God’s Name is everything God has revealed to us about himself in his word” (*Small Catechism*, David Kuske, page 59). It’s no wonder Luther says, “For God Himself here puts His honor, might, and power on the line . . . this Word contains and transmits all of God’s fullness” (*Large Catechism*, Janzow translation, page 100). God places his name upon us in Baptism and welcomes us into a family, the family of God himself.

One final reminder: Because Baptism is a divine washing, any Christian can baptize. The power is in God’s Word, not in the officiant. Normally, for the sake of good order and to prevent confusion or jealousy in the congregation, believers entrust this responsibility to pastors. However, in an emergency any Christian can use water and the Word of God and can be an instrument of God’s amazing grace to save.



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BAPTISM

Also for Babies



“Oh, you’re from that church that baptizes babies? How can you sprinkle water on infants and say they’ll be in heaven? A person has to knowingly accept Jesus as Savior. Show me in the Bible where God says we should baptize babies.”

How do you respond? Is it so necessary to baptize babies? Scripture says yes! First, Christ clearly commands the Church to baptize “all nations” (Matthew 28:19). Certainly this phrase includes infants. Babies are a part of every nation. There isn’t the slightest hint in Scripture that God excluded infants from this command. Remember, “The promise is for you and your children” (Acts 2:39).

Second, listen closely to the Savior who hugged little children. Jesus spoke of “these little ones who believe in me” (Matthew 18:6). In the Greek language, the word translated “little ones” commonly refers to babies. So faith is not simply cognitive understanding. If that were the case, what would we say of the elderly Christian ravaged by Alzheimer’s? Has faith vanished? We thank our Lord for showing us that faith is a miracle of the Holy Spirit, who uses the gospel in the Word and sacraments. Adults receive this gospel when they read the printed Word or hear the spoken Word. The Spirit can use that gospel to create faith. When adults are baptized, they show that they joyously embrace Christ’s command, and the Holy Spirit strengthens

The Holy Spirit works the miracle of faith in babies’ hearts as well as in the hearts of adults.

their newly created faith. To create faith in babies, the Spirit uses the same powerful gospel, connected with the water through the Word.

Finally, remember also how Scripture describes the human condition. Babies are not born morally neutral or with an unblemished free will. From conception we are steeped in original sin (Psalm 51:5), which we inherited from our rebellious first parents (Romans 5:12,17). Though we were born spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1), God graciously comes to create an Easter miracle of new life within us (Romans 6:3,4). Yes, babies need Baptism, for Baptism “now saves you also” (1 Peter 3:21). Luther writes, “No one is to think that [Baptism] is an optional matter like putting on a red coat” (Janzow, page 98).

Some reject infant baptism because they question whether conversion is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit without input or impetus from the recipient. But babies are helpless. Babies cannot speak or assent. God must do everything. And that is Scripture’s message. “It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13). Baptism of babies is truly one of the loudest sermons on pure grace that the church proclaims.



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BAPTISM

A Rebirth



“Are you a born-again Christian?” When asked that question, I invariably answer, “Yes, when I was baptized as a baby.” The retort is predictable and emphatic: “No, no. I mean when did you decide to accept Jesus as your Savior? Or haven’t you been born again?”

Listen to our loving Savior: “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit” (John 3:5,6). What a tremendous picture to emphasize pure grace! Jesus uses the picture of being born again to remind us that in our baptism a miracle was performed in our hearts. And what happened was entirely from God. Think of physical birth. We had no part in the process of conception. We didn’t feed ourselves in our mothers’ wombs. Nor did we thumb through the calendar to pick just the right months and days to celebrate as our birthdays for the rest of our lives. We had no part in the process of our creation. It happened to us.

What is true of physical birth is also true of our spiritual birth. It happened to us without our decision or activity. We who were dead in our transgressions and sins at birth have found new life in Jesus. Scripture declares, “Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ

Baptism is a tremendous expression of God’s pure grace. God’s miracle happened to us without our decision or activity.

even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:4,5). God made us alive through the special washing of Baptism. “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5-7). Please note the last part of this verse. In that washing of rebirth, God has declared us innocent. Our innocence is an accomplished fact in Christ Jesus, sealed to us through this precious washing of rebirth.

Yes, dear believer, you are born again in Christ. This rebirth is not a decision you arrived at. It is not a choice you made. Jesus clearly tells us, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last” (John 15:16). Only as a result of the Spirit’s work through the means of grace can a believer now say yes to Jesus. Rejoice that God has come and created this new life of faith in your heart.



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BAPTISM

A Resurrection



Quickly, without looking, sketch a mental image of the baptismal font in your church sanctuary. Where is the font located? Do artistic symbols decorate the font—symbols which convey the truth that miracles occur at the font? In the old churches of the reformation, fonts were often massive structures located in prominent places within the churches. Those fonts were visual reminders that Baptism is a foundational tenet of our faith. Many fonts were constructed in the shape of an octagon. That shape conveyed a subtle but distinctly Easter motif. Counting Sunday as the first day, Jesus then rose on the eighth day. Perhaps you never thought of the octagonal baptismal font as a picture of Christ's tomb, but Scripture paints that picture.

The apostle Paul finds both Good Friday and Easter Sunday in Baptism. "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus"

The baptismal font pictures Christ's empty tomb. Baptized into Christ's death, we were also united with him in his resurrection.

(Romans 6:3-5,8,11). Read all of Romans 6:1-14 in your Bible, and prayerfully ponder this miracle.

There is no question that Paul's pen links Baptism to Christ's tomb. His death is our death. Baptism is our burial. Our sins are buried and sealed up forever. No one, not our consciences nor even the Adversary, can drag our sins out from that tomb of Jesus. But from that tomb the glorious news of victory is proclaimed. Remember what we just read in Romans chapter 6. "Just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (verse 4). In another place Paul also wrote, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Through Baptism we are connected to Jesus' resurrection. Through Baptism we say yes to Jesus and no to sin.

In his walk of faith, the Christian believer not only walks *toward* his future death and resurrection in Christ, but he also walks *from* his death and resurrection in Christ. Our baptism was our first burial and resurrection. Baptism offers the confidence, through Jesus, to face the next burial with the sure hope of the final resurrection.



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BAPTISM



Jacketed in Jesus

I asked the man from Montana if it was true. He said it was.

I had read about a practice called jacketing. Jacketing takes us to the wide-open ranges of Big Sky country. Think of thousands of sheep grazing on thousands of acres of ranchland. Occasionally, during lambing season, a ewe dies while giving birth. Only one course of action can save her lamb. Because the rancher is too far from his ranch house, and because he is responsible for thousands of sheep, he can't bottle feed that one lamb. And if he tried to lead the lamb to another ewe, the ewe would sniff it and reject it, knowing it wasn't her own. The lamb can be saved only if another lamb has died. The rancher will skin the dead lamb and stitch its hide around the orphan. It is called jacketing. Then, when the lamb is brought to the ewe, she sniffs the jacketed orphan and smells her own. The jacketed lamb has a family and a future.

Our condition at birth was worse than that of an orphan. We were born dead in the stench of sin and selfishness. In God's nostrils, we were the smell of the rotting corpse of the old Adam. The repulsive smell lingers in the ugly reality of our laziness, the cutting words of our hidden gossip, and the sordid details of our secret lust. God's command "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect"

In Baptism, God washed us and dressed us in the unspoiled garments of Christ's perfection.

(Matthew 5:48) is beyond our reach. The unmistakable stench proves that we don't belong to the Father.

Thankfully, God does not reject us. Paul writes, "All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:27). We are now jacketed with Jesus. Imagine! We are wrapped in the perfect obedience of the one and only perfect Child of God. Now when we are brought under the microscope of God's scrutiny, our heavenly Father sees only the perfect life of Jesus, without stain or smudge. Now God smells the pleasing aroma of the perfect words and works of his own Son, Jesus, offered as our substitute. Baptism wraps us in the clothes of Christ's obedience. That is why Scripture declares, "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (Romans 10:4). In Baptism, God washed us clean and dressed us in the robes of Jesus' righteousness. Now we can stand before God. We are jacketed in Jesus. We have a future. We are loved. We have life.



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BAPTISM

A Spiritual D-Day



Most Americans still recognize the significance of a day called *D-Day*. On that day thousands of Allied soldiers began the invasion of occupied Europe. It was a day of horrendous death and destruction. But that day also marked the beginning of deliverance from tyranny.

In one sense, the day of your baptism was a spiritual D-Day. On that day the Lord God initiated an invasion through water and Word. That day was also marked by death and deliverance. But that deliverance didn't take place gradually. On that day you were rescued from hellish tyranny.

Both Peter and Paul invoke this imagery of death yet deliverance in connection with Baptism. The context of Peter's declaration that "baptism . . . now saves you also" (1 Peter 3:21) is a reference to the universal flood. The flood waters destroyed a world characterized by rampant wickedness. Yet that same water lifted the ark and carried eight people to safety. That water safeguarded the promise first enunciated in the Garden of Eden. Something just as extraordinary happens in the flood at the font. "In [the ark] only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:20,21). Luther captures

On the day of our baptisms, God initiated an invasion that brought freedom and deliverance.

the idea well. "Now baptism is by far a greater flood than was that of Noah. For that flood drowned men during no more than one year, but baptism drowns all sorts of men throughout the world, from the birth of Christ even till the day of judgment" (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 35, page 32).

Paul also invokes an Old Testament allusion that most believers will recognize. "I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Corinthians 10:1,2). The mighty waters of the Red Sea destroyed the enemies of God's people. Those same waters brought freedom and deliverance to the Israelites.

We can't miss the evidence of God's steady hand of grace. At the font the old Adam is drowned and God delivers us from a death that we inherited at birth. Destruction yet deliverance—the font is a flood that achieves both through the power and Word of the living Lord. Mark the date of your baptism, and each year celebrate that anniversary. On that day God initiated an invasion in order to destroy sin and to deliver you through the blood of Jesus.



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BAPTISM

A Washing that Unites



“I was baptized a Lutheran.” “I was baptized Presbyterian.” “I was baptized a Catholic.” We often hear people say such things. The fact that we hear those statements so often doesn’t justify the confusion they cause. We are not baptized into a denomination. Nor is Baptism a mere outward rite that places our names on the membership lists of particular congregations. Baptism is so much more.

The apostle Paul speaks of a unity that results from Baptism. “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body . . . and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Corinthians 12:12,13). Baptism is a divine washing that unites us to Jesus and to one another.

Remember the distinction between visible churches that exist this side of heaven and the reality of the invisible church of Christ. We confess in the third article of the Apostles’ Creed that we “believe in . . . the Holy Christian Church.” Those who have been baptized into Jesus and who, by the Spirit’s grace, are nurtured in this saving faith through the gospel are members of this mysterious unity, the body of Christ. This side of heaven, we heed Christ’s admonition to constantly be on guard against error and falsehood within visible

Through Baptism we are all made part of the same family—the family of Christ.

churches. Yet we never deny the reality of the gospel’s saving power wherever it is proclaimed.

So rejoice in the gospel’s march around the world. Every Christian baptismal font reminds us of the wonderful unity that believers have in Jesus. Every public worship service calls to mind this unity. The invocation with which we open many Christian gatherings is also a vivid reminder of this unity. When we hear “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” we remember the name God placed upon us. In Holy Baptism, God has said to you and me, “You are my own dear child in Jesus.” We carry his name into the world as members of one family, adopted purely by grace. “In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves” (Ephesians 1:4-6).

Someday in glory we will see our Savior and all our brothers and sisters in the faith. Look ahead with excitement to that reunion. We will know everyone by name, for they are one with us through the power of Baptism.



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