

Holy Baptism – Matthew 28:16-20

- 1) Jesus guarantees it
- 2) Remain in its blessings

Sometime in the 40 days between Easter Sunday and Jesus' ascension into heaven, he had the disciples go back north to Galilee where Jesus began his public ministry.ⁱ Galilee, the region where Jesus grew up in the home of Joseph and Mary. The people who lived there got to see how Jesus is both the Son of God and Son of Man for the greater part of 3 years. Many of Jesus' apostles called Galilee their home. And it's here on a mountaintop in Galilee that Jesus appeared to the 11 disciples and gave them the Great Commission. First he establishes his authority by saying "**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.**"ⁱⁱ Then he gives the commission – "**go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.**"ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus charges all Christians to share the news of Jesus' free forgiveness with all people. This, in a nutshell, is the Great Commission.

There's a reason why Jesus first lists baptism. Because it is when a person is baptized that they receive life in Christ. The Holy Spirit works through the combination of water and Word to create faith in a heart that before had nothing good in it. For many of us, we received this gift while we were still infants. But even if it was later in life, what a wondrous gift baptism still is! For it is in baptism that we receive the full forgiveness of all our sins without doing anything for it in return. When we enter God's heavenly family and become his children through faith in Christ Jesus. This is a comfort that can never be taken away.^{iv}

But Christians haven't always understood what baptism is. In the times of Martin Luther, baptism was overshadowed by the 6 other sacraments in the Catholic Church. Baptism is important since it is the first step of the Christian life. But once a person was baptized, the people focused on the other sacraments to make sure they remained good enough for God.^v What this led to was a captivity of sorts because the people had to bow to the priests' demands for the sacraments and their insistence to perform good works to gain salvation.^{vi}

This is where Luther stepped in to show people what the Bible says about the sacraments and our salvation. In 1520 he wrote a theological treatise called *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. He makes lots of points, but the one we're focusing on this morning is the comfort that we receive in the sacraments of

baptism. We don't have to do anything to earn God's forgiveness. It's already given to us in them. We don't have to doubt if we have God's salvation. For it is already ours. But with the sacramental system of the 1500s, the Catholic Church was holding the people's souls in captivity. So Luther equates the priests with the ancient, pagan kingdom of Babylon which did not offer any hope to troubled souls.^{vii}

Where do people get this idea that baptism does not give us God's free and full forgiveness? Because not only did it happen in Luther's time, but also in ours. To understand where error can creep in, imagine what a baptism looks like without the eyes of faith. What do you see? There's a newborn infant, probably dressed in something white, held over a bowl of water by their mother or father. A pastor makes the sign of the cross, dips his hand into the water, and pours it on the infant's head three times while saying, "*I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*" He dries off the infant's head with an embroidered cloth, hands it to the parents, and says a few more words before the young family returns to their seats. There isn't much to look at. And if you didn't know what Scripture teaches about baptism, you probably wouldn't realize that God's family just grew by 1 person. It's because of this a number of Christian church bodies wrongly teach that baptism is only symbolic.^{viii} As water washes a person, so they are symbolically washed of their sins. And since they teach that baptism has no power in and of itself, it instead becomes something that we do for God as we dedicate our lives to him in willful obedience.

Yet, as our Lord teaches us in our 2nd lesson from 1st Peter chapter 3, baptism is **"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."**^{ix} Baptism is not a mere symbolic gesture. It is the royal entrance of a forgiven sinner into God's heavenly family. When the combination of water and God's Word is applied to a person in baptism, there is now life and salvation. Because it is guaranteed by Jesus' resurrection, the only person who has won life and salvation for all people.

Do you remember what Jesus said on that mountaintop in Galilee right before he gave the Great Commission? He said, **"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."**^x Not only did he already have all authority as the Son of God, but he showed it to all people as the Son of Man. He's the person we all want to be. The perfect child who never disobeyed his mother and father. The

perfect neighbor who never gossiped or stole. But Jesus is also the person we could never be. The perfect person who kept every one of God's laws. The perfect person who turned the other cheek to endure persecution. It is because of all these things that Jesus alone is the only one who can be our substitute for sin. So that his death on the cross may be accepted as punishment for our sins. So that his resurrection from the grave may be the proof of our life to come.

Baptism connects us with these blessings. Before the water and Word are placed upon us, we were dead in our sins. But it all changes when that water and Word come our way. For we go from enemies of God to children of God. We start calling Jesus our all-powerful and loving Savior who became like us in order to save us. Baptism is far more than a symbolic act that we do for God. It is a wondrous gift where our God brings us into his family and says, *"I love you. Your sins are forgiven. You are my child. You will spend your days in eternity with me in heaven."* Those are the sure blessings we have through our baptisms. And they are guaranteed by the one who has all authority in heaven and on earth.

In the theological treatise that Luther wrote, *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, he uses an illustration of a mighty ship in raging waters to describe what baptism is like. Before we are baptized, we were lost in a turbulent sea destined to die a painful death. But when the Holy Spirit creates faith in our hearts through the waters of baptism, then God plucks us from the raging waters and places us on a mighty ship. This ship of salvation weathers every wind and wave because baptism doesn't depend on us. It depends on God who does everything in it for us. And since God is its strength, it will never fail.^{xi}

But perhaps you're thinking, *"Yeah, but Pastor, what about that person I know who was baptized as a child yet now doesn't believe? Was their baptism real?"* It's a sad fact. There are countless people who once had faith and now have thrown it away. We don't live in a *"once saved, always saved"* world. Using Luther's illustration, just because we're on the ship of salvation doesn't mean we can't fall off it. We need to continually go back to our baptismal waters and repent of our sins so we may receive its blessings all throughout our lives.

It's a continual struggle for Christians to remain on the ship of salvation. That sinful nature in us from birth doesn't go away once we have the Holy Spirit. It will continue to war within our hearts. By making us doubt the power of baptism when we see how others jump ship and throw their faith away. By tempting us to live apart from God's Word because life would be a lot more fun if we indulged

our sinful wants. By getting us angry at God when we see the evils in this world or loved ones hurting us. Day by day we must struggle against this old Adam who tries to convince us that life would be better in the turbulent waters than on the ship of salvation.^{xii}

As you face your sins and temptations, go to the one who guarantees your baptism. Seek the Lord's guidance in his Word. Go to your Savior and count the cost of his cross he bore for you. He lived the life we cannot to give us the reward we do not deserve. He envelopes you in his full forgiveness from the moment you are baptized till the day you breathe your last believing breath. Pray to the Holy Spirit for the power to fight against your old Adam who wants nothing more for you than to jump ship. Daily repent of your sins so that you may receive God's forgiveness and keep your footing secure on the ship of salvation.

Baptism may only look like a dabbling of water with some chosen spoken words. But it is so much more. It is a wondrous gift when a person receives their life in Christ. It is when many Christians first join God's heavenly family. And behind it all is our loving Savior Jesus Christ who commissions Christians to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus is the one who guarantees the power of baptism as surely as the resurrection shows his power over the grave. This is the comfort Martin Luther reminded the people of in his 1520 theological treatise *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. And it's the wondrous gift as he describes elsewhere – **“No greater jewel, therefore, can adorn our body and soul than baptism, for through it we become completely holy and blessed, which no other kind of life and no work on earth can acquire.”**^{xiii} Amen.

ⁱ G. Jerome and Michael Albrecht, *The People's Bible: Matthew* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996), 440.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 28:18b.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 28:19-20a.

^{iv} 1 Peter 3:18,21b.

^v *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part 2, Section 1, Chapter 1, Article 2.

^{vi} James Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and his Career* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 152.

^{vii} Kittelson, 152-153.

^{viii} Baptists, some Presbyterians, and other Reformed churches in general.

^{ix} 1 Peter 3:21.

^x Matthew 28:18b.

^{xi} Kittelson, 153.

^{xii} Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, The Sacrament of Holy Baptism, Part 4.

^{xiii} Martin Luther, *Large Catechism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), Part 4, Paragraph 46.