

“Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (Is 12:3)

✠ Lecture IX: Baptism in The Holy Catholic Epistles ✠

“The longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us, namely baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” (1 Pet 3:20-21)

Next to **Mk 16:16** this is most straightforward and unequivocal statement in the New Testament concerning the relation between baptism and salvation. In plain words St. Peter is simply saying, “Baptism now saves you.” This passage brings to mind what St. Paul said, “having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (**Heb 10:22**). These two passages combine the outer physical aspect and the inner spiritual effect of baptism. We must be careful not to draw the false conclusion that the outward side of baptism or the actual immersion in water is not important for St. Paul called it, “pure water”. It is still baptism that saves. This cannot be limited to an alleged spiritual baptism not involving water, since there is only one baptism in our Christian experience (**Eph 4:5**). Besides this, water is prominent in the context of **1 Pet 3:21**. The fact that baptism involves water is what links it with the flood in the first place.

→ One time H.G. Bishop Antonios Marcos, Bishop of Africa, was invited to attend a baptism of one of the many Protestants denominations in Africa. They had the person to be baptized sitting on a chair and they were praying and waving a red flag above his head. After a while the ceremony ended and they asked His Grace what he thought. So His Grace exclaimed, “Where is the water? You didn’t even use water!” They said, “Oh, water is just the outward aspect, but we are more interested in the inner spiritual aspect of baptism and this red flag represents the Holy Spirit that works in us”. His Grace smiled and said, “My friends, this is not a baptism, this is dry cleaning and we cannot accept it.”

We have pointed out that baptism is a divine work of grace (**Titus 3:5**) through which we have “our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience” (**Heb 10:22**), it is “not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God” (**1 Pet 3:21**). In St. Paul’s defense before Felix the governor, he said, “I myself always **strive** to have a conscience without offense toward God and men” (**Acts 24:16**). St. Paul strived to have a good conscience even though he was baptized which is a good example of the Orthodox understanding of grace and works. (More examples available in lecture IV of Soteriology)

“This is He who came by water and blood – Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth... For there are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one.” (1 Jn 5:6,8)

This passage shows the relation between water of baptism, the blood of Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The saving efficacy of baptismal water is attributed to the precious blood of our Lord, and it is the Holy Spirit who works in the water and gives it the saving power of the blood of Lord Jesus Christ. It is written:

- “Without shedding of blood there is no remission.” (**Heb 9:22**)
- Lord Jesus Christ said about the Holy Spirit, “He will take of what is Mine (saving efficacy of My blood) and declare it to you (in the saving sacraments)” (**Jn 16:14**)
- It is written, “But one of the soldiers pierced His aide with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out” (**Jn 19:34**)
- Our Lord affirms that we must be born again of water and Spirit in order to enter the Kingdom of God (**Jn 3:5**)

‡ **FAQ:**

Q6: St. Paul said, “Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the Gospel” (1 Cor 1:17). Does this mean that St. Paul’s commission was different from that mentioned in Mt 28:19-20?

A6: Our Lord sent His apostles two by two (**Lk 10:1**), and the Holy Spirit chose St. Paul and St. Barnabas to preach together (**Acts 13:2**). The Holy Book of Acts tells us that St. Paul was the chief speaker among the two (**Acts 14:12**). St. Paul’s commission could not have been materially different from that spoken by Lord Jesus Christ in **Mt 28:19-20**. Though St. Paul’s own **specific** task was to preach verbally, this was not to be separated from baptism. It simply means that he did not have to do the baptizing **personally**. St. Paul emphasizes the priority of his preaching since preaching takes precedence over baptizing in the sense that it must come first. Without preaching there would not even be any faith (**Rom 10:14**) and without faith there would be no baptism in the first place. In fact, **1 Cor 1:12-17** reveals the importance of baptism. Here is what it says:

“Now I say this, that each of you says, ‘I am of Paul’, or ‘I am of Apollos’, or ‘I am of Cephas’, or ‘I am of Christ’. Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, lest anyone should say that I baptized in my own name. Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know if I baptized any other. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel...” (**1 Cor 1:12-17**)

At first glance one might think that St. Paul is demoting baptism to the ranks of insignificant duties or even optional acts. After all, he thanks God he only baptized few people, but this is an incomplete and distorted reading of the passage because it ignores the **reason** why St. Paul is glad he baptized only a few. Verse 15 says, “Lest anyone should say that I baptized in my name”. He is glad he baptized only a few so that the circle of his converts could not use this as a means of setting themselves apart from other Christians. His reasoning presupposes the importance of baptism, not its unimportance. Moreover, St. Paul’s extensive teaching in other passages on the important meaning of baptism would not be consistent with the view that he is denigrating baptism in this passage. Finally, why would he bring up the subject of baptism **at all**, especially in conjunction with the crucifixion of the Lord and the potential division of the Church, if it were not among the most vital and serious aspects of the very existence and life of the Church? How could he so forcefully and in the same breath remind them of who was crucified for them and of the name in which they were baptized, if baptism were not in some sense worthy of such a conjunction?

Q7: Why does the Church baptize boys after 40 days and girls after 80 days of their birth?

A 7: The Church can baptize any newborn boy or girl at any day without waiting 40 or 80 days. This period is the required period before the mother can participate in her child’s baptism as Godmother. Holy Scripture says, “If a woman has conceived, and borne a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days; as in the days of her customary impurity she shall be unclean. And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. She shall then continue in the blood of her purification thirty-three days [total of 40]. She shall not touch any hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary until the days of her purification are fulfilled. But if she bears a female child then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her customary impurity, and she shall continue in the blood of her purification sixty-six days [total of 80].” (**Lev 12:2-5**)

The doubling of the period when a female child is born reminds us of the fact that the woman was the first to be deceived and fall bringing sin into the world (**1 Tim 2:14-15; 1 Pet 3:7**)

* This lecture is adapted from ‘*Baptism A Biblical Study*’ by Jack Cottrell.