

GOD MOVES US TO FAITH THROUGH BAPTISM

Let me begin with a few questions. May you truly believe that you are a child of God? May you really believe that God has forgiven your sins and accepted you in Christ? You realise, of course, that these questions have to do with one's assurance of salvation. Yes, are you certain that you are a Christian?

Some of you will say yes to these questions. In fact, I hope you all do. But on what do you base your certainty? How do you know that you are saved? Let me assume that you rest your assurance of salvation on the Word of God. You say that the Bible tells you that you are a child of God. If that is what you say, then that's wonderful. But how do you know that the Bible says that to you personally? The Bible hasn't got your name and address in it. Well, you might answer that you believe what the Bible says about Christ being the Saviour of sinners who repent and believe. Since you also have repented and believe, the salvation the Bible speaks of is therefore also for you. If that is what you would say, then praise the Lord, for such an answer can be backed up by many passages from the Bible.

Notice that I haven't asked you about some wonderful experiences that you may have had. I do hope of course that you often experience God's love and gracious forgiveness and that you experience it deeply and powerfully. Being a child of God involves your heart, your very soul and your feelings. But on purpose I did not want to focus on experiences as a basis of your assurance of salvation because experiences are a bit of an emotional roller coaster. You can be up but you can also be down.

But what about those of you who are not certain about salvation? Do you believe that you are a child of God? Is that perhaps too difficult to answer? You know what the Bible says about salvation in Christ and believe it but for some reason you lack assurance that it is also for you. You may be very conscious of your shortcomings and failures that keep recurring. Unless you are a lot closer to God that what you are now you feel that it is a bit presumptuous to say that you are saved.

And then there are also those who are not sure that the Bible is all what it claims to be. You feel there are a lot of things in the Bible that don't make sense, even things that seem contradictory. And may be you are not yet ready to be a committed Christian because there are things in your life that you have to give up but you don't quite want to do that yet. Besides, there are a lot of hypocrites in the church. If the church was everything it should be, then that might make you rethink your position.

So we have mentioned three types of people: those who have assurance of salvation, those who don't, and those who are not all that interested. Now in the previous Lord's Day we saw that God produces and strengthens faith in peoples' hearts through the preaching and teaching of God's Word and then further strengthens that faith through the sacraments. This means that God speaking through His Word is where our assurance of salvation comes from. And God also does that through the sacraments. And we now want to see how GOD MOVES US TO FAITH THROUGH BAPTISM.

It will help you to think of baptism as such and not just infant baptism. There is, of course, only one baptism. There's not a baptism for adult believers and a different baptism for children of believers. It's one and the same baptism for all. And it's quite possible to not focus on the meaning of baptism itself because we are often busy in trying to prove that infant baptism is scriptural. So with this sermon think of what your own baptism means to you.

1. God moves us to faith through the Word He speaks AT baptism.

We are familiar with this Word. We hear it said at every baptism. The minister says the person's name and then follow the words: "I baptise you into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." These words are exactly the same as those Jesus said when He gave the great commission. He told the disciples to make disciples of all nations and "*baptising them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*" [Mt.28:19b]. The baptismal formula, therefore, is from Scripture. It is from God.

Unless you were baptised as an adult you will not remember your baptism, for you were only a few weeks old. But it did happen because your believing parents had you baptised and written on your church membership card is the date, the church where it took place and the name of the officiating minister.

Now what does it mean that you have been baptised into the name of God? Did you notice that I used 'into' instead of just 'in'? Saying "I baptise you *in* the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' is all right too but it might create the impression that the minister is baptising on behalf of God, in His name. If the Lord was present then He would do it, but now the minister does it on His behalf, as His representative. But that is not what is happening. We should understand it this way. To baptise someone *into* the name of God points to a relationship that exists between God and the person baptised.

Let's use an example from the Bible to illustrate the point we're making here. In his first letter to the Corinthian church the apostle Paul is speaking about the exodus from Egypt of Old Testament Israel. God used the pillar of cloud to lead them to the Red Sea and they all passed through the sea to the other side. Paul speaks of it in this way: "*They were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea*" [1 Cor.10:2]. The words, "*baptised into Moses*" point to a relationship that existed between the Israelites and Moses. There was a bond between them. The Israelites were not just a whole lot of individuals as they passed through the sea. No, they were bound to Moses. They were united in Moses. United they followed the cloud. United they went through the Red Sea. They were the Moses' congregation. They were baptised into Moses and in that manner they went through the Red Sea. Israel was under the authority and protection of Moses.

Now, being baptised into the God does the same thing. A relationship, a bond exists between God and those baptised into His name. Those who are baptised belong to God, they come under His authority and protection.

Note also that baptism is into the *name* of God. 'I baptise you into the *name* of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' God's name points out what He is for those baptised into Him. Therefore, when we are baptised into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, then we should not think that the mention of Father, Son and Holy Spirit merely serves to point to God as the Trinity. It means a lot more. Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the baptismal formula point out what God is for the person baptised, what relationship He has to that person, and what bond God has with that person.

When you were baptised into the name of the Father then it means that God your Father cares, provides for you, and protects you. Baptised into the name of the Son means that God is your Saviour from sin. And baptised into the name of the Holy Spirit means that God dwells in you to make you holy.

So your baptism into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit means that God Himself is in a covenant relationship with you. Your baptism is saying that you are God's possession, that you belong to Him, that He has put His mark of ownership on you. Your baptism is saying that God declared that you share in Him. To share in God can only mean that you share in the salvation that He gives through Christ. And salvation is by grace. God gives it freely because He is also merciful. So this whole relationship that exists between God and you, to which your baptism is pointing, is the covenant of grace that God has drawn up with believers and their children.

I am going to quote words from our Form for Baptism, the first Form that has such good scriptural teaching in it. You have heard these words often, so you'll recognise them:

"Our baptism into the name of God the Father is His *assurance* to us that He makes an everlasting covenant of grace with us and adopts us as His children and heirs. Therefore, He surrounds us with His goodness and protects us from evil or turns it to our benefit."

Remember how I began the sermon by asking if you had assurance of salvation? You've just heard that your baptism into the name of God the Father is His assurance that you are one of His children. See if you can pick up more of this assurance when I quote two more times from the Form for Baptism.

"When we are baptised into the name of the Son, we are *assured* by Christ Himself that He washes us in His blood from all our sins. Christ joins us to Himself so that we share in His death and resurrection. Through this union with Christ we are liberated from our sins and regarded as righteous before God."

"Baptism into the name of the Holy Spirit is the *assurance* that the Spirit of God makes His home within us. While living within us, the Spirit continually works to strengthen and deepen our union with Christ. He makes Christ's work of washing away our sins a reality in our lives. He also helps us each day to live the new life we have in Christ till we shall one Day be presented without the stain of sin among the assembly of the elect in life eternal."

So you and I, having been baptised into God, stand in covenant relationship with Him. In His sovereign good pleasure He is everything that He has decided to be to all those in His covenant.

Let me now return to the question, "May you believe that you are a child of God?" Remember we mentioned three types of people? Those who have assurance of salvation, those who don't, and those who are not all that interested. And the answer for all three types of people cannot be anything else but this: I must not doubt, I must believe. And I certainly must not remain indifferent.

Surely God was not merely playing around with you when you were baptised. If God says in His Word AT baptism that you belong to Him, that He has established this bond, this covenant with you, that you are the possession of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and therefore share in His salvation that He gives through Christ, where then do you find a reason to doubt this? Or to place a question mark behind God's word AT baptism? Or to be indifferent to what He has said?

Can you really be sure that you have been forgiven of the guilt of your sin? In asking you this question I am not first of all thinking how you feel about it. I am trying to focus on God. I am thinking of God with the asking of this question - are you really sure that you have been forgiven?

The answer must never depend on what you think of yourself, or what I think of myself. We either think positively or negatively about ourselves. Favourable or unfavourably. You might even say - I don't care. But salvation is not yours to give or not give to yourself. Salvation is not sitting on some shelf waiting for you to do something about it. Salvation is from God. He sovereignly decides whom to give it to.

So we must look to God. And He said AT your baptism that you are His, that you stand in covenant relationship with Him, that you belong to Him. God didn't ask you if this is what you want. In His sovereign grace He said so. And now that's the way it is. Not perhaps, or may be, but for sure. Remember, I am not focussing on you, I am focussing on God. On what He said AT your baptism.

It's God's sovereign good pleasure to determine who in Christ He has decided to belong to His covenant of grace. God decided that before you were born, before the creation of the world [Eph.1:4]. Therefore it was God's will, not yours, that you were born. It was God's will, not yours, that you were born of believing parents. And if your parents were not believers, then it was still God's will, not yours, that you heard about salvation in Christ and were included in the covenant of grace from a background of unbelief.

God bonded Himself to you. He simply took hold of you. God did not have to wait until you made the first move. If that were so, then you would have never come, for no one comes to the Father unless the Spirit compels him. No, God came to you and He decided and swore by His own name - as truly as I live, says the Lord, this person stands in covenant relationship with me, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

That's what God said AT your baptism. And now you had better make up your mind whether or not you are going to believe this. May be you still doubt the fact that you really stand in covenant relationship to God. May be your question its genuineness because when you were baptised as a child you had no say in it. Or may be you don't really care. But whatever way you feel about it, you cannot undo what God has said AT your baptism. He said that He has put Himself in a relationship with you that speaks of salvation. Yes, with you, your name was spoken.

Even if you go on not believing then you are never free from it. Those baptised but remaining in unbelief, not responding to God's call to faith, are trying to break out of the covenant, trying to break away from God's grace and mercy. That is a slap in the face to God. It is a sin for which they will receive a greater punishment than those who were never in the covenant and were not baptised.

2. God moves us to faith through the Word He speaks ABOUT baptism.

In Titus 3:5 God calls baptism the "*washing of rebirth*" or the "*washing of regeneration*". We know that rebirth or regeneration refers to being born again, which is a work of the Holy Spirit. It's the beginning of new life in a heart dead because of sin. The word 'washing' points a spiritual cleansing. In Acts 22:16 we have the words Ananias spoke to Paul after God had regenerated and converted Paul, "*be baptised and wash your sins away.*" SO according to God, baptism is a spiritual cleansing.

It would be wrong to conclude from this that baptism itself possesses some forgiving and renewing qualities. Baptism of itself is nothing and the water in baptism does nothing. The water is merely a symbol of Christ's

blood washing away sins. But if baptism of itself is nothing and does nothing, why does God speak of it as a *'washing of rebirth'* and the *'washing away of sins'*? Is God careless and inaccurate with His words? Certainly not. God means every word He speaks. It is God's will, remember, to move us to faith through baptism. God says things with the purpose of really getting through to us, of really driving home this point of believing Him at His Word.

We do the same with some things. When I want to pay someone a thousand dollars then I can do that by writing a cheque in that person's name. Everyone knows that the cheque itself is only a piece of paper and not the thousand dollars. But if I am known as someone reliable then the person to whom the cheque is addressed will accept my words when I say, 'Here is your money.' He trusts that the bank will honour my cheque.

In the same way should we understand God's Word when it calls baptism the *'washing of rebirth'* and the *'washing away of sins'*. When someone is baptised then God says, 'Here you have cleansing from sin through being born again, here you have the washing away of your sins.' It is a promise from God and God's promises are as good as the real thing. Baptised people may believe that they are washed from their sins by the blood of Christ as certainly as outward washing with water washes away dirt from the body.

Baptism is the evidence God gives that we can be sure about forgiveness and sanctification in Christ, just as much as a payment by cheque by a reliable person can be seen as settling the debt. Baptism is a God-given pledge, a sign and seal, and by it God wants to assure us that we are spiritually cleansed from our sins, just as much as we are outwardly washed clean with water.

But again, all this has to be humbly accepted in faith at some point in time by the person who is baptised. If a person comes to repentance and faith as an adult, and is then baptised, then a proper understanding of his baptism will further strengthen his faith in what God means to be for him. If the person baptised is a child of believing parents, then he or she must sometime later in life, when able to understand, believingly accept the same thing, namely, what God has said AT baptism and ABOUT baptism.

Not believing God is bad. And unbelief is not God's fault. God has gone to considerable length in order to move us to faith through baptism. He speaks a comforting word AT baptism and He gives us a powerful word ABOUT baptism. We must now believe it and accept it. We must cling to our baptism.

You know how God saved Noah and his family from the great flood. The same water that destroyed everyone else saved the people in the ark by keeping it afloat. To Christians in the first century God speaks of it in this way, *"... only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolises baptism that now saves you also"* [1 Per.3: 20,21]. Baptism that now saves you. Again that emphatic way of speaking about baptism.

Of course it is not baptism that saves. Only Christ saves. But baptism is such a powerful sign of what God does in Christ that the Lord simply says, 'baptism saves you.' At least this strong language keeps us from having a superficial view of baptism. Baptism says that we are saved. Extreme? May be. But at least God is leading us to faith through baptism. Through the sacrament He is urging us, calling us to faith.

Are we responding to what God said AT our baptism and what He says ABOUT baptism? Are you believingly accepting God's promise of salvation? Your baptism, whenever it took place, is still valid. God is speaking through it, in order to move us to faith, in order to give us assurance of salvation. Are you a child of God? That was the question. Think of your baptism, think of what God says through it. We must believe, we cannot remain uncommitted, for then God will punish for rejecting His gracious offer of salvation. Baptism, it is a wonderful sacrament. It's full of meaning and reassurance. Amen.

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