

Luke

Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and the Sacraments
Luke 2:21-24

With Study Questions

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And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. ²² Now when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present *Him* to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “*Every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord*”), ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, “*A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons*” (Luke 2:21-24).

Introduction

We tend to underestimate the effect our culture has on us when we read our Bibles. And it is not merely when we read our Bibles, but when we engage in any disposition regarding the ethos of our current era versus the ones before us. It is quite easy for us to engage in what C. S. Lewis called chronological snobbery when it comes to being critical of the generations which came before us, as if we would have, by the very nature of our own individual superiority, never have done such things.

I recall being psychologically tortured trying to understand how very ordinary people during World War II could somehow be convinced that it was appropriate to participate in the Holocaust. The same could be said for slavery, polygamy, child labor, etc. We sit in our cultural crow’s nest (so we currently think) and snub the darkness of previous generations. It does make me wonder what kind of snobbery future generations will entertain when it comes to us. Abortion, sexual dysphoria, communism, apathy toward our fellow man, come to mind.

I open with this because through the ages the church/Christians have seemingly engaged in two, sometimes extreme, errors. One error is concluding that by virtue of our inclusion in a Christian community (say a church) we have met our (really God’s) religious demands or requirements. As if being a baptized member in good standing of a Christian church (as

valuable as that is) is all that is necessary for God to be satisfied with our curriculum vitae.

This error hit a fever pitch in the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages (mid 400s to mid 1400s). I recall being taught in my church history classes in seminary that very few people during the *medieval period* feared going to hell. Being members of the church of Rome alleviated that concern. What disquieted them was their length of time in purgatory and how to get out more quickly. This, of course, served to launch the Reformation.

The counter error to this is an era in which most of us still live. The era of what Herbert Hoover coined *rugged (western) individualism*. On the frontier, individuals did not have government assistance and there was a dearth of churches. People were on their own and the fittest survived. The bizarre twist in our current era is how dependent we've become on the government while living the fantasy that we're still individually self-reliant.

So, which is the correct way to approach life? Are we to be individuals, even isolated? Or are we to seek out a community? Does the Bible have anything to say about this? Indeed, it does. And the answer, like so many answers, is both.

To be sure, no individual will find salvation, or true peace with God, due to some corporate faith or the faith of someone else. When Job said, **"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there" (Job 1:21)**, the nakedness is the acme of individuality. Job said this having lost his family.

At the same time, we seldom see God interacting with humanity as individuals. It wasn't good for Adam to be alone (Genesis 2:18). When God saved Noah, he included Noah's family (which Peter tells us was a type of baptism-1 Peter 1:21). When God made a promise to Abraham, it was that in him, all **"families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3)**.

When the author of Hebrews wrote of the Old Covenant practice of **"various washings" (Hebrews 9:10)**, the Greek word he uses is *baptismois* or baptisms. As he goes on to explain the application, we see what amounts to be a corporate baptism.

For when Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and goats,

with water, scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people (Hebrews 9:19).

Parenthetically, it should be noted that the only thing dipped (*bapto* in the Septuagint) is the hyssop. Hyssop is a plant used to sprinkle the elements on the people.

The point here is that we see yet another corporate exercise. And this does not change when we get to the New Testament/Covenant. Jesus, the alone Savior, surrounds Himself with apostles and **“seventy others also” (Luke 10:1)**. And when He sends them out as harvesters, He doesn’t send them out, at least primarily, to individuals but to households.

But whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house (Luke 10:5).

When Zacchaeus repented, Jesus’ response was that **“salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19:9)**. This theme of **“family”** runs consistently through the New Testament. When God opened Lydia’s heart, she **“was baptized, and her household as well” (Acts 16:15)**. When the Philippian jailer came to faith, the word was spoken to his household and **“he was baptized at once, he and all his family” (Acts 16:33)**.

When Paul writes about one of the few baptisms he administered, it was **“the household of Stephanas” (1 Corinthians 1:16)**. Later in that same book, he will explain that one believing parent in a household **“sanctifies”** the other and the children are to be considered **“clean”** and **“holy” (1 Corinthians 7:14)**. The words **“holy”** and **“clean”** do not necessarily mean regenerate or saved. These are words used very frequently throughout the Old Testament to designate, at least in a ceremonial, observable sense, that which God requires to function in His community (Leviticus 10:10). It’s a, one might say, dramatic way God communicates to us.

What we have in our current passage are ceremonial, some might call sacramental activities taking place. We live in a Christian culture that tends to downplay the importance of these types of things. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper have become seemingly expendable, less important than say, small groups or asking Jesus into your heart (another chronological/cultural error). But it is a significant mistake to conclude

that these types of things aren't important to God. These are the way God sends a message. These are, what they call, means of grace.

I sometimes find it a bit ironic that my non-church going friends often feel the need to have their children baptized more than my Christian friends. Having said all this, this young family consisting of Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus are all participating in some very significant rituals.

And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb (Luke 2:21).

Circumcision, A Sign Of...

When God made a covenantal promise to Abraham (that he would be the father of many nations-that He intended as it were to save the world) he commanded a sign be attached to that covenant. The sign was circumcision (Genesis 17:10). Among other things, the sign assumed we were born with sinful. We were born with uncircumcised hearts which needed cleansing/softening, to be made flesh (Ezekiel 36:26).

This particular ritual/sacrament (along with the one we will see shortly) was important enough for Joseph and Mary to make what must have been the doable, but likely uncomfortable, trip to Jerusalem (about five or six miles) with a small baby.

The primary point (apodosis, perhaps) of the above verse is the name of Jesus, which was given by God through the angel. The name (a transliteration of Joshua) means Jehovah is salvation. That is what it meant then and that's what it means today. This central message of the Christian faith should never be lost amidst all the details. At the same time, there is a pretty big detail before us. If circumcision was given due to sinful hearts, why would Jesus need it?

That God would require this sign be put on an infant should testify very clearly that man is born in a desperately sinful condition. David confessed that he was a sinner at conception (Psalm 51:5; 58:3). Circumcision, and its New Covenant counterpart, baptism, give the clearest picture both of man's sinful condition (even if you're an infant) and inability to do anything about it (especially if you're an infant).¹ But again,

¹ Over and against the Pelagian view that our sin is not by origin (natural generation), but only by imitation.

why would Jesus be circumcised (or baptized for that matter)? Is not Jesus that one who truly circumcises our hearts (Colossians 2:11, 12)? Didn't John think he should have been baptized by Jesus (Matthew 3:14)?

We learn from this a couple of things: one is that circumcision (and baptism) though both signs of our need to be purified, is more than that. It marked out that you were part of a community, God's community, God's covenant community. In being circumcised, Jesus was counted as part of that community. He is not ashamed to call us "**brethren**" (**Hebrews 2:11**). In His circumcision, similar to His baptism, He fulfilled "**all righteousness**" (**Matthew 3:15**). Being born under the law, He had to do everything the law required.

But there is also merit to the argument that since Jesus would be "**made a curse for us on the cross**" (**Galatians 3:13**), that He would take upon Himself our uncleanness with respect to our guilt (though He was without spot or blemish, i.e., sinless, 1 Peter 1:19; Hebrews 4:15), would allow Himself to be reckoned as unclean (see Calvin on this).²

We serve no distant Savior. He was baptized with the sewage of human sin that we might be reckoned purified by living waters.

Now when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "*Every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord*") (**Luke 2:22, 23**).

Purification

Luke then records the purification of Mary. It seems an odd Old Covenant ritual, that a woman who had given birth must be purified, the entire process taking forty days (Leviticus 12:1-7). Is God saying something negative about childbirth here? Do not the Scriptures teach,

Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, The fruit of the womb is a reward (Psalm 127:3).

² Calvin, J., & Pringle, W. (2010). *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Vol. 1, p. 139). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

The Scriptures speak of children in the most endearing ways, and we shouldn't view this ritual as some special indictment. At the same time, it does carry an indictment. Purification is itself a sort of baptism. When there was an argument between the disciples of John the Baptist and the Jews about purification, the discussion went immediately to baptism.

All this to say that the purification of the mother, similar to the circumcision or baptism of the child all testify to humanity's fallen condition and need for cleansing. It is during even the most beautiful and significant events in our lives that God would remind us of both our need and His answer. For it is only in the blood of Christ that we find true purification.

But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:7-9).

It might be of interest to note, as William Hendriksen points out, referencing a book (*None of These Diseases*) by S. E. McMillen, as Christian doctor, that the medical community was quite slow in discovering and admitting that those who handle patients should have clean hands. Yet the Scriptures have required washings in running water for thousands of years.

Firstborn

We also see, in this passage, special emphasis on the firstborn (the male who opens the womb). This reminds us of that great deliverance from Egypt where those (once again) households covered by the blood of Christ escaped the destroying angel (Exodus 12:13). The Old Covenant had special emphasis on the firstborn. We should take this not as some inherent superiority of the firstborn of those of Israel, but as a foreshadow, since it was the design of the entire covenant to shine a light upon Christ. Of Jesus, Paul would write,

He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed *us* into the kingdom of the Son of His love,¹⁴ in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation (Colossians 1:13-15).

We should not conclude from this language that Jesus is Himself a created being. As the Nicene Creed says, “begotten, not made.” Emphasized here is His position of preeminence.

...and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, “A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons” (Luke 2:24).

A Humble Sacrifice

And yet, the preeminent One, would empty Himself. The very household from which He would emerge was a household of humility. Turtledoves and pigeons were an offering for those who couldn’t afford a lamb (Leviticus 12:8). Let us ever be reminded that God does not see as man sees (1 Samuel 16:7). When the widow offered “**two mites**”³ she gave more than all because she offered “**out of her poverty**” (Luke 21:1-4).

The conclusion of all of this is that God is giving a message through the drama of sacraments/rituals/ordinances (call them what you will). It is through these things that we learn of our need, and we learn of God’s provision for that need, which is summed up in the blood of Christ. We turn to that now in the Lord’s Supper.

³ About 1/64th of a days wages. A couple of pennies.

Questions for Study

1. In what ways do you find yourself influenced by your culture in terms of ethics? In terms of religion (pages 2, 3)?
2. Do you view our current evangelical culture more corporate in its thinking or individual? Explain (pages 2, 3)..
3. How did God tend to interact with people when we read the Scriptures (pages 4, 5)?
4. What is circumcision a sign of? Why was Jesus circumcised (pages 5, 6)?
5. Why did Mary have to engage in the sacrament of purification? How do we find purification (pages 6, 7)?
6. What does it mean, or not mean, that Jesus was the firstborn (pages 7, 8)?
7. Does the sacrifice offered by Joseph and Mary teach us anything about them? Does it instruct us (page 8)?