

The Laver of Baptism
Exodus 30:17-21; 38:8
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Medical doctors are rather well-known for being obsessive-compulsive about washing their hands. They do it many times a day, and with good reason. What we know about germs, viruses, bacteria and micro-organisms is quite enough justification for this practice in a hospital. We want our doctors to be obsessed with cleanliness, because if they aren't, disease is waiting just around the corner. Hospitals need to be clean, or else the hospital could do more damage than good. In a similar way, the priests of the Old Testament were to be obsessed with ritual cleansing. They were the spiritual doctors of the people, and they too needed to be clean. This laver (which is just a fancy word for "basin") was made for ritual cleansing, which had to happen every time the priest went to do something in the tabernacle, or even when they come near the altar outside the tabernacle. It pointed to the priests' need to be cleansed by the blood of the Savior. It has the same message for us, and it tells us about two cleansings that we receive, both of which are symbolized and sealed by baptism: a once for all cleansing, and a continual cleansing. This is a life or death message for us just as it was for the priests. If they did not wash in the water, they would die. Verses 20 and 21 both say this. If we are not washed with the blood of Christ, we will die eternally. It is repeated for emphasis: cleansing is a life or death matter.

This basin, or laver, was located between the altar and the tabernacle, according to verse 18. The reason it is not located between the entrance and the altar is that it was not for the people to be cleansed. They were cleansed by the blood of the animals on the altar, although even there it was only as that blood looked forward to the blood of Christ that it had any effect. The priests mediate between God and the people, and that is why the basin is located between the tabernacle and the altar: the place where priests start is the place of cleansing. If they went into the tabernacle they needed cleansing. If they went to the altar, they needed cleansing. The priests were themselves sinners, weren't they? They needed cleansing in major ways: two ways, to be precise. They needed a once for all cleansing at the beginning of their ministry, and they needed constant everyday cleansing. We need this too, which is why this text is so relevant for us.

The first cleansing needed is a once for all cleansing at the beginning of their ministry. In chapter 29, when Aaron and his sons were consecrated for the ministry of priesthood, it all started with ritual cleansing (29:4). This symbolized the need for regeneration. Regeneration is a word that theologians use to describe the new birth, being born again, as Jesus puts it in the Gospel of John. We need our hearts of stone removed, and hearts of flesh put in instead. We need a resurrection of the dead soul to new life, as Paul would put it in Ephesians 2. Whether you call it new birth or resurrection, it is new life put into a person. That is what the word "regeneration" means: new life. The Holy Spirit is the person who accomplishes this great benefit in us. Jesus says that very clearly in John 3. We do not decide for Christ and therefore regenerate ourselves. No, the Holy Spirit moves in us before we react in faith. This regeneration is related to our sin in this way: the power of the guilt of our sin has to be washed away in regeneration. That is done by the blood of Christ. So the Holy Spirit applies that blood to our sin-stained soul, and washes us clean through that blood of Jesus Christ.

The question for most of us is this: how do we know whether that has happened or not? Take the question of children, for instance. It is easy to make two mistakes regarding our

children. The first is to assume that they are not regenerated. Children can be regenerated before they are even born, as the example of John the Baptist proves to us when he leaped in the womb at the approach of His Savior. David says to the Lord that he trusted in the Lord even when he was still nursing at his mother's breast. Children can sometimes never know a day when they do not know Jesus, in which case the Christian life, for them, looks like a continual nurture and growing up in the faith. If we then require some time-stamped date from them concerning a conversion, we will be teaching them to doubt what they already have. This is not wise.

However, it is equally unwise to assume that our children are regenerated. Not all children are regenerated from the womb, as we well know. Some grow up into a state of rebellion. Just because parents are Christians doesn't make their children Christians. Yes, God very often works through the covenant continuity of families, but not always. The question of what we should do in either case, though, is the exact same thing: tell to our children the gospel! The gospel is for Christians and it is for non-Christians. It is for the regenerate and for the non-regenerate. Baptism preaches the gospel, which is one of the great reasons why we baptize our children: baptism is a visible sermon that preaches the power of the blood of Jesus Christ to cleanse us once for all from our sin. It is a proof that God means what He says. It is a guarantee: if a person puts their faith in the Lord and Savior of sinners, Jesus Christ, they will be saved. We know that baptism itself does not regenerate a person. But it works in a very similar way to the Word of God: it preaches. Baptism preaches. It preaches in a visible way, whereas the Word preaches in an aural way. In baptism you see that which represents Christ's blood. In the Word, you hear about the blood of Jesus. But both baptism and the Word preach the blood of Christ as it cleanses us from sin. Regeneration cleanses us. That is what Paul says in Titus 3:5, where he calls regeneration a "laver." Regeneration washes us. Have you been regenerated? Has the Holy Spirit come into your life and put new life into you? And how do you know?

The answer to how you know is threefold: God makes promises in Holy Scripture and we believe those promises; secondly, there will be an inward evidence of grace in your life. You will see life differently from the unbeliever. You will see history differently. There will be a mighty struggle in your life with sin (the unbeliever doesn't have that struggle, and so one great encouragement for the believer is the very presence of the struggle.); thirdly, the testimony of the Holy Spirit as it witnesses with our soul. The way we lay hold of those three things is by the means of grace. Grace gets us there, and so we need the means of grace, which are the Word, Sacraments, and prayer. We have therefore seen that baptism is of tremendous value to us as a preaching of the gospel, and a seal of the promises of God, that God means what He says, and that the blood of Christ really and truly cleanses us from sins once for all.

However, the beginning of the Christian life is not the only time of life for which baptism has value. Baptism helps us all the way through life. There is a continual cleansing that we receive from the blood of Christ. We can see this from the text in verse 20. The washing and cleansing happened every time they did something in the tabernacle or on the altar. The text says "When they go," which means "whenever they go," implying that they would go many times. The washing was there for them every time. So also baptism is there for us all throughout life, not just at the beginning of the Christian walk. Martin Luther knew this truth well. Oftentimes when temptation came his way, he would respond by saying, "I have been baptized!" By remembering the visual promise of water pointing to blood, Luther was

remembering the cleansing power of the blood of Christ. Remembering that we have been cleansed by Christ's blood is a very effective way of resisting temptation. After all, Christ's blood cleanses us from all our sin: past, present *and future*.

We must avoid two problems here. The first is to forget that Christ's blood cleanses once for all and thus fall into despair. Your continuing sin does not cancel the cleansing of Christ's blood. Rather, Christ's blood cleansing you calls you back once again to repentance. The other error we need to avoid is to presume on that cleansing in order to say, "Well, since I have been cleansed from the sin, it's now okay for me to plunge into that sin again." That doesn't work, precisely because Christ's blood cleanses us from that sin! If we have been cleansed, then why would we want to get dirty again? That would be like a medical doctor disinfecting himself right before a major operation, but then going to the pig-pen and covering himself with filth. It makes no sense! But then, sin never does make sense, does it?

Baptism has value all the way through life. Whenever we see someone baptized, we should remember our own baptisms and be strengthened by the promises of God to a renewed fight against sin. We should not only remember our own baptisms in the time of temptation, but we can also remind others of their baptism when they are tempted to sin. Doing so has been described as "grabbing them by their baptism." Baptized people have been set apart, and are different from the world. People need a reminder of that rather often.

Both of these cleansing aspects (the once for all cleansing, and the continual cleansing throughout life) point us directly towards our Savior Jesus. He was baptized as well, not for His own sins, since He had none, but rather for our sins. Have you ever wondered why Jesus was baptized? The Gospels tell us directly that it was to fulfill all righteousness. That is a very broad concept. It is usually described more particularly as being the time point when Jesus began to identify Himself with His people. He was entering into their state so that He could bear their sins. Baptism always has a judgment side to it in the Bible, especially when you remember Noah's Flood, which Peter calls a type of baptism; or the Red Sea, which Paul tells us is a baptism into Moses. There is a judgment on sin that happens in both of those cases. And in the New Testament, Jesus calls His own death a baptism. Jesus received all that judgment so that we would not. He took the judgment side of baptism so that we would receive only grace.

We receive grace in order to serve others. In John 13, right before Jesus was betrayed into the hands of sinners, He took a basin (or laver!), and He poured water into the basin and began to wash the disciples' feet. Remember that the priests had to wash their feet as well as their hands. Here is Jesus showing us the result of new cleansing: we are to serve one another. All too often we think of church as the place where we receive. And if we don't receive what we wanted or expected, we simply move on to the next church where we will get what we expect or want. Our approach to church is very selfish, isn't it? Jesus tells us that the church is the place where we serve one another, and sacrifice for one another. True greatness in the kingdom of God is always measured by service, not by fame, theological intelligence, wealth, church office, or anything else. Jesus told His disciples that the one who would be great in the Kingdom of Heaven must be the servant of all. It is never about what other people think about you. We must never do service in order to be seen by people. We serve because we are serving God. That is such a hard truth to remember, and a difficult goal, but by God's grace we can all make improvement in that area.

So, like the medical doctor who constantly needs disinfecting, and like the priests who constantly need cleansing, so also we need cleansing. This is all provided by the blood of

Christ, which the Holy Spirit gives to us once for all in regeneration, and continually applies to us through the constant cleansing of Word and Sacrament.