

“One Baptism for the Remission of Sins”

March 6, 2022

Exodus 24

Psalm 42

Titus 3

Exodus 24 relates the first worship service of the people of God as they come to Mt. Sinai.
God had told Pharaoh –

“Israel is my son, my firstborn.

Let my son go, that he may worship me.”

Now Israel, the son of God, has come to Mt. Sinai to worship the LORD.

In one sense, Israel had already been baptized in the cloud and in the sea.

The glory cloud – the pillar of fire by night and cloud by day –
was the presence of the Holy Spirit.

And from the Red Sea Israel is brought by water and the Spirit
to Mt. Sinai – to the presence of the living God.

But there is another sort of baptism that Israel undergoes at the mountain,
as Moses sprinkles them with the blood of the sacrifice –

“Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you
in accordance with all these words.” (v8)

Moses has read the book of the covenant – the Word of the LORD.

And now he sprinkles on them the blood of the covenant –

in order that they might be cleansed and brought out of death into life.

In other words, it is a sort of baptism for the remission of sins!

Our psalm of response is the song that Augustine would have sung at every baptism –
Psalm 42.

In Psalm 42, the psalmist is panting, thirsting for God.

He is in the northern part of Israel –

“the land of Jordan and Hermon” –

where “deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls.”

There is lots of water – indeed, too much water!

“all your breakers and your waves have gone over me”!

The waters of baptism are a rushing torrent that threatens to sweep us all away!

If you think about it,

that's the picture of baptism that Peter uses in 1 Peter 3 –

the Flood, where God saved Noah and family

in the same waters that destroyed the wicked.

Or Paul speaks of how Israel was baptized in the cloud and in the sea –

the same Red Sea that destroyed Pharaoh's army!

Water cleanses.

But water also destroys.

After all, *how does water cleanse?*

By *washing away* the dirt from the body.

Water cleanses by *removing* that which is impure.

And that's what *your baptism* was all about!

Maybe you didn't realize it at the time.

Maybe you were baptized as an infant – and you don't remember that day.

Maybe you didn't really understand yet what baptism meant.

That's why the Psalmist calls us – in the refrain –

to “hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation and my God.”

Sing Psalm 42

Read Titus 3

In the Apostles' Creed, we confess that we believe in

“the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins.”

The Nicene Creed rephrases the first two parts into

“I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins.”

You might wonder – what does the forgiveness of sins have to do with baptism?

But the apostles talk about the connection all the time!

Indeed, when Paul relays the story of his conversion in Acts 22,

he says that Ananias told him,

“The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One,
and to hear a voice from his mouth;

for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard.

And now why do you wait?

Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.” (Acts 22:14-16)

What is baptism for?

According to the apostle Peter – on the day of Pentecost –

baptism is for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Reformed people like to say that sacraments are signs and seals of the covenant.

But what does that mean?!

Baptism and the Lord's Supper
are signs and seals of the *gospel* –
in other words as signs they depict
and as seals they confirm
our participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Because the gospel – the good news –
is that Jesus has died for our sins and been raised from the dead
so that we might have life.
The eternal Son of God became all that we are by nature,
so that we might become all that he is by grace.
He came to join us to the life of God himself!

And even as preaching sets forth the message of this gospel,
so also the sacraments apply the message of the gospel.

And even as we receive the preaching of the Word by faith,
so also we receive the blessing of the sacraments by faith.

In short, we see that the book of the covenant (the Word)
and the blood of the covenant (the sacraments)
are inextricably bound together,

because in the Word we hear the message of the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus,
and in the sacraments we partake of the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus.

And today we look particularly at this “one baptism for the remission of sins.”

I like the way that the Heidelberg Catechism puts it:

69. Q. How does holy baptism signify and seal to you that the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross benefits you?

A. In this way: Christ instituted this outward washing and with it gave the promise that, as surely as water washes away the dirt from the body, so certainly His blood and Spirit wash away the impurity of my soul, that is, all my sins.

In Matthew 28 Jesus instituted the sacrament of baptism:

*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. (Mt 28:19-20)*

The focus of the Heidelberg Catechism is on the parallel between sign and reality.

“as water washes away the dirt from the body,
so certainly his blood and Spirit wash away...all my sins.”

The outward sign (water) cleanses the body.
The inward reality (blood and Spirit) cleanse the soul.

And so they ask what does this mean?

70. Q. What does it mean to be washed with Christ's blood and Spirit?

A. To be washed with Christ's blood means to receive forgiveness of sins from God, through grace, because of Christ's blood, poured out for us in His sacrifice on the cross. To be washed with His Spirit means to be renewed by the Holy Spirit and sanctified to be members of Christ, so that more and more we become dead to sin and lead a holy and blameless life.

Baptism is the sacrament of the beginning of the Christian life.

In Acts 2:37 after Peter proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ,
declaring that Jesus is the exalted Christ
who has poured out the Holy Spirit on his people,
the crowd asked Peter, "What shall we do?"

And Peter answered,

"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ
for the forgiveness of your sins,
and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (2:38)

Baptism is the sacrament of the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.
We have no other cleansing than in the blood of Jesus Christ.

So to be washed with Christ's blood and Spirit
means that we have received the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

But it is only fair to ask:

71. Q. Where has Christ promised that He will wash us with His blood and Spirit as surely as we are washed with the water of baptism?

A. In the institution of baptism, where He says: Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ([Matthew 28:19](#)). He who believes and is baptized will be saved, but he who does not believe will be condemned ([Mark 16:16](#)). This promise is repeated where Scripture calls baptism the washing of regeneration and the washing away of sins ([Titus 3:5](#); [Acts 22:16](#)).

In our passage in Titus 3:5, Paul connects the sign and the thing signified
so that baptism is called "the washing of regeneration."

This is the language that Paul uses in Titus 3.

*For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray,
slaves to various passions and pleasures,
passing our days in malice and envy,
hated by others and hating one another.
But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,*

*he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness,
but according to his own mercy,
by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,
whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,
so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs
according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:3-7)*

Some have tried to say that Paul is not talking about baptism.

But remember that a sacrament includes two parts:

the outward sign,
and the inward reality.

Baptism includes two things:

the outward washing with water,
and the inward work of the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

If you look again at Titus 3,

it is clear that Paul is talking *at least* about the inward reality –
the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.

But he is talking about the inward reality
using the *language* of washing! – which is baptismal language!

After all, Paul is talking about the same thing that Peter spoke of in Acts 2.

Baptism beautifully illustrates the primacy of grace in salvation.

What do you do in baptism?

Nothing!

As Paul says:

--“not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy.”

So...

72. Q. Does this outward washing with water itself wash away sins?

A. No, only the blood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sins.

The outward washing cannot cleanse the soul.

Only the blood of Jesus Christ, applied by his Holy Spirit can cleanse us from our sins.

So, one might ask,

73. Q. Why then does the Holy Spirit call baptism the washing of regeneration and the washing away of sins?

A. God speaks in this way for a good reason. He wants to teach us that the blood and Spirit of Christ remove our sins just as water takes away dirt from the body. But, even more important, He wants to assure us by this divine pledge and sign that we are as truly cleansed from our sins spiritually as we are bodily washed with water.

The Heidelberg Catechism emphasizes the sign-aspect of baptism.

We want to clearly distinguish between the sign and the thing signified.
Please, do *not* confuse the outward sign with the inward reality.

But here in question 73, the catechism wants to make sure that you read the sign clearly.

There are two reasons why the Holy Spirit calls baptism

“the washing of regeneration and the washing away of sins.”

- 1) *He wants to teach us that the blood and Spirit of Christ remove our sins just as water takes away dirt from the body.*

This has been abundantly demonstrated already.

As water cleanses the body,

so also the blood and Spirit of Christ cleanse our souls.

- 2) *He wants to assure us by this divine pledge and sign that we are as truly cleansed from our sins spiritually as we are bodily washed with water.*

In other words, baptism is about assurance.

If you have been baptized,

then you should be assured that you are truly cleansed from your sins.

Why?

Because baptism has two parts!

The outward sign and the inward reality.

Let me re-read that answer:

He wants to teach us that the blood and Spirit of Christ remove our sins just as water takes away dirt from the body. But, even more important, He wants to assure us by this divine pledge and sign that we are as truly cleansed from our sins spiritually as we are bodily washed with water.

Who receives this cleansing?

The catechism does not answer this question directly.

The point of the catechism is that baptism shows us that the inward work
is as certainly accomplished by the Holy Spirit
as the outward work is accomplished by the water.

But for whom?

This is where we have to be very clear:

If we are going to be faithful to scripture,

then we must say that there is one sense in which all are cleansed in baptism.

Peter speaks of the apostate in 2 Peter 1:9,
“For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind,
having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.”

There is a sort of cleansing that comes to all those who are baptized –
to all who are united to Christ and his church.
After all, the church of Jesus Christ is the body of Christ, the household of salvation.
All those who are part of the church do (at least outwardly) share in the benefits of Christ,
by virtue of their participation in the means of grace.

But, as Peter says, the apostate has “forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.”
This cleansing has only a temporary and partial effect.
And he returns to wallow in his sins.
And so this “cleansing” cannot be seen as a full participation in Christ,
but must be viewed as a temporary and partial cleansing –
which in the end results in condemnation and judgment.

And so there is another sense in which only the elect are cleansed in baptism.
Because only those who persevere to the end are truly and fully cleansed spiritually.
And only the elect will persevere to the end!

But I want to be careful not to lose sight of what the Heidelberg catechism is trying to do here.
The Heidelberg wants to use this teaching to promote assurance.
How should *you* look at your baptism?

You should be assured by this divine pledge and sign
that you are as truly cleansed from your sins spiritually
as you were bodily washed with water.

Baptism is designed to remind us that God has put his name upon us,
and he has claimed us as his own.

This is the hallmark of question 74:

74. Q. Should infants, too, be baptized?

A. Yes. Infants as well as adults belong to God's covenant and congregation. Through Christ's blood the redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, who works faith, are promised to them no less than to adults. Therefore, by baptism, as sign of the covenant, they must be grafted into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the old covenant by circumcision, in place of which baptism was instituted in the new covenant.

As Peter said at Pentecost, the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit
are promised to us in baptism.

And this promise, he told us, is for you and for your children,

and for all who are far off.

(when he said “far off” he was probably thinking of the dispersion,
but the Holy Spirit who inspired him knew better!

It refers even to the Gentiles!)

Baptism distinguishes us from the world

and marks us with the sign and seal of the covenant.

In baptism God says, “this one is mine.”

Of course, as the history of the covenant in the Old Testament reminds us,

it is a fearful thing to belong to God!

God is faithful to his covenant,

and therefore if we rebel against him,

and worship other gods,

then he will destroy us.

And yet it is a great blessing to be thus marked as God’s own child.

Because as God’s own child you participate in the covenant community.