

STUDY 9

Baptism as Purification from Sin

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HAVE YOUR SINS WASHED AWAY

Paul the apostle gives this account of his baptism:

A certain Ananias . . . came to me; and standing beside me, he said . . . ‘And now why do you delay? Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name’ (Acts 22:12, 13, 16).¹

The verb ‘washed away’ (ἀπόλουσαι, *apolousai*) is an imperative, meaning a command, and is in the aorist tense, indicating a one-off event. It is also in the middle voice: it is not active (‘wash yourself’) or passive (‘be washed’), but that strange intermediate action which is done to you, which you could not do to yourself, but in which you are not merely passive but play an active role: ‘get yourself washed!’ The word for ‘be baptized’ (βάπτισαι, *baptisai*) is the same: ‘get yourself baptized!’ It is worth paying some attention to the grammatical voice used in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 6:11 (‘you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God’), ‘sanctified’ and ‘justified’ are passive—actions of God done to us that we could never do for ourselves—and ‘washed’ is again middle voice; literally: ‘you got yourselves washed’. Getting baptised and belonging to Christ, and all that comes with it, is to be taken up by us eagerly and with alacrity. ‘See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!’ So, ‘we entreat² . . . on behalf of Christ, be reconciled³ to God’ (2 Cor. 6:2; 5:20). When that happens, the whole of our person, in all its being and action, is called up into Christ.

While ‘washed away’ is suggestive of the water used in baptism, and so links the washing away of sin with that action, there are those who, perhaps out of a concern to uphold the sovereignty of God’s grace ‘by faith apart from works’ (Rom. 3:28), to guard against any notion of being cleansed by the agency of a human ‘sacramental’ action *ex opere operato*,⁴ have sought to associate the washing away of sins simply

¹ Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

² There is no ‘you’ in the original: Paul here is writing to those who have already accepted the grace of God, is speaking about his general ministry to those who have not, and is urging those who have accepted God’s grace not to have done so in a vain or empty way—see 2 Cor. 6:1; compare 1 Cor. 15:2, 12–14.

³ Passive voice.

⁴ That is, by virtue of the action itself being performed.

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with ‘calling on his name’ (as in Acts 2:21 and Rom. 10:13, quoting Joel 2:32). So the Good News Bible has the translation: ‘Get up and be baptized and have your sins washed away *by* praying to him’.⁵ But this is the kind of fine distinction that the Scriptures do not make, even when we might like them to. Calling on the Lord’s name, and being baptised, and having your sins washed away, are all part of the one ‘package’ of salvation, and cannot easily be separated out.⁶

Similar considerations cluster round the interpretation of Jesus’ words to Nicodemus in John 3:5:

Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

While this conversation is set in a baptismal context, this cannot be taken as a direct reference to Christian baptism, since this did not yet exist.⁷ Yet pains have been taken since, both to associate ‘water’ here with Christian baptism and to dissociate this passage from any reference to baptism at all. Various positions have been summarised as follows:

What is meant by the reference in John 3:5 to being ‘born *of* water and the Spirit’? ‘Water and the Spirit’ here has generally been taken in the church to have a baptismal reference. The discourse does have a baptismal setting. John is baptising with water (John 1:26, 28, 31, 33; [sent by God, 1:23]; 3:23; compare Mark 1:4; Acts 19:1–7), and so are Jesus’ disciples (John 3:22; 4:1–3). ‘Water’ in this connection may have a reference to the need for repentance and cleansing signified by John’s baptism with a view to the forgiveness of sins that will be brought by the Messiah (see Mark 1:4; compare Acts 2:38). Pentecostal theology (on the basis of e.g. Matt. 3:11–12) makes a sharp distinction between ‘baptism in water’ and ‘baptism in the Spirit’, with the latter as a necessary second stage. In reaction against a doctrine of ‘baptismal regeneration’ whereby it was claimed that the new birth is effected by the act of baptising of itself, there are those who have sought to dissociate this passage from baptism altogether. Some have taken ‘water’ here to be a reference to the ‘waters’ of natural birth, giving birth to ‘flesh’, as the Spirit gives birth to ‘spirit’ (see John 3:6). Some take it to be a reference to seminal fluid in conception, and associate this either with natural birth or with the action of the Spirit in new birth (compare the imperishable ‘seed’ in 1 Pet. 1:23). Remembering the association of water with the Spirit of God in Ezekiel 36:25–27, it may be preferable to see them together, with water either as a metaphor of the Spirit’s cleansing action⁸ (‘of water, even the Spirit’ is a possible translation; compare Titus 3:5, ‘the water [Gk: ‘washing’] of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit’), or as the actual water of baptism, as an outward sign associated with the inner action of the Spirit in an undefined way (see Acts 22:16) that does not imply baptismal

⁵ This paraphrase is an interpretation rather than a translation. The word ἐπικαλεσάμενος, *epikalesamenos* (also middle voice) is literally ‘having called upon’, and there is no word for ‘by’. Perversely, this could be taken to be substituting one human action—baptising; with another—calling on the Lord’s name. Both of these in reality, however, come as the gift and enabling of God. See further: Martin Bleby, *The Gift of God: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper as Sacraments of the Cross* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2007), passim, summarised p. 59.

⁶ Professor Andrews, a colleague of P. T. Forsyth, wrote in the early 1900s:

... we are forced to admit that as far as exegesis is concerned the sacramentarian interpretation of Paulinism has won a decisive victory, and the Symbolical school has been driven off the field. There can be no doubt whatever that baptism and the Eucharist stood for far more in the life of the Apostolic Church than they do in the estimation of the bulk of the members of the Free Churches today. The evidence seems to me to be so clear upon this point as to amount almost to demonstrative proof.

(See ‘The Place of the Sacraments in the Teaching of St Paul’, reproduced in P. T. Forsyth, *Lectures on the Church and the Sacraments*, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1917, pp. 154–5.)

⁷ See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1971), pp. 215–18.

⁸ ‘The Spirit wash you clean/ From every stain’, in the song ‘I saw Him standing there’, Martin Bleby, *New Creation Hymn Book* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2001), no. 109, v. 4.

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regeneration *ex opere operato* (by virtue of the action being performed) but sees the whole as the gift and action of God, by virtue of Christ's cross.⁹

This 'washing' is given undifferentiated and glorious expression as part of the total action of God in salvation in Titus 3:3–7, which also makes clear what we have been washed from:

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water [Gk: *washing*] of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Peter the apostle spoke of a time when:

God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in *cleansing their hearts* by faith he has made no distinction between them and us (Acts 15:7–9).

WHO CAN SAY, 'I HAVE MADE MY HEART CLEAN'?

This 'washing' is no light thing. Job lamented the impossibility of sinners under the wrath of God ever being able to make themselves pure:

If I wash myself with soap
and cleanse my hands with lye,¹⁰
yet you will plunge me into filth,
and my own clothes will abhor me (Job 9:30–31).

Job spoke a true word, corroborated by God in Jeremiah 2:22:

Though you wash yourself with lye
and use much soap,
the stain of your guilt is still before me,
says the Lord GOD.

So Proverbs 20:9 asks:

Who can say, 'I have made my heart clean;
I am pure from my sin'?

The implication is, no one can. So Job comes to the conclusion, humanly speaking:

Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?
No one can (Job 14:4).

⁹ Martin Bleby, *The Gift of God*, pp. 43–4.

¹⁰ Strong alkaline solution for washing; detergent.

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There is a hint in Proverbs 20:30 that, at the human level, sharp and deep disciplinary suffering is required to bring about such cleansing:

Blows that wound cleanse away evil;
beatings make clean the innermost parts.

But if our sin is such that our very lives are forfeit (as in Ezek. 18:20: ‘The person who sins shall die’),¹¹ what disciplinary action would be sufficient to remove the offence? If it was sufficient, who could survive? Can any of us take that on for ourselves, or for another person?

Truly, no ransom avails for one’s life,
there is no price one can give to God for it.
For the ransom of life is costly,
and can never suffice
that one should live on forever
and never see the grave (Ps. 49:7–8).

In one of the Old Testament ceremonies, unlike all the others, there is provision made for cleansing not just from unintentional infringements of the ritual requirements but, amazingly, from all sin:

For on this day atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the LORD (Lev. 16:30).

This was the Day of Atonement, when atonement was made ‘for the sanctuary . . . for the tent of meeting and for the altar . . . for the priests and for all the people of the assembly’ (Lev. 16:33).

This shall be an everlasting statute for you, to make atonement for the people of Israel once in the year for all their sins (Lev. 16:34).

Perhaps it was this that emboldened David to pray, with regard to adultery and murder that would normally have been capital offences:

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin . . .
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow (Ps. 51:2, 7).

Perhaps David, as the one who had been shown by God the coming of Messiah who in his victory over sin and death would reign from his throne for ever (see 2 Sam. 7:1–29; Ps. 89:19–37), was anticipating and drawing upon the later promises that would come to fulfilment in this promised one, such as:

I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me (Jer. 33:7–8).

¹¹ Compare Gen. 2:17; Rom. 5:12; 6:23; Eph. 2:1, 5; James 1:15.

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These promises are given classic detailed expression in Ezekiel 36:

I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. I will save you from all your uncleannesses, and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you (Ezek. 36:24–29).

We have already suggested that the association of ‘clean water’ and ‘my spirit’ here may underlie what Jesus says in John 3:5 of being ‘born of water and Spirit’ as a single total action.

It is worth noting in passing that a full awareness of our sinful uncleanness comes only after this cleansing has been effected:

Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your dealings that were not good; and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds. It is not for your sake that I will act, says the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and dismayed for your ways, O house of Israel (Ezek. 36:31–32).

It is only after we have been delivered from ‘the deceitfulness of sin’ (Heb. 3:13) that we can see our sin for what it really is. Mercifully, we see our sin only as a result and in the light of God’s forgiveness and cleansing of us from it—apart from that, the full view of our sin would drive us to insanity and death.

WHEN HE HAD MADE PURIFICATION FOR SIN

All of this comes to fulfilment in Jesus, in his suffering and death on the cross, where he ‘made purification for sins’. It is clear that this completed action (we sit down when we have finished our work) imbues him with all authority:

When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Heb. 1:3).¹²

Jesus did this purifying work out of love for his people as his Bride:

... Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:25–27).

The words ‘cleansing her with the washing of water by [literally *in*] the word’ again would appear to have a baptismal reference. While water is involved, the cleansing is effected by virtue of ‘the word’—presumably the word of the gospel, which comes as

¹² Compare Matt. 28:18; Phil. 2:8–11. Heard from an aboriginal elder in the far North-West of South Australia: ‘I used to be a church man. Then one Easter convention I heard the evangelist say that Jesus took away all my sins. I knew that if he could do that, he must be Lord of all!’

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‘the power of God for salvation’ (Rom. 1:16), rather than just a correctly spoken baptismal formula, though the words spoken and the actions performed at the moment of baptism are no less a part of the saving gospel in action. With this we may compare:

... baptism ... now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him (1 Pet. 3:21–22).

The ‘appeal to God for a good conscience’ comes ‘through the resurrection of Jesus Christ’ and his exaltation applied, presumably, by the word of the gospel and the action of baptising. This cleansing by Christ of his people was the carrying through of the Father’s eternal purpose:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual¹³ blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love (Eph. 1:3–4).¹⁴

The ongoing action of this is powerful in our lives:

For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! (Heb. 9:13–14).

This can be called upon especially at times when we become painfully aware of present sin:

... if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses¹⁵ us from all sin . . . My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 1:7; 2:1–2).

Thus we are exhorted:

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful (Heb. 10:19–23).

This goes on to consider ‘how to provoke one another to love and good deeds’, and meeting together to encourage one another (see Heb. 10:24–25).

¹³ Or ‘Spirit-type’? (πνευματικη, *pneumatikē*)—which would make this a trinitarian reference.

¹⁴ In these two passages, at the beginning and end of the Letter to the Ephesians, ‘holy and blameless’ (1:4) and ‘holy and without blemish’ (5:27) use the identical words in the original Greek: ἅγιος καὶ ἀμώμους, *hagios kai amōmous*; ἅγια καὶ ἄμωμος, *hagia kai amōmos*.

¹⁵ Present indicative tense, καθαρίζει, *katharizei*; literally ‘goes on cleansing’.

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PURITY

So far we have thought mainly about being purified from sin. Since we all start out as sinners, this is the only hope any of us have of ever being pure. But what is the nature and quality of this purity that we are brought into? Is it just the absence of sin, or is it something more than that?

Jesus said:

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God (Matt. 5:8).

By this he would have meant not those whose heart and conscience have never been defiled by sin (since that would exclude everyone bar him) but those who have been *purified* through faith in him as the one who takes away the sins of the world. He says that these are able to ‘see God’, and so indicates that for the ‘pure in heart’ there is an affinity between them and God—their purity now corresponds with something of how God is in Himself and in His actions towards us. In God such purity is not simply the absence of sin—if we can talk like that at all with regard to God, since for God sin, or operating contrary to His own nature, has never been a consideration. God’s purity is substantial and positive, having to do with God always being and acting consistently with His own holiness, righteousness, goodness, truth and love. This comes through to us as we seek ‘the wisdom from above’:

If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you . . . Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change . . . the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy (James 1:5, 17; 3:17).

These are the qualities of God’s ‘purity’ that He bestows on us. Thus our God-given purity participates in the splendour of holiness, with all its practical outworking as spelled out in Leviticus 19, which includes honouring of parents, right worship, care for the poor and needy and the immigrants, honest and true dealings with each other and with God, just judgements, love of neighbour, straightforward practice in agriculture, manufacturing and trade, sexual purity, renunciation of all pagan and occult practices—all in a close covenant-relationship with God. Our God-given purity also means that we pursue these things with singleness of heart and mind. James demonstrates how this purity is not just being made clean from sin but also being single-minded with regard to these things:

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded (James 4:8).

At a new Creation Summer School in the 1980s, one speaker was relating the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in Matthew 25:1–13, and wondered about the morality of the wise virgins not sharing their oil with the foolish ones. The voice of Geoffrey Bingham came from the front row: ‘They were single-minded’! So will we be, if we are fully focussed on the coming of the Bridegroom.

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AS HE IS PURE

Our purity, then, derives from what Christ has done:

Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (1 Cor. 5:7–8).

Our purity is also drawn out by the promises of our dwelling with God as His sons and daughters, with God as our Father, in the age to come (see 2 Cor. 6:16–18; compare Rev. 21:3, 7–8):

Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7:1).

Those who know and relate to the Bridegroom now, and eagerly await his coming, align their lives accordingly:

And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming.

If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does right has been born of him. See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure (1 John 2:28–3:3).

Paul the apostle writes of this as the aim of what is revealed in the gospel:

... the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith (1 Tim. 1:5).

This requires renunciation of certain attitudes, habits and practices, and the vigorous taking up of what pertains to God:

In a large house there are utensils not only of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for special use, some for ordinary. All who cleanse themselves of the things I have mentioned will become special utensils, dedicated and useful to the owner of the house, ready for every good work. Shun youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. Have nothing to do with stupid and senseless controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness (2 Tim. 2:20–25).

This is practical purity.

UNLESS I WASH YOU

The Lord Jesus, girded with a towel, carrying a basin of water, came to Peter. Perhaps Peter thought this was a demeaning or embarrassing action. 'You will never wash my feet', he protested. None of us wish to be in the position of needing to be cleansed by the Lord. But if we know this Lord as Peter did, would we want to miss out on being

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with him? ‘If I do not wash you’, Jesus answered, ‘you have no part in me’.¹⁶ Can we answer with Peter, ‘Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!’ (John 13:8–9)?

If we do, it is likely that the Lord will say to us, as he said to Peter and the others: ‘You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you’ (John 15:3).

¹⁶ RSV.