

## Covenant Baptism

*Topical Subjects - GIW*

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**Bible Text:** Acts 2:38-39  
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Beloved in the Lord, my subject today is covenant baptism. Covenant baptism and we focus on the text in Acts 2:38 and 39. After these people cried out, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

38 Peter said, "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. 39 For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call."

Now in order to understand that text, you need to remember the historical situation because those words were spoken in one of the most momentous moments of change in the history of the world. You see, world history is divided into two great sections, 1) the day of preparation before the coming of Christ and that lasted many thousands of years, many more than the history of the world since the coming of Christ, and God prepared very carefully over all those many thousands of years for the hour in which Jesus Christ the Messiah would be born, and these people who stood there that day listening to Peter, were there alive on the earth at the great time of transition. And so Peter stood up to tell them that these strange things that they had seen that day were because the hour of fulfillment had arrived, and you'll notice there in chapter 2 that a lot of his sermon is built upon the prophet Joel and what he said. In the 16th verse we read after he says these men are not drunk. You might think so, but no, no, they're not drunk. This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel in the last days. You see, the last days are the final era of world history and here it is. Now the last days have begun. In the last days God says, "I'll pour out my Spirit on all people and your sons and daughters will prophesy, and your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams.

And so because Jesus Christ, the Messiah, had come to the world, had lived a sinless life, had been cruelly put to death and then by the power of God raised up with the power of an endless life forever immune to any pain, sorrow or death so that he was exalted to the right hand of God and even given the privilege of pouring out the Holy Spirit upon his church, which took place that very day, therefore a new day had dawned on the history of the world and these people were actually there to see it. And who were these people? Who were the people that constituted that great multitude that rushed together when they

saw and heard these strange things on the day when God poured out his Spirit? Well, in verse 5 we are told, "There were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven." Why were they there? They were there because this was the time of the annual Feast of Pentecost, and they were there for that and they had come from all over the ancient, civilized world that we would call the Roman Empire because there were synagogues all over the Roman Empire, and they were there to take part in that great celebration of the harvest, that's what Pentecost was all about. So you could say that representatively speaking, you have the whole nation of Israel reassembled on that day. You may have wondered, why did the Holy Spirit of God come on the day of Pentecost? Well, that's why, because that was a day when representationally speaking the whole nation of Israel was gathered together in Jerusalem. And now the Apostle Peter, standing up in the power of the Spirit of God, speaks to these, God's old covenant people, to whom he had given his covenant promise, and he says, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know." He's speaking to representationally the whole nation, and they're going to go back and tell the others. He says, "Let the whole house of Israel know for certain that God has made this Jesus to be both Lord and Christ."

Now I think you can see from that that in the history of God's kingdom on the earth there is a very marked element of continuity. We vigorously disagree with our Baptist brethren when they speak of the New Testament church as if it were a brand new entity in the world. That's not true. As a matter of fact, the New Testament church was just the Jewish nation being called back to God. That's what it really wants. These people were Jews. It was on the band of Jews that Christ called to be his disciples that the Spirit of God was poured out, and it was out of the nation of Israel that day that 3,000 people were added to that band of disciples. So there was a strong element of continuity, but at the same time anyone can see that there was also a very important element of change now that the day of fulfillment had arrived, and one thing that did not change, which is the heart of it all, is stated in our text for what does God say when the last days begin and the new Israel is organized and the New Testament church begins to emerge in the world? Well, he says to Jewish people, "The promise is for you and your children and also for those who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God shall call." And right away the new element is introduced in the radical demand for the baptism, the ceremony of cleansing, as the distinguishing mark of the new covenant people of God.

Now let me ask you this: had you been a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin, let us say, and you were there that day and you were listening to Peter the apostle say these things, what do you think you would have understood him to mean when he says, "The promise is for you and your children"? I do not see how anyone acquainted with the Old Testament could possibly doubt that your mind would immediately go back to Genesis 17 where God first gave that promise to his covenant people, for you know that God called Abram, a heathen, out of the Ur of the Chaldees. He renamed him, said, "Your name from now on is going to be Abraham which means the father of a multitude." And when he was 99 years old, he instituted his covenant with him and gave him the covenant sign of circumcision and he said, "This promise is to you and to your children throughout all generations. I'm going to be of God to you and to your seed after you forever." I don't see

how anyone can doubt that that is what the Jews assembled in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost would have understood him to be saying.

Now to be sure, he adds that many others are going to be called also, but the number one thing that he says is, "Folks, the promise still is for you and your children." God doesn't change. God doesn't go back on promises he's made. Sure we are in the last days, but that doesn't mean God's program has been put on the shelf and something new brought into existence. No, God doesn't change. The promise is still for you and your children, the difference being that whereas circumcision had once been the sign and seal of that covenant, from now on it is the circumcision that is made without hands, as Paul writes to the Colossians, and that circumcision, which is made without hands, is being baptized into union with Christ. So just as circumcision prior to the coming of Christ was the sign of admission to and incorporation into and membership in and fellowship with the people of God, so now and from now on, baptism is the sign and seal of that same covenant. And we know that this is true because we read that those who accepted his message and were baptized, verse 41 were added to their number that day.

So what you have is, first of all, continuity. God's church is one in all ages and it's based fundamentally upon his covenant promise, "I'm going to be of God to you and to your seed after you throughout all generations and that still stands today." But there's also transition into the last era of world history in which it was God's purpose from the beginning to enlarge his people; you could find that even in his first promise to Abraham, "I'm going to make you the father of many nations," he says, and that enlargement to embrace the whole world and to call many out of darkness into God's marvelous light and incorporate them into the nation of Israel, is now signified by the international sign and seal of the covenant which is baptism. But I ask you this: what do you think that any Jew would have thought if in a question and answer period, Peter had said to these people, "Well, of course, from now on you have to leave your children out. I know, I know all the way from Abraham's time till now, the children were in. I know that but no, from now on the children are out." Well, I can tell you this, there would have been the greatest furor you ever heard.

Now, ordinarily in biblical exposition, the argument from silence is what we call it, doesn't have too much weight. In this instance, it has enormous weight for if there was anything precious to the heart of one of God's old covenant people, it was exactly that promise, and the fact that their children were also in the kingdom. Now they could leave it. They could abandon it by unbelief the way Ishmael did, the way Esau did, selling his birthright for a mess of pottage. Oh, yes, they could do that. Everybody knew that. But can anyone here imagine that Peter taught such a thing on that day? I don't believe it's conceivable. No, he didn't teach that and the rest of the New Testament doesn't either. Paul writes to the Corinthians, he says, "Don't you know that your children are holy," *hagios*, saints is the word in the New Testament, and all the way through the New Testament there are these little clues that clearly imply this. How can baptism be the circumcision made without hands if it doesn't apply to children? And so Peter did not say, "You've got to leave your children outside." To the contrary, he said, "As number 1 on the agenda of the last days, remember this, you people, the promise is still for you and for

your child, and also to those who are afar off," yes, that's really important, the whole missionary enterprise of the church rests on that, "as many as the Lord our God shall call."

So there were changes, momentous changes in those days, but not in the promise and not in the fact that the promise belongs to you and your children. What then does it really mean when you and your children receive the sign and seal of the covenant? What did it mean back in Abraham's day when he was circumcised and his children? What does it mean today when you are baptized and your children? Well, one thing it does not mean is that baptism itself will save you, and I have two absolutely incontrovertible proofs of that fact. One proof is the fact that Abraham himself was a saved man for approximately 20 years before he was circumcised. You say, "Well, where's the proof of that?" It's in Romans if you'd like to turn to it. It's in Romans 4:9b. We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness, good. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised or before? Well, here's Paul's answer, it was not after but before, and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had, and really the meaning there is that he already had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. Well, anyone ought to be able to see that if Abraham was already saved before he was circumcised, it certainly wasn't circumcision that saved him, was it?

And the second proof is the fact that God commanded Abraham not only to give the sign of circumcision to himself, but also to all of his male children. And yet we know for sure that one of his male children ended up an unbeliever. His name was Ishmael. His other son, Isaac, stayed in the covenant, and then Isaac had two sons, and they were twin brothers, and their name was Jacob and Esau, and they were both circumcised and yet the Bible says that Almighty God said, "Jacob I've loved, but Esau I've hated." And Esau sold the birthright for a mess of pottage and Esau became what the Bible calls a profane man. He loved hunting more than he loved God and that's profanity. And so the Bible says that here were two men right at the very beginning of covenant history who had the sign and that sign didn't save them. They were lost.

So anybody who looks at the biblical data can clearly see that that can't be the meaning of baptism. We in this church, this Reformed church, we do not believe in baptismal regeneration. We do not believe that the water of baptism has the power to cleanse a person's heart and make them a new creature. It's a sign of that but there's a difference between the sign and the thing which is signified. Now when you say that, there will always be some in the church of God who say, "Well, but doesn't that weaken the force of God's promise then? You say it doesn't save, well, doesn't that weaken the promise? What's the sense of baptizing if it doesn't save? And what's the sense of baptizing all of our covenant children if they don't all inherit the promise?" Well, my answer to that brothers and sisters is, first of all, what if I can't explain it? Do I need to? God commanded it. You know, there's a lot of things I can't understand but God commands it. Isn't that enough? If God says, "Do this and when you get to heaven I'll explain it to you," isn't that enough? Do we need more than that? I don't think so. If God sees significance and importance in it and he says, "Abraham, you may not understand all the circumcision

business, but I'm telling you, you have it and all of your male children have it." God, "Do it," and Abraham does it. He maybe doesn't understand it all either but is that really the point?

And the second thing is that some of the children and grandchildren of this great believer didn't turn out right in spite of the fact that they received the solemn sign and seal by God's commandment. And yet some did, and one of the clearest teachings of the whole Old Testament is that God maintained and sustained his church down through all those ages in the line of his covenant. And God never did say, "The promise is going to be for you and every one of your children without fail." No, he always said, "as many as the Lord our God shall call."

So it doesn't weaken the force of his promise at all, and it's a wonderful thing that God does maintain his church in the line of the generations. And I think I can see one final reason why God just doesn't do it the way we might like him to, and one reason is so that we will respect his sovereignty. The Bible says that Almighty God is the ultimate determiner of our destiny, and the Bible says the secret things belong to the Lord our God. They don't belong to us. So I can understand how Abraham felt when he cried out, "O Lord, I wish you'd save Ishmael." I'm a parent. I've said the same thing many times. But Abraham respected the sovereignty of God, and if you respect the sovereignty of God and you realize that ultimately the destiny of all our children is in the hands of God, you know what you're going to do? You're going to pray for your children. If I thought that all of my children would automatically be saved because they're baptized, you know something, prayer would go right down the tubes for me. I'm too lazy. But when I know that my God is sovereign, and I don't know how it's all going to work out but I know that I have a passionate and deep desire for every one of my children to be saved, do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to pray without ceasing and I'm going to pray to the day I go into my grave for those children and grandchildren. That's what I'm going to do.

And if you were God up in heaven, what would you do? Would you look down on the man who just took it all for granted, never bothered to agonize in prayer, and you'd give him all those blessings? I don't think so. You look down from heaven on that man who agonizes through a whole life for his children and grandchildren, I think you're going to bless him. That's what God does. That's exactly what God does and the Bible is full of the proof of it, isn't it? Well, you know that those great saints of God like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, they didn't have an easy time of it. Boy, the trouble they had with their kids, and the agony and the prayer.

Well, that's why God doesn't give it to us in some automatic mechanical way. We respect God's absolute sovereignty. And you'll notice also that throughout the Bible, promise and responsibility always go together. Remember when God came down to do something about Sodom and Gomorrah? Well, the first thing he did was go talk to Abraham because Abraham was God's friend and he says, "Shall I hide this from Abraham?" He's talking to two of his angels there. "No," he says, "Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation and all nations on earth will be blessed through him for I have chosen him." Okay,

God, why did you choose Abraham? Well, listen to this, "I chose him so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just," so that, oh, I love that, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him. You mean that God's promise to Abraham also is conditioned by Abraham's faithfulness to God? And the answer is, amen, it sure is.

Now one thing I want to say in conclusion: God's always going to be more faithful than you are. Any real faithful parents here, raise your right hand. I don't think we've got any, including the one in the pulpit. We fail. We fall short. How many times we look back and say, "Oh, if I could only do that over again, how much more faithful I would be." God is always going to be more faithful than you are. You can count on that. But there is a relationship between God's promise and your faithfulness. If you are faithful, you can count on it, God will be faithful to you 100 times over, for if you are Christ's, if you really are Christ's, you are Abraham's seed and you're in heir according to the promise, and he will maintain his church also through the line of the generations in your covenant family. May God enable us all, not just Calvin and Tanner, but all of us today to realize anew the tremendous privilege of being baptized into his covenant and also our holy responsibility like Abraham to lead our household in the ways of the Lord. May God grant it. Amen.