

**FIRST PETER 3:20–21.**

In this ark a few, that is, eight souls, were saved by water. And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the body but the guarantee of a good conscience before God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In 252 AD, just a little more than two hundred years after Jesus’s ascension, a pastor named Cyprian wrote a reply letter to a pastor named Fidus. Fidus had expressed to Cyprian his opinion that Christians should wait to have their infants baptized until they were a week old, since that’s the age at which Jewish boys were circumcised in the Old Testament. Cyprian discussed the matter with sixty-five other leading pastors and wrote back: “But with respect to the case of the infants, which you say ought not to be baptized within the second or third day after their birth, and that the law of ancient circumcision should be regarded, so that you think that one who has just been born should not be baptized and sanctified before the eighth day, we all thought very differently in our council. For no one agreed with the course you thought should be taken. We all rather judge that the mercy and grace of God should not be refused to anyone born of man.” Notice that the debate was not between whether infants should be baptized or whether children should decide to be baptized on their own after they reach the age of accountability. The debate was between having infants baptized as soon as reasonably possible and waiting until they were at least a week old, and it wasn’t much of a debate.

How did we get from there to today, when the largest Protestant churches, which call themselves Christian, typically not only wait to baptize children until they reach the age of accountability, whatever that might be, but also attack churches like ours for baptizing infants, and will tell people that if they were baptized as an infant, it has no value?

A number of years ago, one of my fellow pastors vented some frustration about a woman who was not a member of his church but who had enrolled her child in his church’s grade school. She came into his office one day to yell at him because his church and school taught that baptism saves people and is also for babies. How did infant baptism go from being standard practice among Christian to being under heavy attack from people calling themselves Christians? More importantly, how do we defend baptism and our practice of it?

Of course, the answer is not simply to get angry and say, “Uh-uh, we’re not wrong! You are!” The answer is to search the Scriptures and to answer these simple questions: 1. What does the Bible say that baptism is and does? and 2. What does the Bible say about our need for it?

But before we begin answering those questions, I should say this. I am going to be naming a number of the arguments that people have against infant baptism. And I am going to answer those arguments on the basis of Scripture. Please don’t mistake that for me encouraging you to quarrel about baptism with your neighbors, friends, or coworkers. Quarreling with others in an attempt to prove them wrong and yourself right has never converted anyone. If people want to discuss baptism with you, and they are willing to listen to what you have to say on the basis of the Bible, then calmly, patiently, and lovingly discuss it with them. If they just want to get your goat or quarrel, it is better to remain silent and stay away from them.

With that said, let’s look at what the Bible has to say about baptism.

## 1. What does the Bible say baptism is and does?

First, what does the Bible say that baptism is and does? To see what baptism is, we need to visit two passages: Mark 7 and Matthew 28:19. Mark 7 tells us that baptism in its most basic sense simply means a ritual washing with water. Whether that washing takes place by pouring, wiping, or dunking doesn't really matter, as long as it is a ritual washing. Matthew 28:19 tells us that Christian baptism in particular is a ritual washing that takes place in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, so that it is not water alone, but water connected with God's name and God's word.

What about what baptism does? Brothers and sisters, if you get nothing else out of this sermon, I want you to remember what Peter says clearly about baptism here. He compares the water of baptism to the water which flooded the earth and destroyed unbelievers, but which at the same time saved Noah and his family by lifting them in the ark high above the destruction taking place on ground level. This is what Peter says: "In this ark a few, that is, eight souls, were saved by water. And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you." Please listen to that again, remember it, and believe it: Baptism's water now saves you. Different translations will word it slightly differently, but it's basically impossible for them to mess up Peter's words, because they're so clear: Baptism's water now saves you. This really sums up everything else the Bible says about baptism: Baptism saves us.

By the way, it is because of this comparison that Peter makes, between the water of baptism in which we are saved to the water of the flood through which eight people from Noah's family were saved, that many baptismal fonts have eight sides. Ours does not, but many do. Whoever first designed an eight-sided font wanted us to think of Peter's words here when we look at a baptismal font. The water of the flood saved eight people; baptism saves us.

What will people who reject infant baptism say in response to these clear words? One of the most common ways they will respond is by saying that the Bible talks about two different kinds of baptism—water baptism and Spirit baptism. Spirit baptism, they say, is when the Holy Spirit is poured out on us when we are truly converted, whereas water baptism is simply when people are dunked into water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in obedience to Christ's command. Spirit baptism benefits us spiritually; water baptism does not, they say. What Peter is talking about here, they will say, is Spirit baptism, not water baptism.

But first of all, the Bible makes no such distinction between Spirit baptism and water baptism anywhere. And secondly, this is why we make sure our pastors study the original Hebrew and Greek of the Bible. Because especially in Peter's Greek it is clear that he is saying that the very H<sub>2</sub>O that lifted up the ark from the earth is the same H<sub>2</sub>O that now saves us in baptism. But it's also clear in the English translation I'm using: "In this ark a few, that is, eight souls, were saved by water. And *corresponding to that*, baptism now saves you." To paraphrase Peter, he is saying that water also saves us, in the form of baptism. He is not talking about water baptism as opposed to Spirit baptism. He is clearly talking about baptism by water through which the Holy Spirit works to save people, the same baptism that you and I know.

People who reject infant baptism will also respond to this passage by simply saying that even though it sounds like Peter is clearly saying that baptism saves us, that simply cannot be what he means, because that doesn't make sense. But isn't that how every heresy and false teaching originates, friends—when people hear God's clear word and say, "Well, that can't be

what God means”? Isn’t that exactly how Satan tempted Eve? “Did God *really* say...?” He wanted Eve to elevate her own reason above God’s clear word. That’s the same thing Satan does here. “Is Peter *really* saying that baptism saves you?”

Yes, that is exactly what he is saying. The Bible says baptism’s water saves us.

Paul says the exact same thing in Titus 3. By the way, one of the easy ways to remember where important baptism passages are is to remember they’re in the third chapter—1 Peter 3, Titus 3, John 3, and Galatians 3. In Titus 3, Paul says that we were slaves to sin by nature, but at God’s chosen time, he saved us through baptism, which he calls a washing that accomplishes rebirth and renewal. So Paul clearly says that baptism saves us and gives us new birth and makes us new.

Jesus said the same thing to Nicodemus in our Gospel from John 3. He told Nicodemus that no one could see the kingdom of God unless he was born again. And then he explained to Nicodemus how God gives us new birth, namely through water and the Spirit. Notice how Jesus combines water and the Spirit. Water baptism and Spirit baptism are not two separate things; they are one and the same thing through which God gives us new birth.

“But what about faith?” you might ask. And that is a good question. Jesus did not say, “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever is baptized will not perish but have eternal life.” He said, “he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Here’s where we turn to Galatians 3, where Paul says, “You are all sons of God *through faith in Jesus Christ.*” And then he explains how we became sons of God and obtained faith in Jesus Christ: “For,” he says, “all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ,” as we sang in our Gospel Acclamation. So baptism is precisely one of the means through which God gives us faith. That is how it saves us. It does not save us magically, as if God were waving some magic wand over us: “Wallah! Now you are saved!” No, it saves us through the faith in Jesus that it gives us—faith which then needs to continue to be strengthened by God’s Word throughout one’s life, or else it will die, just like a plant that sprouts well from the seed but does not continue to receive water and sunlight.

There are other passages, like Mark 1 and Acts 2, where the Bible says that baptism forgives our sins. Acts 22 similarly says that baptism washes away our sins. Again, it does this through the faith in Jesus that the Holy Spirit gives us in baptism.

Romans 6 is another important passage, where Paul not only tells us that baptism gives us eternal life by connecting us to the death and resurrection of Christ, but that as part of that new life it gives us, it also gives us mastery over sin. The most comforting aspect of baptism is the fact that our sins have been washed away in it. The next most comforting aspect of baptism is that through it God has given us mastery over sin. That is, there is no temptation or sin that is stronger than we are through baptism. We have the God-given ability through our baptism to say No to every sin and temptation that Satan throws at us.

So, let’s review what the Bible tells us: Baptism is a ritual washing with water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Baptism saves us. Baptism gives us new birth. Baptism makes us new. Baptism gives us faith in Jesus. Baptism forgives and washes away our sins. Baptism connects us to Jesus’s death and resurrection. Baptism gives us new life, including mastery over sin and its power. And we could add what Peter also says here: Baptism

is the guarantee of a good conscience toward God. That's what baptism is and does. This is why we call baptism a form of the gospel and a means of grace.

## **2. What does the Bible say about our need for baptism?**

Now to the second question: What does the Bible say about our need for it? Here we only need to return to the doctrine of original sin. David speaks for all of us in Psalm 51, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." And remember what Jesus said in our Gospel: "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born from above." As we heard last week, Paul says in Ephesians 2 that we are all by nature spiritually dead in our transgressions and sins.

In other words, our need for baptism is absolute from Day 1. We are not conceived and born sinless or with a blank slate. We are conceived and born needing salvation, forgiveness, new birth, and new life—in short, needing faith in Jesus. And that is exactly what baptism gives us.

Some will object, "But little babies are not able to believe in Jesus!"

First of all, the Bible says that none of us, children or adult, are able to believe in Jesus on our own. Faith is a gift the Holy Spirit must give (Eph. 2:8; 1 Cor. 12:3).

Secondly, Jesus himself made it very clear that the Holy Spirit does also give the gift of faith to little children. He said that when people were bringing babies to him to have him touch them. The disciples tried rebuking the people for doing that, but Jesus rebuked his disciples and told them to let the little children and babies come to him and not to hinder them. Then he said explicitly that the kingdom of God belongs to people who are like little babies in their faith (Mark 10:13–15; Luke 18:15–17). In fact, he said that anyone who doesn't change and become like a little believing child will never enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 18:3).

Remember that faith is not primarily knowledge of the facts of the Bible or assent to the facts of the Bible, but confidence in Jesus as one's Savior. If an earthly father can instill such confidence in his little toddler so that he can stand him on a stair and get the toddler to jump off the stair into his arms, isn't the heavenly Father able to instill confidence in little children? Isn't he able to get little children to rely on him, to throw themselves in to his arms, so to speak?

People can put up all the objections they want, friends. Some will say, "Isn't belief in infant baptism a belief in forcing the saving faith on a baby?" No, it's not. Jesus doesn't force the faith on anyone. He draws and wins and woos people to the faith. Just as we do that with adults by using God's word, so also Jesus does it with infants by using baptism.

Some will point to the fact that Peter said, "Repent and be baptized" (Acts 2:38). In other words, teaching and repentance should come first, then baptism. But we could just as quickly point to Matthew 28:19–20, where baptism comes first and teaching second. The order of the words is not really what determines the matter. Not only that, but repentance isn't merely something we do. When Peter invites the crowds to repent, he is basically inviting them to believe in Jesus as their Savior, and faith is something God gives, not something we do.

Some will say, "Why isn't there an explicit command in Scripture to baptize babies?" The answer is that there is: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them," Jesus said. Aren't babies included in all nations? If we're going to say we shouldn't baptize babies because Jesus didn't explicitly say "babies," then we could also argue that we shouldn't baptize adults because Jesus didn't explicitly say "adults." "All nations" means all people regardless of age, language,

ethnicity, or anything else. Plus, Peter also explicitly says that baptism is for repentant believers and their children (Acts 2:38–39).

Some will say, “Jesus wasn’t baptized until he was an adult.” But baptism wasn’t around until Jesus was an adult. Circumcision was, and Jesus *was* circumcised when he was just eight days old. Once baptism arrived on the scene with John the Baptist, then Jesus was also baptized.

But really all of these questions can be answered the same way. Usually we associate answering a question with a question as something politicians do. But sometimes it has its place. And no matter what objections people might have to infant baptism, our answer can always be to answer their questions by going back to these two questions of our own: What does the Bible say baptism is and does? What does the Bible say about our need for it?

To repeat: The Bible says that baptism is a washing with water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Baptism saves us. Baptism gives us new birth. Baptism makes us new. Baptism gives us faith in Jesus. Baptism forgives and washes away our sins. Baptism connects us to Jesus’s death and resurrection. Baptism gives us new life, including mastery over sin and its power. Baptism is the guarantee of a good conscience toward God. That’s what baptism is and does.

Did you need this and do you continue to need this? Absolutely. Have you been baptized, and do you believe what God says about baptism in his Word? Then *you* are saved. *You* have been reborn as God’s child. *You* have been made new. *You* have faith in Jesus. *Your* sins are forgiven and washed away. *You* are connected to Jesus’s death and resurrection. *You* have new life, including mastery over sin and its power. And *you* have the guarantee of a good conscience before God now and on Judgment Day.

What a blessing baptism is! What a beautiful means of grace! The triune God, into whose name we were baptized, grant that we never give up those blessings or take them for granted. Amen.