

TITUS 3:4–7. (EHV)

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior toward mankind appeared, he saved us—not by righteous works that we did ourselves, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs in keeping with the hope of eternal life.

Many Christians, and actually lots of people in general, just want a real encounter with God. They want an encounter with God in hardships—some vision or other experience that will give them the strength to persevere or clearly show them the purpose of their hardship. They want an encounter with God in church, through the beauty of the music or the emotion of the pastor’s sermon delivery. They want an encounter with God in difficult decisions. “What should I do, God? Just give me a sign!” They want an encounter with God in doubts and crises of faith. “Just show yourself, God! Prove to me that you’re real and that your religion is the right one.”

In this morning’s text, God reminds us Christians that he’s already given all of us a real encounter with him. He’s already made his appearance in our lives. He’s already shown himself. The word *appeared* here in the original Greek is about as close to the word *epiphany* as you can get: “When the kindness and love of God our Savior toward mankind *epephane*”—when it “appeared.” And when did it appear? When he saved us. And interestingly, when Paul talks about God saving us here, he doesn’t point primarily to Calvary on Good Friday, where Jesus paid for all our sins, like he often does elsewhere. And he doesn’t point explicitly to the Holy Spirit’s gift of faith in Jesus, like he often does. No, here he points us back to a physical event in our own lives (yes, also a spiritual event, but it was physical too), an event we all actually experienced. He points us back to our baptism.

Baptism is God’s epiphany in your life.

“*But* when the kindness and love of God our Savior toward mankind appeared, he saved us.” That *but* implies that Paul was just talking badly about us. And he was. Paul is in the middle of encouraging Titus to remind the Christians on Crete to be peaceable and gentle and to show every courtesy to *all* people, even when they’re not the kind of people you want to be gentle and courteous to, even when they don’t deserve your gentleness and courtesy.

Why should we show gentleness and courtesy to all people? “For at one time we ourselves were also foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved by many kinds of evil desires and pleasures, living in malice and jealousy, loathsome, and hating one another.” Paul isn’t interested in building up our self-esteem, not when he’s talking about the way we are by nature, the way we are in ourselves. We were disgusting. We didn’t deserve any gentleness, any courtesy.

But God isn’t the kind of being who acts on the basis of what we deserve. He is a God of kindness, a God of love toward mankind. And when that kindness and love made its epiphany in our lives, he saved us from our disgusting sinful nature.

He didn’t save us “by righteous works that we did ourselves.” There weren’t any to be found, not of the pure character he demands. No, he saved us according to his mercy. He saved us according to that characteristic he has whereby he takes pity on that which is miserable, loathsome, and disgusting.

“He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit.” He saved us through our baptism. Some think that Paul is using the word *washing* metaphorically here. They would say that we are reborn or born again when we make our decision for Christ and dedicate our lives to him, and so our decision for Christ is *like* a washing. But first of all, that directly contradicts what Paul just said, that what God did for us he did not do through or on the basis of any righteous thing that we did. Second, Jesus himself calls baptism the washing of rebirth in John 3. “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God. . . . Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God! Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh. Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Note how Jesus doesn’t just say we have to be born of the Spirit, but of water and the Spirit. There was only one way to undergo that kind of birth when he said those words—baptism. And third, Paul says that God saved us through this washing, which is exactly what the apostle Peter says God does through water baptism in 1 Peter 3. That’s because in baptism, water isn’t just water. It’s water joined with God’s command and connected with God’s powerful and saving word.

So let’s celebrate baptism for what Paul clearly says that it is here—God’s epiphany in your life, the washing of rebirth. By nature we are born one way. In baptism, we are born another. By nature we are born of our parents. In baptism, we are born of God. And it’s the washing of renewal. Once baptized, and as long as we remain in the faith of our baptism, we are never decrepit, worn-out, broken-down sinners. We are always brand new.

Isn’t one of the joys of seeing a newborn child the fact that we’re looking at a human that is, relatively speaking, innocent? Now, as we just talked about, no human, no matter how young, is innocent before God. But relatively speaking, a baby is innocent. A baby has not yet spoken an angry word, refused to share, hit or hurt anyone intentionally, used God’s gift of physical intimacy purely for selfish gratification, stolen anything, or anything like that. They haven’t yet been corrupted by the world’s bitterness, cynicism, crudeness, or pursuit of power and fame. There’s almost a sort of jealousy in us when we see a cute, sleeping baby. “Man, I wish I could erase it all and go back to that state, we think.”

Brothers and sisters, God sees us that way every second of our lives as his baptized children! Only it’s even better, because unlike those babies, if they’re not baptized, we are actually innocent of all sin in his eyes! We are actually brand new to him! In baptism, the Holy Spirit gives us new birth and makes us new. He takes away our sin and clothes us in Christ. He takes away our selfish heart and gives us a heart filled with God’s love and love for God. He takes away our love of sinning and gives us a love for righteousness. He takes away the devil’s batteries, so to speak, and replaces them with Christ’s batteries.

And God didn’t just drip the Holy Spirit on us. He poured him out abundantly on us through Jesus Christ our Savior. When God does anything to us or for us through Jesus Christ our Savior, he does it richly and abundantly, including the giving of the Spirit. It isn’t like we have a little mini-Spirit in our hearts lined up against an army of evil spirits—though that would be enough. When the baptismal waters hit our head, a tidal wave of the Spirit comes crashing over the dry desert of sin and the sinful forces dwelling there, and it takes them all out and instantly makes everything green and fresh. Jesus’s victory over sin, death, and the devil

becomes our victory. We are connected to his death for sin and to sin. We are connected to his resurrection from the dead. Jesus is all in all to us, and death no longer has any claim on us.

And what's the result of this tidal wave of the Spirit? "...so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs in keeping with the hope of eternal life." There are two options for understanding the justification Paul talks about here. Paul might be saying, "When Jesus died on the cross, you were justified, declared not guilty of sin, as a gift of grace, but you didn't benefit from it yet, because you didn't believe it. You weren't connected to it. But when you were baptized, his gracious justification on Good Friday now reached its goal in you and you became an heir of heaven."

Or Paul might be talking about subjective justification, that when you were baptized and were given faith in Christ, you were justified by his grace. Even though it already happened in a sense on Good Friday, it happened anew now, because you believed it and received its benefits and blessings. And when you're justified by his grace, as you were in your baptism, you also become an heir having the hope of eternal life.

Either way, your baptism means that you have the hope of eternal life! And this is no ordinary hope. The Bible doesn't use the word *hope* the way we do. We usually use *hope* to mean that something is uncertain. "I hope that it's warmer this week." "I hope I don't get sick this winter." "I hope we get good moisture this year." "I hope the bakery has my favorite donut this Friday." But *hope* is not used that way here. Paul calls it hope only because we haven't fully experienced it yet, but it is absolutely certain. Since in baptism your sins were washed away and you were declared not guilty, and since where there isn't sin there is only holiness, and since holy people go to heaven, not to hell, that means that you don't need to fear death! You will experience eternal life—life that never ever ends!

"Where are you, God"? "Give me a sign, God"? He's right there, in your baptism—your baptism that continues to have meaning and to give you hope in Jesus Christ every day of your life. Baptism is God's epiphany in your life. Baptism is your assurance that his Holy Spirit dwells in your heart, that he's always there for you, that he's always for you and not against you, that even bad things will work for something good, that death is not the end, but the beginning.

And let's not lose the context. Paul told us all of this, he reminded us of this incredible gift of grace that God gave us in kindness and love in our baptism, to encourage us to be peaceable, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy toward *all* people.

God did all this for you and me, though you and I did not deserve any gentleness or courtesy. As baptized children of God, then, show that same love, gentleness, and courtesy to others. Put that new heart, those new batteries, that new self to work. Resist the devil and ignore his temptations. Be the epiphany of God's undeserved love and kindness in the life of others, for the sake of God the Father, Son, and Spirit, the God of your salvation, the God who has made his appearance in your life in your baptism. Amen.