

Grace and Baptism (Part 1)

As I continue to study and continue to grow, one thing I am increasingly convinced about is how my only hope of salvation is the grace of God. I cannot save myself. Since I have sinned, no amount of personal righteousness will ever add up to salvation. There is no amount of obeying all the commands of God that will get me to His side for eternity. No doubt, I long to obey those commands. He deserves it. But if I never sinned again, I could not get myself into heaven. I am saved by grace (**Ephesians 2:8-10**).

But at the same time, I am equally convinced that I accessed that grace through faith (cf. **Romans 5:2**) and that happened when I was baptized in water for the remission of my sins to enter Christ and His death (cf. **Acts 2:38; Romans 6:1-2; Colossians 2:12**). And frankly, I know this shocks some people. There are many in the modern religious world who think these two certainties simply cannot coincide. They cannot understand how I can say we are saved by God's grace and then say we have to be baptized for the remission of our sins. Allow me to explain.

I say both because the Bible says both. **Ephesians 2:8-10** says I am saved by grace and not as a result of works. Additionally, **Titus 3:4-5** says God saved us because of His mercy and not because of works done by us in righteousness. Yet, having said that, **1 Peter 3:21** says, "Baptism...now saves you..." (ESV). In **Acts 2:38**, Peter told those first responders, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins..." (ESV). In **Acts 22:16**, Paul was told "Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name" (ESV). As a person committed to speak what the Bible speaks, I cannot help but say both of these things. But that leaves the question of how the Bible can say both things.

Please notice something that is often missed in **Matthew 28:19-20**. Jesus 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (ESV). There is a subtle but profound point made in this sentence. How do we make disciples? It takes two things. 1) Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. 2) Teaching them to observe all of Jesus's commands. Notice what these two points show. On the one hand you have baptism and then on the other hand you have "all that I have commanded you." Do you see the distinction that is made here? While we often talk about the command to be baptized (and there is some truth to that), when Jesus talked about baptism, He actually separated it out from "all that I have commanded you." He saw a distinction between the submission to baptism and the observance of commands. Right off the bat, we should see that distinction too.

Now consider the very well-known passages of **Mark 16:16** and **Acts 2:38**. The first says, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (ESV). The second is Peter's instruction for his audience to "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" (ESV). Now don't get me wrong. I recognize that Peter instructed his audience to do this. In a sense, this is a command to obey. However, when the apostles taught about baptism they did not present it as a legal stipulation. They presented it as a promise. They did not say, "Do this and you'll earn salvation." They did not say, "Let me give you a list of commands to get you into heaven." Rather, they made a promise. "Salvation comes here."

Think of this like Elisha's promise to Naaman. If Naaman would dip seven times in the Jordan, he would be healed of his leprosy (**II Kings 5:10**). This wasn't a command. Naaman wasn't sinning if he didn't go dip in the Jordan seven times. It was a promise. If he dipped in the Jordan, he would be healed; if he didn't, he wouldn't. Think of the Israelites when they were bitten by the serpents. In **Numbers 21:8**, they were told that whoever looked on the bronze serpent would be healed. It wasn't a command. They weren't sinning if they didn't look at the serpent. It was a promise. If they looked at the serpent, they would be healed; if they didn't, they wouldn't.

This is subtle but important. Baptism is not a command in the same sense that the commands to "obey your parents" and "honor your father and mother" are (cf. **Ephesians 6:1-2**). Consider children as they reach the age of accountability. Imagine for a moment a child that has crossed into that age. We don't know exactly when it happens with each child, but God does. Imagine a child that has just crossed into that age but has not yet chosen to do anything sinful. He is still innocent before God. In that moment, he is commanded to obey and honor his parents. If he decides to not obey and honor his parents, he has sinned. However, at that moment he is not commanded to get baptized. He is not condemned because he hasn't been baptized yet. He only becomes condemned when He violates God's laws (cf. **I John 3:4; Romans 5:12-13**).

However, once this child sins, God makes him a promise. "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved." Baptism is not some other law laid on top of the law the child already violated. Rather, it is a promise. "If you submit in faith to baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you'll be saved." Like Naaman dipping in the Jordan and Israel looking at the bronze serpent, avoiding baptism is not a sin. We are not doubly condemned if we don't get baptized. Rather, we simply don't enjoy the fulfillment of the promise. If Naaman hadn't dipped in the Jordan, he would have continued with leprosy. If the Israelite hadn't looked at the serpent, she would have died from the snake bite. If we don't believe God's promise we won't submit to baptism, we'll die in our sins.

God's Word never teaches if you get baptized you have done some great thing and now deserve salvation. No baptized person is able to declare he saved himself by his great obedience to the commands of God. Rather, God's Word promises those who believe and are baptized will be saved. Do you believe it? God's Word promises those who repent and are baptized for the remission of sins will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Do you believe it?

Why not put your faith in His promise. He is able to save to the uttermost and He promises to save those who surrender in faith to baptism. Will you receive His promise or reject it and die in your sins?

—Edwin L. Crozier