

“Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.” (Ps 51:7)

✠ Lecture V: The Sacrament of Baptism ✠

Baptism is the Holy Sacrament through which we are born again by being immersed in water three times in the name of the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Sacrament of Baptism has the primacy among the Seven Holy Sacraments for it is the door through which the individual enters the Church (as a congregation) and is given the right to partake of the rest of the Sacraments.

✠ Institution of The Sacrament:

Lord Jesus Christ instituted this Sacrament **after** His blessed resurrection, having completed our redemption and having made salvation available, He said to His disciples, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 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” (**Mt 28:18-19**), and “He who believes **and is baptized** will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (**Mk 16:16**). Thus baptism is necessary for salvation as the Lord indicated, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is **born of water** and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God” (**Jn 3:5**)

✠ How Exactly Does Baptism Save Us?

Salvation simply means remission of sins and it is written, “Without shedding of blood [death] there is no remission” (**Heb 9:22**). Salvation is made available through the redemptive death of Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. In order to have a share in this salvation, we must share the death and resurrection of the Lord. Therefore, St. Paul said, “That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering being conformed to His death” (**Phil 3:10**). Unless a person undergoes such death, he/she will not be saved! Now how can we undergo such death? How can we share the death of the Lord? The answer is “Through Baptism”. St. Paul said, “Or do you not know that as many of you were baptized into Christ Jesus were **baptized into His death**? Therefore **we were buried with Him through baptism into death**” (**Rom 6:3-4**). It is our death and burial with the Lord through baptism that saves us and makes us share the glories of His Resurrection. St. Paul affirms, “For if we have been united together **in the likeness of His death** [baptism], certainly we shall be in the likeness of His resurrection... now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him” (**Rom 6:5-8**). The salvation that began with our death and burial with Lord Jesus through baptism continues to be effective in us also through death. We obtain salvation through death and our bodies must always remain dead in relation to worldly lusts. For as long as the body is dead to sin, salvation lives in it, but when carnal lusts rise from this death, we become liable to lose our salvation since salvation is only attained through death.

Hence St. Paul exhorts us saying:

- “Reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey it in its lusts.” (**Rom 6:11-12**).
- “If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” (**Rom 8:13**)
- “Those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh and its passions and desires.” (**Gal 5:24**)
- “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.” (**Gal 2:20**)
- “For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” (**Col 3:3**)
- “Always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus.” (**2Cor 4:10**)
- “Therefore put to death your members which are on earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” (**Col 3:5**) “He who has died has been freed from sin.” (**Rom 6:7**)

→The salvation that we obtained through baptism continues with us through death. Thus we pray saying, “O, who tasted death in the flesh in the ninth hour for our sake, we sinners, **put to death our carnal lusts**, O Christ, our God, and deliver us” (From the prayer of the 9th hour – Coptic Book of Hours).

✠ Symbols of Baptism in The Old Testament:

1. It is written in the Holy Book of Genesis, “The Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (**Gen 1:2**). This is both a symbol and a prophecy about the work of the Holy Spirit in baptismal water to give it its saving efficacy.
2. St. Peter interpreted the story of Noah’s ark and the flood (**Gen 7**) as a symbol of baptism, he said, “The divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were **saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us** – baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (**1 Pet 3:20-21**) → Notice the link between baptism and salvation through the resurrection of the Lord.
3. St. Paul interprets the commandment of circumcision (**Gen 17**) as a symbol of baptism, he said, “You were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, **by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism**, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God who raised Him from the dead” (**Col 2:11-12**) → Notice the link between baptism and salvation (through the resurrection of the Lord) for God said about the child who is not circumcised that he will be “cut off from his people, he has broken My covenant” (**Gen 17:14**). Likewise, a child who is not baptized cannot enter the Kingdom of God (**Jn 3:5**)
4. The relation between the ark, the circumcision, the saving resurrection of the Lord, and baptism goes even further. Notice that St. Peter emphasizes that only **eight** souls were saved from the evil world through the water of the flood. Also notice that God ordered that children must be circumcised on the **eighth** day. Now the Lord’s resurrection took place on the first day of the week (**Jn 20:1**) that is the **eighth** day from the previous week. The number eight represents the new life and eternity. In fact number **eight** is the only number (**from 1-10**) that does not have a beginning and end (**8**), which is basically the definition of eternity.
5. St. Paul interpreted the story of crossing the sea (**Ex 14**) as a symbol of baptism, he said, “All our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all **were baptized** into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (**1 Cor 10:1-2**). The sea was a symbol of the baptismal water that draws its saving efficacy from the precious blood of our Lord (no wonder its called the **Red Sea**), the cloud was a symbol of the Holy Spirit who works through the baptismal water, and Pharaoh was a symbol of the devil who is destroyed by the cross of Lord Jesus through the water of baptism.
6. The Priesthood was not given to Aaron and his sons except after being washed with water (**Ex 29:4**), also the laver of bronze and it’s water set between the tabernacle of meeting and the alter (**Ex 30:18**) was a symbol of the spiritual cleansing effect of baptismal water.
7. The sacrifice of Elijah the Prophet was accepted after pouring water on it three times (**1 Kgs 18:34**). Moreover, Elijah himself was not taken up to heaven until he crossed the waters of the Jordan river (**2 Kgs 2:8**). The same happened with the Israelites who went into the Promised Land after going through the waters of the Jordan (**Joshua 3**). In the Holy Book of Revelation we read about “a sea of glass” (**Rev 4:6**) before the throne of God. The point is that we must go through the waters of baptism to reach heavenly Promised Land and enjoy the company of God.

✠ The Baptism of St. John The Baptist:

No pre-Pentecostal baptism can be equated with Christian baptism. This not only includes St. John the Baptist’s but also the disciples’ baptisms during the life of the Lord on earth (**Jn 4:2**). These baptisms were preparatory ones, just for repentance, as St. John said, “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (**Mt 3:11**). The redemption had not yet been accomplished; the specific relationship of baptism with the cross and the blood of the Lord had not yet been established. Moreover, the gift of the Holy Spirit was not yet available (**Jn 7:37-39**). On the day of Pentecost no exceptions were allowed for those who may have received St. John’s baptism, St. Peter said, “Let **every one of you** be baptized” (**Acts 2:38**)

The Holy Book of Acts tells us of a specific incidence where some believers at Ephesus were only baptized with St. John's baptism so St. Paul asked, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They replied, "We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." He wondered, "Into what then were you baptized?" So they said, "Into John's baptism" Then St. Paul explained, "John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is on Christ Jesus." So when they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 19:1-5)

✚ The Effectiveness of Baptismal Water:

It may be objected, "What does mere water do when a person is immersed in it?" One might just as well ask, what does water do when poured into the boiler? The water in the boiler can do nothing of and by itself, nor can the water in the baptistery, but when the water in the boiler is united with the mind of an engineer, it can drive an engine across a continent or a ship across the sea. So too, when water is united with the power of the Holy Spirit, it can give regeneration and spiritual cleansing. Those who think that the effectiveness of baptism depends on the water alone bring to mind the story of Naaman (2 Kgs 5), the commander of the Syrian army, who was a leper. This man came to Elisha the Prophet to be healed from leprosy so he told him, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored to you, and you shall be clean" (2 Kgs 5:10). Naaman was insulted and became furious; he said angrily, "Are not the Abanah and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?" (2 Kgs 5:12). His servants, however, said to him, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do something great, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, 'Wash and be clean'?" (2 Kgs 5:13). So Naaman went down and dipped in the Jordan and he was healed! Likewise, if the blind man from birth had questioned the words of Lord Jesus about washing in the pool of Siloam (Jn 9:11), he would have remained blind. Our Lord emphasized the relation between the water and the Spirit (Jn 3:5-6) thus baptismal water is not to be considered mere water for "There are three that bear witness on earth: The Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one. (1 Jn 5:7)

✚ Immersion Vs Sprinkling:

To baptize (Gr. *Baptizo*) literally means to immerse or to put into. Therefore, the Orthodox Church baptizes by triple immersion, "in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19). Baptism by immersion is supported also by the following biblical examples:

- "Both Philip and the eunuch **went down into the water**, and he baptized him. Now when they **came out of the water**, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away" (Acts 8:38-39). If baptism were by sprinkling, St. Philip could have just brought water to the chariot and sprinkled it on the eunuch.
- St. Paul said, "We were **buried** with Him through baptism" (Rom 6:4), and "**Buried** with Him in baptism" (Col 2:12). The only way a person is buried in baptism is through complete immersion.
- St. Paul said, "According to His mercy He saved us, through the **washing** of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5), St. Ananias said to St. Paul (Saul), "Be baptized, and **wash** away your sins" (Acts 22:16). Baptism is also called "washing" in (1 Pet 3:18-21; Eph 5:26). To wash a piece of cloth you need to completely immerse it in water.

→ Because baptism is a very important condition for salvation (Mk 16:16; Jn 3:5) the Church allows baptism by sprinkling only in the case where immersion is prevented by a medical condition and there is a risk that the person would die without being baptized. For example, a newborn with a fatal health condition that is kept in an incubator cannot be immersed three times in water, so the Church allows sprinkling in this instance. Moreover, if there was no priest available, any Orthodox Christian (male or female) can perform the baptism by anointing the baby with water three times saying, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit". If the baby lives, baptism is not repeated and the child just needs to be anointed with the Holy oil.

✚ Why Do We Baptize Infants?

1. Baptism is essential for salvation and without it a person cannot enter the Kingdom of God, “Most assuredly I say to you, unless a person is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God” (**Jn 3:5**). Infants are no exception since they are born with the corrupt nature due to the original sin. Therefore, infants are baptized to insure their salvation.
2. Circumcision was a symbol of baptism (**Col 2:11-13**). Now if God commanded that infants enter in the Old Covenant with Him, should we prevent them from entering in the New Covenant?
3. Crossing the Red Sea was also a symbol of baptism (**1 Cor 10:1-2**). Undoubtedly, infants crossed the sea with their parents so why should today’s infants be prevented from being baptized?
4. St. Peter said to the people on Pentecost, “Be baptized... and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to **your children**” (**Acts 2:38-39**). This is a clear implication that children are accepted in baptism.
5. Holy Scripture records several occasions where families and entire households were baptized together (**Acts 16:14-15, 33; 1 Cor 1:16**). This is another implication that children were baptized.
6. There is not a single biblical verse that supports the prevention of infants’ baptism. On the contrary, our Lord said, “Let the little children come to Me, and **do not forbid them**; for of such is the kingdom of heaven” (**Mt 19:14**), and “Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven” (**Mt 18:10**)

✚ One Baptism:

The Sacrament of Baptism is performed once and is not repeated as we say in the creed, “we confess **one** baptism for the remission of sins”. Since baptism is a spiritual birth so a person is born (baptized) once and since baptism is death with the Lord and the Lord died once so a person dies with the Lord (baptized) once. Thus St. Paul said, “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (**Eph 4:5**)

✚ FAQ:

Q1: If baptism is necessary for salvation, were the people of the Old Testament baptized?

A1: Baptism was not a condition for salvation in the Old Testament, but it was only instituted as a condition in the New Testament, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved” (**Mk 16:16**). The reason is that baptism’s saving efficacy is linked to the death of Lord Jesus Christ and the Lord had not yet died in the Old Testament. Had baptism existed in the Old Testament, people would have had to be baptized in order to be saved. Nevertheless, the people of the Old Testament practiced the symbol of baptism available to them at such time, namely circumcision (**Col 2:11-13**). They also kept the Passover, which was a symbol of our Lord (**1 Cor 5:7**)

Q2: What is the fate of infants who die without being baptized?

A2: As humans, it is not revealed to us what will happen to those infants who depart prior to baptism nor do we know how they will be judged. Yet we trust in the wisdom, justice and mercies of our Lord.

* This lecture is adapted from ‘*The Church Sacraments*’ by Archdeacon Habib Guirgess.