

Romans 6:1-14

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[0 : 0 0] will celebrate the sacrament of baptism. What is baptism? What is it all about? I think most people with even a passing acquaintance with the subject would know that it is some kind of right of admission. We even use the word baptism in other contexts in connection with admission or a new start. We speak of a tough start to a new job or task as a baptism of fire.

We use that language just in our everyday conversation, and people recognize the significance in some measure of that word baptism. And baptism does have to do with admission to the church or the family of God. Our confession speaks of baptism as securing the solemn admission of the party baptized, implicit, into the visible church. And that is true. That is one of the things that happens when we baptize somebody. But is that all baptism is? Well, again, our confession, echoing and picking up on biblical language and truths, describes baptism as a sign and a seal.

And I want to explore that this morning for a brief time, especially baptism as a sign. What does it signify if it is a sign? Now, let me, before we launch into that, just explain why I want to think about that this morning. Obviously, we're going to have a baptism. It seems appropriate to speak about baptism. But why particularly? Well, when we participate in the baptism in a few moments, it's important for us to realize that we are all participating. When we think of the two sacraments instituted by Jesus, we maybe sometimes imagine, even if we haven't really thought it out, that in the Lord's Supper, well, we participate. If indeed we are at the Lord's table, we're participating. We eat the bread, we drink the wine, we're participating. But perhaps we sometimes imagine that in baptism, well, we're witnesses. We're not participating, we're witnessing. But that's not true. We are participants. These are sacraments that have been given to the church. And we, as members of the church, when there is a baptism, by our presence in this act of worship that includes this sacrament, we are participating in the sacrament. And it's important, especially as we are participants, to do so intelligently, to know what it is that we're participating in. And so my hope is that in some of the things that we can look to and draw from the Bible this morning, that will help us to participate more intelligently and indeed more joyfully in this sacrament. So baptism is described as a sign. What does it signify? Well, let me suggest three things that baptism signifies, and then we'll think about each of these three things in turn. I'm not suggesting that this is exhaustive. No doubt other realities could be mentioned and added, but there are three things in particular that I want us to think about this morning. First of all, baptism signifies cleansing from sin. But then secondly, baptism signifies as a sign of indwelling by the Holy Spirit. And thirdly, baptism signifies our union with a Christ. And note that each of these three realities symbolized by baptism are acts of God.

It is God who cleanses. It is God who indwells us. It is God who unites us to His Son. Baptism is about what God has done and is doing for us as His people. Cleansing from sin. Let's think about that first.

And we begin here, perhaps for no other reason than it is the most obvious symbolism of baptism. We baptize with water. I hope there's water here. Yes, we've got water here to my right. It's not very visible, but believe me, there's water there. And so it's so obvious, it's so clear that water serves to symbolize washing and cleansing. We use water to bathe ourselves, to clean ourselves. And indeed, this water that we will employ serves as a symbol of cleansing. Baptism symbolizes spiritual cleansing.

[5 : 04] It really is that simple. It's not complicated, the symbol that is being used and its meaning. Well, it's simple enough. But before identifying the way in which the Bible speaks of baptism as a sign of cleansing from sin, we need to notice two realities that baptism assumes or takes as a given. Firstly, baptism assumes that we need to be cleansed, that we are sinners and that sin has polluted us. And we need to be cleansed from sin's pollution. And that is the clear and unequivocal message of the Bible. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. If we don't acknowledge this reality, if you don't acknowledge this reality, then you will see no need for cleansing and, reasonably enough, no need for a sign that symbolizes something that we don't require. So, baptism assumes, takes as a given that that is our reality, that we are sinners in need of cleansing. But secondly, baptism is grounded in the recognition that cleansing from sin is available. God is willing and able to cleanse us.

God has secured a way in which sinners can be forgiven and cleansed. And that God-appointed way is through faith in the person and saving work of His Son, Jesus Christ, who died for our sins.

But what of the biblical material that presents baptism as a sign of this spiritual cleansing? Well, let me just mention a couple of texts. This morning, we're going to do things very differently to the way we normally do things. We're not going to be focusing on one verse or one passage and drawing out truths from one text. Rather, we're going to be drawing from different parts of the Bible that direct us in the direction we want to go in understanding baptism as a sign. So, a couple of texts that very clearly speak of baptism as involving and symbolizing cleansing from sin.

In Acts chapter 22 and in verse 16, we read the words of Ananias directed to Saul following his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. And this is what Ananias says, and now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized, and wash your sins away, calling on His name.

Baptism and washing spoken of in one breath. It's as clear as crystal clear water. Be baptized and wash your sins away. If anything, what strikes us is the manner in which the sign is so identified with the reality symbolized. And there's a lot of mileage to think about that, but we're going to leave that to one side for the moment. We then have the words of Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, where he illustrates teaching on marriage with a description of the manner in which Christ has demonstrated His love for the church. We're reading from Ephesians chapter 5 from verse 25.

[8 : 36] Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the Word, and to present her to Himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. Paul here makes clear that Christ secured our cleansing, our salvation by His death. He gave Himself up for her, for the church, but that He applies that cleansing or salvation by means, namely the ministry of the Word and sacrament with water through the Word. Baptism then is a sign of cleansing from sin, a cleansing, secured by the death of Jesus and offered to us through the ministry of Word and sacrament.

This morning, we celebrate God's cleansing of His people, of you and me, and we look forward to the day when we will be freed definitively and permanently from the corruption and pollution of sin.

So, baptism symbolizes cleansing from sin. But then we also said a moment ago that it also symbolizes indwelling by the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached the good news, and we're told that his hearers were cut to the heart. They acknowledged. They were made very palpably and dramatically, palpably and dramatically aware of their condition, of their sin, of their need of cleansing. They were cut to the heart, and they cried out, what shall we do? And how did Peter reply to that question that was posed? Well, we read in Acts chapter 2 and verse 38, Peter replied, "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." Notice what was involved. Those who were cut to the heart needed to do two things. They needed to repent, and they needed to be baptized. And then notice the two spiritual consequences of repenting and being baptized that Peter identifies for the forgiveness of sins. And then he immediately goes on, you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism then symbolizes both cleansing or forgiveness of sins and the gift or indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Now, of course, cleansing and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit are not distinct acts or realities.

They are inextricably linked. And this connection is very clearly expressed by Paul when he writes to Titus. And let's just read what he says in Titus chapter 3, verses 4 and 5. There's so many texts you might just want to listen. By all means, look them up if you're quick at looking up texts, but you can just listen as well. Titus chapter 3, verses 4 and 5.

[12:16] But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Even before we turn to the language that is so clearly pointing towards baptism as a sacrament that symbolizes these spiritual realities, we can't do so without just noticing the beautiful language of the beginning of the passage. Isn't that a beautiful description of the incarnation, of the coming of Jesus into this world to be our Savior? The kindness and love of God our Savior appeared. And what did He appear to do? Well, He appeared to save us. And how does He save us?

It's through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. And the language continues in the same vein where the Holy Spirit is spoken of as being poured out on us, language that we would use of water poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ, our Savior. It is God's Spirit who washes or cleanses.

But notice how this cleansing work is deep and profound. God does not give us a fleeting rinse, but rather His cleansing is the washing of rebirth and renewal. To simply use the very language Paul uses, it is a work that is both profound and continuing, rebirth and renewal. Baptism is a sign of the Spirit's work.

Past, past, present and future as He indwells the believer. And today in baptism, we celebrate this gift of God.

[14 : 32] We give thanks for this gift of God, the gift of Himself in the person of His Holy Spirit. Baptism then signifies cleansing from sin. It signifies indwelling by the Holy Spirit, but it also signifies or symbolizes union with Christ. Baptism is a sign of union with Christ and of everything that Christ has secured for us by His saving work. Before we look at what Paul says, or something of what Paul says in Romans chapter 6, the passage we read a few moments ago, let's just take a wee step back and notice an intriguing use by Jesus of the word baptism. Jesus spoke of His own saving work as a baptism. He does so on a couple of occasions, or in any case, it's recorded for us on a couple of occasions. Let me just read what we find in Luke's gospel in chapter 12 and in verse 50. Jesus is here speaking, and He says this, but I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed. Now, in the context in which Jesus uttered these words, it's beyond any doubt that Jesus was contemplating His impending death and resurrection and speaks of these events, these redemptive acts of the Son of God as His baptism. With that in mind, as we look back or return to our baptism and how it is a sign of our union with Christ, we recognize it as a sign of our union with the One whose baptism has secured our baptism. Well, let's read what Paul says on this matter of baptism, or where he alludes in any case, to baptism as a sign of our union with Christ. Back to the passage we read in Romans chapter 6. Let's read again the first four verses of that chapter. Romans chapter 6 from the beginning,

What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means. We died to sin. How can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. And Paul goes on. The key expression here for our purposes that Paul uses is baptized into Christ. There in verse 3, we have been baptized into Christ. Becoming a Christian involves being united to Christ, and baptism is a sign of that reality. But what does it mean to be baptized into Christ or to be united with Christ? Well, that's a big question. But if I had to answer that question in one sentence,

I would say that being united to Christ means that we are where Christ is. We are where Christ is. To be united to Christ, symbolized by baptism, is to be where Christ is. It means to be crucified with Him, as Paul says in this passage. It means to be buried with Him. It means to be raised from the dead.

With Him. All realities that Paul speaks of in these verses. It also means to be united to Christ in the present and into our eternal future. In Christ, we approach the Father assured of His welcome and embrace. In Christ, we resist the devil and temptation. In Christ, we serve God and our fellow men.

Christ is our Emmanuel. Christ is our Emmanuel, God with us and for us. He opens up the way before us. He stands by our side. He guards our rear, and He carries and upholds us in every trial. We are united to Him.

[19 : 11] And baptism is a sign of this union with Christ. And today, as we participate in the sacrament, we celebrate this glorious reality of our salvation. We are united to Christ. Before we move on, we need to mention and highlight a happy corollary of our union with Christ, namely our union with Christ's people.

If we are united to Christ, then we are also united to His people. Listen to what Paul says as he writes to the believers in Corinth. This is in his first letter in chapter 12 and verse 13.

For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free, and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Union with Christ involves, requires, whether we like it or not, that we are united to His people. And that is an added blessing to this great salvation that Christ has secured for us, and that involves union with Him. Baptism, then, is a sign of God's saving work, of what God has done and is doing for us. He has, to recap, in Christ secured our cleansing, and by His Spirit, and by His Spirit. And by His Spirit, He cleanses us. He has given us Himself in the person of His Holy Spirit, in whom and by whose agency we are reborn and renewed. God has united us to His Son, Jesus Christ, where Christ is, we are. And baptism is a sign of these wonderful spiritual realities.

But not only a sign, also a seal. And on this we'll speak much more briefly. What do we mean by calling baptism a seal, a sign and a seal? A seal is a mark of ownership. Baptism, as a seal, marks the one baptized, as owned by God. Owned by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in whose name we are baptized. In baptism, God declares, you are mine. Baptism isn't so much about what we say to God, and sometimes it's maybe portrayed, but rather about what God is saying to us. And God is saying to us, you're mine. I place my seal upon you. You are mine. We don't seal ourselves. God seals us, and God declares His gracious ownership of us. This sealing by baptism is an act of God, but it also serves by the work of His Spirit to assure us of the reality in our lives of the things signified by baptism, our cleansing, our indwelling, our union with Christ. So baptism is a sign and a seal. But it is more, and here we withdraw things nearly to a close. In common with the other sacrament instituted by Jesus, the Lord's

Supper, we rightly speak of and identify baptism as a means of grace. It's language we use, in our tradition. And by that we're saying that the sacraments are not just bare signs, divorced or separate from that which they signify. We think of baptism, where baptism is accompanied by faith.

[23 : 19] The saving benefits that baptism signifies and seals are also conferred by the Holy Spirit. And there we're simply adopting or using the language that is used in our confession. Again, drawing on biblical truth. Let me just quote one sentence of what the Westminster Confession states concerning the efficacy of baptism, the effectiveness of baptism. We're just jumping into what it says, and it says this, and it says this, by the right use of this ordinance of baptism. The grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Spirit to such as that grace belongs to, according to the counsel of God's own will in His appointed time.

God, by His Spirit, is present and active in the sacrament, and He is present and active to bless and to save. Now, we're in Scotland, and we are grateful heirs of our Reformation fathers. I hope we are.

And as such, let me quote the words, I have to say, quite strident words, at least to a 21st century ear, of John Knox in the Scots Confession, when he speaks of this matter that I'm just touching on so very fleetingly. And John Knox says this, Now, there's so much that would need to be said in relation to what John Knox says there.

But properly understood, they pick up on, and I think declare a biblical truth concerning baptism.

One of the things that's striking in the language that the New Testament uses in relation to baptism that we've noticed just on one or two occasions, but I haven't really highlighted, is how the sign is so often identified with the reality to an extent that it almost makes us wonder, and we need to think about that more on another occasion. But the point that John Knox is making, and I think he does rightly and validly, is that baptism is not just a sign. It is a sign, it is a seal, it is a means of grace, and it is accompanied by faith in the work of God's Holy Spirit.

[26 : 16] Well, in summary, what have we learned about baptism? Well, we began by noticing what we all knew already, that baptism is a rite or ceremony of admission into the visible church, and it is that. But then we reminded ourselves that baptism is also a sign and a seal of the spiritual realities that it symbolizes, cleansing of sin, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and union with Christ. And baptism is a means of grace whereby, by the working of the Holy Spirit, the spiritual realities that baptism represents are actually conferred on those to whom they belong. Today is a day of celebration. Today is a day we celebrate God's saving love as we all participate, and we do all participate in the sacrament of baptism.

We do so giving thanks for and celebrating all that God has done for us as His people, His cleansing, His indwelling in us by His Spirit, His uniting of us to His Son, Jesus Christ. And praise be to His holy and glorious name. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, once again, we acknowledge readily and gladly that You are a generous God. Your cleansing is deep and profound. Your indwelling is marvelous and wonderful. You have poured out Your Holy Spirit upon us in the washing of rebirth and renewal. You have united us to Your Son, Jesus Christ, and with that granted us manifold and multiple blessings, many of which we don't even begin to realize or understand. And we thank You for the generosity of Your saving work on our behalf. And we pray that as we now proceed to participate as Your people in this sacrament that

Jesus has instituted for His church, that we would indeed all participate and would do so joyfully and with gratitude in our hearts. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.