

Lectures on the First and Second Epistles of Peter

by
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Lecture XXIII¹

1 Peter 3:21,22

"The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us, (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ: who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto Him."

The immediate object of the writer being to comfort his brethren in their trials and promote the work of their sanctification (vs. 13-17), he is showing them how it had fared with Christ, the holy vicarious Sufferer. He, to whom it was their greatest glory to be in all things conformed, had "*indeed*" endured whatever the wrath of man can inflict on the martyrs of truth and righteousness. He had been "*put to death in flesh.*" But even so He did not finally perish. There presently ensued His "*quickenings in spirit,*" whereby He regained that original condition of sovereign, gracious activity in which He had existed and wrought from the beginning, and particularly in the former crisis of the world, "*the days of Noah.*"

This reference to the deluge now serves to introduce a sort of parenthetical corroboration, drawn from the meaning and force of baptism, and then the 22d verse completes the description of the Saviour's triumph.

The main thought of the 21st verse is not essentially affected by a slight change of reading, which is, however, adopted in almost all editions of the Greek Testament; and which, instead of "*The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us,*" would be rendered thus: "*Which in a like figure now saveth us also, even baptism.*" In either case, if we regard merely what is expressed, and not also what may be suggested, the comparison is not between baptism and the ark nor yet generally between the Christian salvation through baptism and Noah's through water; but [the comparison is] between the baptismal use and import of water, as that is here explained, and the action of the same element in relation to Noah and his company. To all others (it is true) of that old time, it brought only a destroying vengeance; and so far one might rather have expected to find it said: "In the deluge water was the instrument of wrath, but now, *on the contrary,* in baptism, of salvation." It has even been supposed that this is what Peter may have intended. But as in the 20th verse there is nothing whatever said of the perdition of the ungodly, so neither does the language of the 21st verse bear this interpretation. What it does seem most obviously to assert is that *now,* as formerly, *we too,* as well as the inmates of the ark (lifted up on the swelling but to them friendly waves) *are saved through water;* and that in the one case there is, as our version phrases it, "*a like figure*" of the other.

¹ We have reprinted this lecture without modification except for modernizing the punctuation. We also omitted the footnotes.

The Apostle's own word for this is one familiar to us under its English form *antitype*, which accordingly is here employed by many versions and commentators. But as we now commonly understand that word, it would here imply that the deluge was strictly a type, or a divinely appointed prefiguration, of baptism; and this, whether true or not, is more than can be inferred from the original. Only in sacred and patristic Greek, it would appear, does the term express resemblance at all. And in every such instance the likeness, if not incidental, is held forth not as the fulfilment of a prophecy (the substance which a type had foreshadowed) but as itself rather the reflection or counterpart of a model. Thus, in the only other place where the word occurs in the New Testament (Heb. 9:24, "Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures"--*antitypes*--"of the true"), some would even understand by it the copy of a copy--the copy, that is, not directly of the heavenly things but of a pattern of the same, shown to Moses in the mount. And so in the case before us I incline to think [that] *similarity, correspondence* is probably all that is meant. There is a certain likeness between the water, which in the days of Noah bore up the ark unharmed over the ruins of a world, and the water which now, as baptism, "*saveth us also.*"

But what, you will ask, is baptism then a saving ordinance? Certainly; that is just what Christ's Apostle here affirms. Nor is this the only place, by any means, in which the New Testament speaks of baptism in a way that would now offend many good people, were it not that the perplexing phraseology is unquestionably scriptural. Recollect, for instance, Peter's own practical application of his pentecostal sermon: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins." And so Ananias in Damascus to the humbled persecutor: "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins." Paul too expressly calls baptism "the laver of the water" by which Christ purifies His Church; and again, "the laver of regeneration" by which God saves us. Frequently also he represents it as that by which we are united to Christ and made partakers of His death and resurrection. Nay, Christ Himself, in sending forth His Gospel among all nations, named baptism as one condition of salvation. We need not, then, hesitate to call it a saving ordinance.

But how does it save? Just as any other ordinance saves -- not through any inherent virtue of its outward signs and processes, but solely as it is a channel for the communication of Divine grace and used in accordance with the Divine intention. On the one hand, while grace is ordinarily dispensed through ordinances it is not confined to them, God being ever higher than His own appointments and acting, when it so pleases Him, independently of them altogether. And on the other hand, there must be on the part of man, besides the observance of the formal precept, a yielding of his whole nature to the quickening and transforming influence.

Take for an example that greatest ordinance, the word of God. It "is able," says James (1:21), "to save your souls." But how? Not simply as it is preached, or heard, or read. That it may be "the power of God unto salvation," it must first be accompanied with "the demonstration of the Spirit," and then "received with meekness," and so become "the engrafted word." It is not the foolishness of preaching that saves; but "it pleases God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe."

Now just so with baptism. Equally with the Gospel itself it is a Divine institution whereby God ordinarily dispenses His grace. But its whole efficacy is due to that grace of God and to our

fitting reception and use of the rite, not to its mere external administration by whatsoever priestly or apostolic hand. Observe how Peter himself here defines his meaning.

Water, he says, saves us--is saving us--exerting a salutary influence to that end. Not, indeed, as water nor even as the visible sign of invisible grace; but as "*baptism*," and that in the fulness of its essential, evangelical import. This, on the side of the baptized (which, agreeably to the ethical and hortatory drift of the context, is alone presented), consists "*not*" in "*the putting away of the filth of the flesh*" ([that is], not in any outward or ceremonial purity, not in such a "purifying of the flesh," for instance, as was effected by the sacrifices and "divers washings" of the law), but in "*the answer of a good conscience toward God*." Here it becomes evident that the Apostle is thinking only of the inward and spiritual, whatever difficulty there may be in ascertaining the precise import of the clause.

The word for "*answer*" is in the New Testament found only in this place, and according to its derivation and classical usage means rather *a question, inquiry*. Hence a variety of interpretations such as these: [1] *the inquiring, request, application to God of a good conscience* for salvation, direction, etc.; [2] *the act of a good conscience in inquiring after, seeking, God*; [3] *the interrogating a good conscience before God*; [4] *the asking God for a good conscience*; and so forth. But not one of these explanations appears to state any positive characteristic of baptism as the initiatory rite of the Christian life. It is not easy to see in what sense it can be said that the believer is at that time saved either by his own bare seeking or asking, or by his being himself interrogated. And for this reason, while it is commonly believed that there is an allusion here to the catechising of the candidate which preceded the administration of the ordinance, there is also a quite general consent among commentators in favor of taking Peter's expression as including the *answer* to the question--a view in favor of which many things are alleged with which you need not be troubled. But it is worth mentioning that the old Syriac version gives this as the sense: *when ye confess God with a pure conscience*; and among the earliest English versions, Tyndale and Cranmer have it thus: *in that a good conscience consenteth to God*.

Consider, then, what is scripturally implied in "*a good conscience*."

It is first of all a *blood-sprinkled* conscience; or, in the language of the Epistle to the Hebrews, a "heart sprinkled from an evil conscience" and so "having no more conscience of sins"--these having been forever cancelled by the one effectual sacrifice of the cross. And then it is a *sanctified* conscience--a conscience "purged from dead works to serve the living God" and already assured of finding in that service "all its salvation and all its desire."

When such a soul, therefore, comes to the baptismal font, it comes not in hesitancy or doubt, or in search of an unknown God, but [comes] solemnly to ratify in the appointed way its own previous act of self-surrender. It enters within the sacred munitions of the everlasting covenant, and laying hold of the promises engages the Divine grace for its defence and guidance. The transaction is one wholly between it and God. And on the part of the soul, [this transaction] could not be better described than as its "*answer*" to the overtures and commands of the Gospel--"*the stipulation toward God of a good conscience*." God having said "Repent, and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved," the answer of the soul

in baptism is, "Behold, I am vile. Wash me, and I shall be clean. Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief." God says "Come unto me and I will give thee rest"; and the soul answers, "Lo, I come. To whom shall I go but unto Thee? Thou hast the words of eternal life." Says God, "Thou art mine; and I will be thy God"; and the response of the wondering and adoring soul is, "My Lord and my God." Such is the apostolic idea of true Christian baptism considered merely in respect of what it involves on the side of the baptized. And of such baptism certainly we need not fear to say that it saves us.

But you will now observe farther on what depends this saving efficacy of baptism, even in the case of a penitent and obedient soul. It *"saveth us . . . through the resurrection of Jesus Christ"*--in consequence, that is, of the relations into which we are thus brought to the risen Saviour. "Know ye not," argues Paul when expounding what he regarded as the first principles of the Gospel salvation, "that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death? Therefore we are buried with Him by baptism into death: that, like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For, if we have been planted together in the likeness of His death, we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection." In the very opening of our Epistle the writer had spoken of the regeneration and the consequent filial standing and hope of the Church as the fruit of our Lord's deliverance from death. Here he traces to the same fact in the history of redemption the saving power of baptism as one of those ligatures of grace that connects Christ's Body with its living Head.

The whole discussion tends to show how very far the tone of the New Testament, in dealing with the sacraments, is from justifying either the faithless indifference and neglect with which they are regarded by many Protestants as innocent but superfluous formalities, or the Romish superstition that would turn them into magical charms and incantations at the disposal of the priest.

"In treating of the sacraments," says Calvin,

two things are to be considered; the sign and the thing signified. Thus, in baptism the sign is water; but the thing signified is the cleansing of the soul by the blood of Christ, and the mortification of the flesh. Both of these things are comprised in the institution of Christ; and, whereas often the sign appears to be ineffectual and fruitless, that comes through men's abuse, which does not annul the nature of the sacrament. Let us learn, therefore, not to tear apart the thing signified from the sign; though at the same time we must be on our guard against the opposite fault, such as prevails among Papists. For, failing to make the needful distinction between the thing and the sign, they stop short at the outward element, and there confidently rest their hope of salvation. The sight of the water, accordingly, withdraws their minds from Christ's blood and the grace of the Spirit. Not reflecting that of all the blessings there exhibited Christ alone is the Author, they transfer to water the glory of His death, and bind the hidden energy of the Spirit to the visible sign. What, then, must be done? Let us not separate what the Lord has joined together. We ought in baptism to recognize a spiritual laver; we ought in it to embrace a witness to the remission of sins and a pledge of our renewal; and yet so to leave both to Christ and the Holy Spirit the

honor that is theirs, as that no part of the salvation be transferred to the sign.

Having thus in the sweep of his discourse been brought within full view again of the person of his Lord, the Apostle at once confirms and clenches the various motives to a patient, holy life that had been drawn from the Saviour's past career by a reference to His present condition of glory and power. *"Who is on the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject unto Him."*

If the self-denial and sufferings of the holy Jesus were great, great also was His reward. When the crucified Nazarene rose from the dead, it was no ordinary triumph that awaited Him. His path was upward, far above all thrones of earth, to the very topmost pinnacle of honor and dominion in heaven itself. He *"went into heaven"* and there was welcomed by shouting angels, and by the smile of His Father, saying unto Him: "Sit Thou at my right hand, until I make Thine enemies Thy footstool."

Behold, then, O suffering Church of God, this great Example after which thou art called--the Man of Sorrows who "suffered for" thy "sins" and was "put to death in flesh" now at the last living and reigning in glory spiritual and divine, the Viceroy of the Universe! The mightiest of created beings--the hierarchy of angels, God's own messengers--throughout all their ranks and provinces of authority and power are *"made subject unto Him,"* who for a little while was "made lower" than they. Now they ever stand before Him, His willing, constant, flaming ministers. "The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels: the Lord is among them, as in Sinai, in the holy place." It is no abatement to the ardor of their loyalty and the alacrity of their service that the Son of the Highest took not on Him the nature of their companions that fell, but became the Son of man--"bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh"--or that a human Form shall forever fill the throne around which they adore. Nay, it is the untiring burden of their song that He who is their Lord, as He is ours, was once dead, and that He died for us. "I beheld," says John, "and I heard the voice of many angels . . . and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; saying with a loud voice: Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing."

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