

Suppose for a moment that there was a doctor who had such incredible talent that he could prevent people from dying, and bring those who had died back to life, never to die again. Just imagine how people would do whatever they could to be treated by this doctor! Now consider that in Holy Baptism, God actually does give us the gift of eternal life! Let's learn more about this marvelous blessing.

What is Baptism?

*Baptism is not just plain water, but it is the water included in God's command and combined with God's Word."*¹

What's so special about a handful of simple water? Nothing, until God connects His Word to it! In Baptism, that is exactly what God is doing. He combines His life-creating and life-giving Word with the waters of Holy Baptism, and thereby we are born again of water and the Spirit (John 3:5).

What is that Word of God?

Christ our Lord says in the last chapter of Matthew: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt.28:19).

Our Lord commands Baptism. It is not optional, nor is it simply a nice "extra." God's Word takes on many forms, according to His good and gracious will. The Word is preached, taught, and proclaimed. It is read, studied and meditated on. It is shared by Christians, with non-Christian and fellow believer, alike. And it is that Word of God, His promise, that makes Baptism what it is. God Himself is present as His name is joined to the water, with all His power and all His blessings of forgiveness, life and salvation. Christ consecrates the water of Baptism with His Word, so as we in Baptism stand with Christ in the water, the Father calls us His beloved children, the Holy Spirit is given to us, and heaven is opened to us.

Those who receive Baptism after they have been brought to faith by the preaching or teaching of the Word also receive all the blessings God has attached to Baptism.

What benefits does Baptism give?

It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare. Which are these words and promises of God? Christ our Lord says in the last chapter of Mark: "Whoever believes

and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16).

In and through Baptism, God cleanses us from all of our sins, snatches us from the power of Satan, and gives us everlasting life. It is all God's doing as He gives us His blessing. It is His promise. In Baptism, our Triune God imparts to each of us personally the gifts the Lord Jesus Christ won for the world through His life, suffering, death, and resurrection. (Please see especially Galatians 3:27; Colossians 1:13-14; 1 Peter 3:21; Titus 3:5-7 and 1 Corinthians 6:11.)

How can water do such great things?

Certainly not just water, but the word of God in and with the water does these things, along with the faith which trusts this word of God in the water. For without God's Word the water is plain water and no Baptism. But with the word of God it is a Baptism, that is, a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit, as St. Paul says in Titus, chapter three: "He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal in the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying" (Titus 3:5-8).

Of course, simple water can't do such great things, but the water of Baptism is not simple water! Baptism is one very special way God delivers to us the blessings Christ won for us. Baptism is not something we do, but something God does. Therefore, it is far more than a symbol. It is a sacred act in which God Himself is at work forgiving sins, giving new life in Christ and bestowing on us the Holy Spirit with all of His gifts. Baptism gives us the faith through which we receive these gifts. God the Holy Spirit works faith in the promises attached to Baptism.

What does such baptizing with water indicate?

It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. Where is this written? St. Paul writes in Romans chapter six: "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" (Rom.6:4).

In Baptism we are buried with Christ, and in Baptism we are raised with Christ. His death and resurrection are made our own, and because of that fact, through our

entire life, we are able to say, "I am baptized!" Having been buried with Christ into His death we do not have to be afraid of the tomb in which we will rest one day. Christ has already been there. In Holy Baptism we have passed through His grave into His resurrection.

As Luther says in his Large Catechism, *"If I am baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body ... no greater jewel can adorn our body and soul than Baptism ... baptism is a treasure which God gives us and faith grasps, just as the Lord Christ upon the cross is not a human work, but a treasure comprehended and offered to us in the Word and received by faith."*

What does Baptism have to do with our daily life?

Everything! Our entire life is a life lived trusting in the promises of God, given to us in and through Holy Baptism. We are constantly returning to Baptism. In moments of temptation and suffering in our lives, when all seems to be crashing down on us, and in particular in those moments when our sin and the guilt of those sins haunt us, we are able, as Luther says, to *"Pull out our Baptism and wave it under the devil's nose and say, 'I am baptized ... I have God's bath. It is Christ's own blood.' It is a bath blessed and mixed with the blood of Christ."* We can't return to the cross of Christ, nor should we attempt to imagine ourselves back there. No, we turn instead to the "here and now" reality of God's work in our lives. We return to our Baptism. For it was there and then that God buried us with Christ and raised us with Him to a new life.

In his Large Catechism, Luther says, *"Every Christian has enough to study and to practice all his life. He always has enough to do to believe firmly what Baptism promises and brings—victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sins, God's grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with His gifts."* And: *"If you live in repentance, therefore, you are walking in Baptism, which not only announces this new life, but also produces, begins and promotes it. In Baptism we are given the grace, Spirit and power to suppress the old man, so that the new man may come forth and grow strong. Therefore, Baptism remains forever ... repentance, therefore, is nothing else than a return and approach to Baptism."*

Why are infants and young children baptized?

They are baptized for the same reason adults are baptized—because of the command and promise of God. What is promised in Baptism is given to all who receive it; therefore, infants and young children also have the promise of God. They, too, are made children of God. They, too, are included in the words "all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Jesus specifically invites little

children to come to Him (Luke 18:15-17). But most important, as sinners, infants need what Baptism gives.

By His word, God created all that is seen and unseen. By His word, our Lord Christ called a dead man from the tomb (John 11:43-44). The unborn child, John the Baptist, leaped in his mother's womb when he heard the word of God (Luke 1:41-44). Why is there any doubt that in and through the Word and the promise of Baptism, God works a similar gift of faith in the infant? If we misunderstand Baptism to be our work, then we will always cast doubt on it. When we recognize that it is not our work, but God's gracious promise and work, we realize that infants are to be baptized and receive the treasures offered in and through Baptism. Sadly, there are individuals and church bodies that deny Baptism to young children and infants. They do not believe that these little ones need what Holy Baptism gives. They do not believe what the Bible teaches so clearly, namely, that God saves us through Baptism. As a result of these false teachings, they deny both to themselves and to others the power, blessing and comfort of Holy Baptism. That is tragic, for it is a most serious offense against God to deny what He plainly declares in His Word: *"The promise is for you and your children"* (Acts 2:39) and *"Baptism now saves you"* (1 Peter 3:21).

Conclusion

"We see what a great and excellent thing Baptism is, which snatches us from the jaws of the devil and makes God our own, overcomes and takes away sin and daily strengthens the new man. It always remains until we pass from this present misery to eternal glory" (Large Catechism).

The meaning, power and promise of Holy Baptism rest entirely on the One who lived perfectly in our place and who suffered and died as the sacrificial ransom for the sins of the world. He rose victorious over death and the grave. In Holy Baptism, we receive all the blessings of Christ's atoning sacrifice. Thank God for His gift of Holy Baptism!

1. The words in italics are from Luther's Small Catechism.
2. WA 47:651,10-19,32-36.

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