

Grace and Baptism (Part 3)

Over the past few articles, we've noted that many today think somehow "saved by grace" and "saved in baptism" are mutually exclusive concepts. Not so. In our first article, we recognized that Jesus Himself set baptism apart from obeying all His commands (**Matthew 28:19-20**). We also noted that baptism is not so much a command to be obeyed as it is a promise to be accepted (**Mark 16:16**). In the second article, we noted that Paul's statement about not being saved by works lest anyone should boast in **Ephesians 2:8-10** did not mean we make no effort or that we are not involved in any physical activity connected with our salvation, but rather that when we are done doing what we are told, we cannot boast that our own hand saved us (cf. **Judges 7:2**). Finally, we discovered that baptism for the remission of sins is not a work of our own righteousness, but is a work that displays God's righteousness (cf. **Titus 3:5; Luke 18:9-14**).

But to me, one of the most important points goes back to what we initially said. The Bible says both that we are saved by grace (**Ephesians 2:8-10**) and we are saved in baptism (**Mark 16:16; I Peter 3:21**). What is even more impressive is when God says both things in the exact same passage and context.

Consider **Titus 3:3-7**. Paul's entire point in this context is that the difference between us and the world around us is the grace of God. Just like the "Cretans" around us, we spent our lives in sin and wickedness. But now we are saved. However, we are not saved by our works done in our righteousness. We are not saved by how well we kept all the commands of God. Rather, we are saved strictly according to His mercy and justified completely by His grace. However, notice what Paul says smack in the middle of this: "he saved us...by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit" (ESV). Instead of reading this in the context of modern doctrinal debates, try to put yourself back in the first century. You are a Hebrew reader who remembers John baptizing, then Jesus baptizing. You've been in the church and witnessed water baptism over and over and over again. What is your natural reading of "washing of regeneration"? Is it not the washing you've witnessed over and over again? This passage actually hearkens back to what Jesus Himself said in **John 3:3-5**. We must be born of water and Spirit in order to be born again. Just as Jesus did, Paul connects watery baptism with the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. By the way, please note that this passage points out it is not the waters of baptism that regenerate, but the Holy Spirit who renews us in our baptism that prompts this regeneration. Here it is all in one paragraph and in the same point. We are saved by grace and not by any righteous work we've done. When? When we went through the washing of regeneration, when we were baptized.

Consider also **Galatians 3:27**. Beginning in **Galatians 2:16**, Paul is making his case that we are justified by faith in Jesus and not by works of law. In **Galatians 2:21**, he explains that he is not nullifying the grace of God because righteousness is not by law. In **Galatians 3:2**, they received the Spirit by the hearing of faith and not by the works of law. In **Galatians 3:10**, if you rely on works of law you are cursed because no one is justified by law, but rather the righteous live by faith. Is there any doubt that Paul believes salvation is by grace through faith? Is there any doubt that observing legal stipulations will not save us? And yet, in **Galatians 3:26-27** Paul says, "For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (ESV). Again, don't read this passage in the context of modern debates which try to perform all kinds of mental gymnastics to deal with the word "baptism" here. Keep in mind that they had all witnessed water baptism. They had all experienced it. Most today will even declare that the water baptism they had witnessed is one of the most important and first acts of obedience Christians go through. Yet, for all that these readers had witnessed and experienced, we are supposed to believe when they read "baptism" they didn't actually think of the baptism they had undergone, they were thinking of something else. That makes very little sense to me. Their salvation was by grace through faith, but they were baptized into Christ. In baptism, they put on Christ. In baptism, they became Abraham's offspring. Race, gender, and social status no longer mattered.

Consider **Ephesians 4:4**. This is the letter where Paul said so succinctly and clearly that we are saved by grace through faith and it is not of works. Yet, in that same letter, he proclaims there is one baptism. He does not mean that the word "baptism" can't refer to more than one thing. What he means is there is one baptism that brings us into the one body, submits us to the one Lord, gives us the gift of the one Spirit, provides us the one hope of our call, is the response of and to the one faith, and calls upon the name of the one God and Father. This is that rebirth of water and Spirit we've already read about in **John 3:3-5**. It is the one baptism Paul taught in Ephesus according to **Acts 19:1-7**, the baptism in the name of Jesus. It is the baptism that is distinct from John's baptism and the baptism into Moses. It is the same baptism that was taught in **Acts 2:38** and **Acts 10:47-48**. The disciples in Ephesus had already experienced an example of Paul distinguishing baptisms and focusing on the one baptism. They knew what baptism it was. It was water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ. These Ephesians who were

saved by grace through faith and not of works, were baptized in water for the remission of their sins in the name of Jesus Christ.

Finally, consider **Ephesians 5:25-27**. Again, in the same letter that so proudly and accurately proclaimed that we are saved by grace through faith and not of our works. But in this passage Paul says the church of Christ has been cleansed “by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (ESV). One final time I have to ask you to put yourself in first century shoes rather than that of modern day debates. We have already seen that water baptism was taught and practiced in Ephesus. When these water-baptized believers heard about being washed with water, what would jump to their minds first? Some kind of wordplay that makes water mean anything but actual water? Or would they think of the washing they went through when they first believed? In response to the Word of God, they were washed of their sins obeying the same instruction that Paul did according to **Acts 9:18; 22:16**. Yet, they were saved by grace through faith.

What does all of this demonstrate? Does it demonstrate that we are saved by our own works? Of course not. It demonstrates that we are saved by grace through faith when we are baptized in the one baptism to be washed of our sins and enter Jesus Christ. Baptism doesn't contradict grace. It accepts it.

—Edwin L. Crozier