

Titus 3:4 When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ 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, ⁶ whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

THE MIRACLE OF BAPTISM

Dear Friends In Christ,

The Powerball Lottery is close to a billion dollars! (At least it was before Saturday's drawing.) That is enough money to put you in the top 2-3,000 wealthiest people in the entire world, overnight. Just imagine what you could do with money like that! How many Mercedes Benz 600 series cars you could buy? (About 5,900) How many times around the world would the dollar bills stretch if you placed them end to end? (4 times) Oh, is charity more your thing? How many people you could feed for a year? (About half a million). But it is not money out of nowhere. You at least have to buy a \$2 ticket. You have to contribute something. And do you know how many losers there are? One or two drive off with a dump truck full of cash, but tens of millions of somebodies lose their money.

A billion dollars probably isn't coming your way, so let's be realistic. In the mail you get an offer of a pre-approved \$25,000 credit card. Cash, just when you needed it! And then spend the next 5 years paying 30% interest while you barely have enough to buy macaroni and cheese. You will have to pay sooner or later.

Maybe you favor the more traditional "an honest day's work for an honest day's pay." But there you have it. You have to put in an honest day's work. There is no such thing as free lunch.

I. The FREE Gift of God's Salvation

So is that how we should think of salvation? Is there something we have to contribute? Do we have to put some sweat equity into it? Then we can be saved from the hell our sins deserve?

Back in early Lutheranism, only years after Martin Luther's death, this question came up. Lutherans believe that the Bible says we can do nothing to save ourselves, but surely, when God looked forward in time from the beginning of the world, surely he must have seen some good quality, some virtue in some of us to save us? That was a question in early Lutheranism. Sort of like a woman who walks into a dog pound full of dogs, all destined for the worst. She sees them and has pity on them, but thinks—"I will test them and find the one that is worth the bother." So she commands the dogs to sit and lie down and finally picks one a bit more obedient than the rest. At least there is a little bit of material that she can work with in that dog. Or maybe she picks the one that she thinks looks the cutest. There was something in that dog that persuaded her to choose it. Is that how it works? Maybe not works, but at least God saw some promising signs in us?

Here is a little bit of a religious brainteaser. Fill in this blank: "God saved us because we are _____" What could possibly go in that blank? "God saved us because we are hard-working?" "God saved us because we are so deserving?" "God saved us because we are so promising?"

Is that how it works? Listen to what God's word says in verse 5 of our reading, "**He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.**" There was nothing we could contribute. Nothing in us that merited his favor. It is God's mercy that he has saved us. This is the consistent witness of Scripture in passage after passage. And I could read a dozen like this one.

God's economy of salvation is like nothing else in this world. There is no input on the human side. No \$2 ticket to purchase, no honest day's work to get saved. It is God's gift, freely given. It's not because we are good enough or sorry enough. It isn't because we show up to worship on Sunday. It isn't because of offerings to the church or gifts to the poor. It is simply God telling us that we are saved by Jesus, and the Holy Spirit working faith in our hearts.

“He saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done.” So what is the answer to that fill-in-the-blank question? God saved us because we are _____ —God saved us because we are. Period. That is mercy. We deserved nothing. On the other hand, when God saw us who are born in sin, he did not count us as worthless. In God's eyes, people, even the most fallen and sinful, are not zeroes. They are valuable to him. So he shows them mercy.

And yet, while we can do nothing to be saved, there is no free lunch. There was someone who had to do a lot to save us. That is why our reading calls Jesus, ***“Our Savior.”*** He contributed everything. It was a reverse lottery. One person paid a huge amount, and everyone else benefits. By his life and death, we are saved, not because of the righteous things *we* had done, but because of the righteous things *he* had done.

II. God's Free Mercy in Baptism

To communicate his mercy, God has given us the Sacraments. Sacrament—what is a sacrament? “Sacrament” is one of those church words that we use nowhere else in our lives. You have probably heard the word here in church. Maybe you have a vague idea of what a sacrament might be, but you sure hope the pastor never asks you to define it in Bible class. And that's ok. Let's review it today.

You who are in catechism class should know the answer, right, because we just did this two lessons ago. Our Foundations In Faith class just went through it yesterday. A sacrament is: 1) an act which Christ established for Christians to do; 2) an act in which God uses earthly elements together with God's Word; 3) a sacrament offers and gives the forgiveness of sins.

When we look in the Bible we find only two things that fit this definition. Can you guess them? [Review: Established by Christ; earthly element with God's word; gives forgiveness.] The only two things that fit this description are Baptism and Holy Communion. In these two sacraments God freely gives to us his forgiveness. Today our reading especially directs us to the first one, Baptism.

Now some people object to Baptism as a way to receive forgiveness. They challenge us, “How can simple water give the forgiveness of sins?” Or “How can earthly elements do spiritual work? That's like magic. God doesn't work that way.” Those are reasonable questions. They are reasonable because we know that Christ's kingdom isn't about the kingdoms of this world. We know that you can't use earthly things to get into heaven. God's kingdom is not the things we see with our eyes; it is a matter of faith in the heart and things unseen. God's kingdom is not about kings or armies or money or buildings. You need spiritual things for God's spiritual kingdom.

But what if God, looking at us, looked at us people with pity? What if God looked at us like it says in Psalm 103, *“As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.”* What if our heavenly Father really did look at us with compassion, like a kind-hearted father looks on his children. What if God did say, “Let me give them more than promises. Yes, my promises are enough. But they are only flowers of the earth that return to dust. They are but children. They get discouraged so easily. They doubt so quickly. I have asked them to believe so much. Let me give them Baptism. Let me give them Holy Communion. Then they will have my power in things that dust of the earth can understand, things they can touch.” And that is what God has done for us in the Sacraments.

In Baptism he is pleased to give us his forgiveness, his mercy bound up with the water of Baptism. It is far, far more than a sign or symbol. Baptism is an actual shower of God's grace raining down on sin-scorched souls. Baptism is an actual tide of forgiveness washing up on the thirsty sand of our hearts. **"He saved us through the washing of rebirth"** (5) says our reading. 1 Peter 3:21 says, *"Baptism saves you."* It is more than a mere remembrance of God and his grace. It is more than a symbol of what the Holy Spirit has done in our hearts. Baptism is God's power to save.

The small catechism of Martin Luther says, *"How can water do such great things? It is certainly not the water that does such things, but God's Word which is in and with the water... For without God's Word the water is just plain water and not Baptism. But with this Word it is Baptism. God's Word makes it a washing through which God graciously forgives our sin..."*¹

That is why we bring our little children to be baptized—because God has promised that the Sacrament of Baptism is a way God gives his grace. In Baptism God's promise of heaven lies even on our infants. God has promised the world so to speak, and he has promised heaven quite literally. Baptism is God's grace in a form that we can touch.

III. Baptism Leads Us to Thank God

Remember that brainteaser? "God saved us because we are." Baptism is a sacrament built on that truth.

God saved us because we are. He saves our little baptized children because they are. And when you have someone in life who loves you that much, just because you are, not because you are anything, you always have some place to go. And when that someone who loves you because you are, is not just the one sitting across the table from you at the coffee shop listening to you, but that one who loves you just because you are is the one who has the power to raise you from the dead at a future time of his choosing, and give you a life better than you can ever imagine, and is so powerful no one will ever be able to contradict or negate his promises, you put all your trust in him.

He loves you because you are. He loves me because I am. Baptism is a seal of that truth. Therefore we want to somehow assure him that his love and effort for us, his death for us, his gift of baptism in his name, are not in vain. We desire to live for him. No, no, no. Don't misunderstand me. It is not that we pretend we we could ever repay our debt. But we want, in some way, to prove that we understand what God has done for us. We are children of God know, and we know that to a loving parent, even imperfect thank-yous of a small child still are pleasing. Amen.

¹ Luther's Small Catechism, Part 3.