

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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BAPTISM (2): A PLEDGE TO GOD

1Peter 3:21

We will continue today our study of the meaning of baptism. We saw the last time that baptism is a sacrament of union. Baptism is the symbol of the union that takes place between the believer and Christ. In our lesson today, I will show you another aspect of baptism. And it is that baptism is a pledge to God. It is a commitment to follow God.

Baptism according to Peter

In order to clarify this, we need to turn to 1Peter 3:21. And this is what Peter says. I will read from the NKJV.

1Peter 3:21. There is also an antitype which now saves us, namely baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Here we find the word ‘baptism’ described as an antitype to the arch by which, as Peter says, eight people were saved. This indicates that baptism is seen in the way of what happened in the days of Noah. And the connection between baptism and Noah’s arch, we will see in a moment.

Three possible definitions

It says here in v. 21 that baptism is the *answer of a good conscience toward God*. The translation of this sentence is rather problematic. The word translated as ‘answer’ is the Greek word *eperotema* and it can have three possible meanings. First it can be defined as an answer to a question. That’s the view that the KJV takes, an *answer of a good conscience toward God*. Secondly, it can mean an appeal or a request. That’s what you are going to find if you have the RSV or the NASV, an *appeal to God for a good conscience*. So baptism is the request to God for forgiveness of sins and for a new heart. Thirdly, it can mean a pledge or a commitment. That is the translation that is used in the NIV text, baptism is the *pledge of a good conscience toward God*.

So you see that scholars don’t agree with the exact meaning of this Greek word *eperotema*. From the lexical point of view, i.e. on the basis of the vocabulary, there is no way you can argue more in favor of one definition. The view that we choose to take will have to depend more on theology.

I will develop this lesson today from the point of view of the translation that we find in the NIV text. Baptism is a pledge. It is a commitment to God. This is the point that you will hear me stressing in our lesson.

An oath of allegiance

In Protestant theology, we recognize two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism is the sacrament of union and the Lord's Supper is the sacrament of communion. The word 'sacrament' does not appear in the English Bible. It comes from the Latin word *sacramentum*. Our English word 'sacrament' is simply the transliteration of the Latin word. Now, it is interesting to notice that in Latin, *sacramentum* means an oath, a vow. In other words, it means a pledge.

The particular meaning of this word was used of a military oath of allegiance. It was called a *sacramentum* when the Roman armies made their oath of allegiance to their country and to their emperor. They sometimes did it by the raising of the hand, like when somebody takes an oath in the court of law as a symbol to say, 'I am doing this in all honesty and truth.' Sometimes it was done with a clenched fist over the heart to represent the sincerity of the one who is making the oath of obedience. So 'sacrament' in Latin is a technical military term to designate the oath of allegiance of the soldier to his leader.

When we read in 1Peter 3:21 that baptism is a *pledge ... toward God*, I believe that it is correct to say that it has a similar meaning as the word 'sacrament' in Latin. At baptism, we make a pledge. We take an oath of allegiance to Jesus as our King. We crown Him King of our lives. We owe our loyalty to Him once and for all at baptism.

I should mention to you that the other sacrament, the Lord's Supper, has also this element of commitment to God. When we partake of the cup and of the bread, we are showing that we are associated together in the blood and the body of Christ. It is a public demonstration of our identification with Jesus in His death. It is a commemoration of His death in which we renew our communion with Christ. Paul says in 1Corinthians 10:16, *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?* By communion, he means the fellowship or the sharing of *the blood of Christ*. And then, he says the same thing about the bread. *The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?*

It is interesting to read that from one of the early military governors and his report to the Roman emperor about certain Christians he had arrested, he said that at the communion, they renewed their vows to the Lord to live a life of holiness. They renewed their vows to love one another and to love God. The Lord's Supper in itself contains a renewal of our commitment to God every time we take the communion.

Now in 1Peter, it says that baptism is *the pledge of a good conscience toward God*. We make a pledge to God from a good conscience. *Good conscience* here does not mean a conscience that does not accuse us of having done anything wrong for it is precisely because we feel guilty and in need of forgiveness that we come to baptism. 'Good conscience' refers to the sincerity of the heart of the person making the pledge. You make an oath of allegiance to God out of a sincere heart. Your heart is not divided. Your commitment is total. That's what it means.

Does baptism save us?

So understand the importance of baptism. Baptism is not just something that you can simply take it or leave it. So important is baptism that you will notice these words that Peter says here, 'Baptism now saves you.' Those are significant words, but at the same time, intriguing ones. Are we saying that baptism saves us? Does baptism give you salvation? You will remember that in our last lesson, I made it very clear that baptism is not a condition for salvation, that baptism is only the external sign of a spiritual regeneration that has already taken place in the person who has genuine faith. If that's the case, then how should we understand Peter when he says that 'baptism saves you'?

In order to understand the mind of Peter, we have to talk about Noah's ark. Look at the beginning of this verse, v. 21. *There is also an antitype which now saves, namely baptism.* Baptism is an antitype to what? To the ark that Noah built. Now read the previous verse. It says that Jesus *preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.* Notice the word 'saved' again. Here is the connection. Just as the ark saved eight people from the flood, baptism now saves us. In that sense, baptism is an antitype of the ark. It is a figure of Noah's ark, which in its turn is also a figure of a spiritual reality. This means that baptism is a figure of a figure. So we have two figures here, Noah's ark and baptism, two figures that point to the same spiritual reality.

Now the question is to determine what is this spiritual reality that is pictured both by Noah's ark and baptism. The people in the ark correspond to Christians. The water of the flood corresponds to the water of baptism. In the flood, the water symbolizes the judgment of God falling upon the world because of sin. In baptism, the water pictures the judgment of God that a person deserves because of his sins. The escape of Noah's family from drowning corresponds to the spiritual salvation of believers. We see then from this parallel that the spiritual reality that Peter has in mind in this passage is about God's judgment on sin and the salvation that God provides for those who have faith in Him.

Faith expressed in baptism

And then, Peter says, 'Just as the ark saved Noah's family from the flood, baptism now saves you.' Obviously, we should not interpret this statement in any material sense. The ceremony of baptism doesn't convey spiritual salvation. The water in baptism doesn't have any spiritual power to regenerate anyone. Notice that Peter is very quick to make that point. He says, it is *not the removal of the filth of the flesh*. The RSV has this translation, *not as a removal of dirt from the body*. Baptism is not to be equated with the removal of dirt from the body. The water itself that you see at baptism does not cleanse you from sin. The physical act of baptism, the outward ceremony is not the part that saves you. What saves you is the inward spiritual reality that baptism represents. Salvation happens when the gospel comes to a person and that person accepts it in faith. It is faith that makes a person say at baptism, 'I confess Jesus as my Lord and my Savior. From now on, I'm going to follow Him forever.'

And hence, Peter says, Baptism is *not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God*. It takes faith to make a pledge of commitment to Christ if you really mean what you are saying. There must be faith in the heart for anyone to make a confession of allegiance to Jesus as King.

That's what Paul says in Romans 10:9-10: *That if you confess with your mouth the LJ and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes to righteousness and with the mouth confession is made to salvation.* How will you be saved? Two things. First, you confess that Jesus is Lord. Isn't that what you did at baptism when the pastor asked you, 'Do you believe that Christ is your Lord and Savior?' And you said, 'I do. I confess Jesus as my Lord and my King.' And by saying this, you are committing your life to Jesus who is now King of your life.

Secondly, you are saved if you believe that God raised Christ from the dead. Because you see, ultimately we are saved by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Read again 1Peter 3:21. ... *baptism ... now saves you – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God.* And then, listen to this. *It saves you (baptism saves you) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.* Baptism saves you on the basis of the effects of Jesus' resurrection. So the real saving agency is not baptism because baptism itself does not have the power to save. The real saving agency is the resurrection of Jesus because the power that made Jesus to rise from the dead is the same power that causes you to experience regeneration.

Then Peter concludes this section with a word of encouragement for the disciple of Christ. He says in v. 22, *Christ who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and power having been made subject to Him.* In other words, he is saying, ‘Don’t be afraid. The Christ whom you confessed as your Lord is Lord over all the opposition that you may face in your spiritual life. Spiritual victory is yours because Christ has risen.’

Counting the cost

So baptism is a pledge to God, a commitment to follow Him, without reserve, wherever He leads you. This decision to follow Christ is not to be made lightly. Think about it very carefully before you say ‘Yes, Lord, I want to follow You wherever you go.’ You have to be willing to pay the price that comes with that decision because true discipleship will cost you everything that you have. This is very clear in the teaching of the LJ. It appears in many places in the gospels. Let me just show you one of these places.

I would like to read to you Matthew 8:18-22.

Matthew 8:18. Now when Jesus saw great multitudes about Him, He gave a command to depart to the other side.

19 Then a certain scribe came and said to Him, ‘Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go.’

20 And Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.’

21 Then another of His disciples said to Him, ‘Lord, let me first go and bury my father.’

22 But Jesus said to him, ‘Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead.’

This passage is about discipleship, more accurately about the cost of discipleship. Here a certain scribe came to Jesus and said, *Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go.* Clearly, he had been impressed by the life of the Lord Jesus, by His teaching and by the power that He showed in healing the sick. And he makes this remarkable commitment. *...I will follow You wherever You go.* Today, if somebody says, ‘I want to follow Jesus’, then most likely we will say, ‘Praise the Lord! Halleluiah!’ And that’s all right. But look at Jesus’ response. It is as though Jesus takes a big bucket of cold water and pours the water right over the head of this person.

The Lord Jesus says, ‘You know the foxes. The foxes have holes. You see the birds of the air? They have nests in the trees. But the Son of Man, i.e. Me, has nowhere to lay His head.’ In other words, He is saying to this man, ‘Before you say you want to follow Me everywhere, you’d better consider first what is involved in being a follower of mine, a disciple.’

Changing our relationship to the world

So what is involved in following Christ? Jesus says to this man, *The Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.* What does that mean? Because you see, even a homeless person can always find somewhere to lay down his head. You might find him on a bench in a park, or in a subway station, or just on the street. During His ministry on earth, Jesus didn’t have a permanent home but He could certainly lie down in some places and get some rest.

What He is saying here is this: ‘If you want to follow Me, then this world cannot be your home.’ That is the point of His answer. This world is not my home. I’m just passing through. Hebrews 11 tells us that Abraham, the father of our faith, saw himself as a pilgrim passing through the land of promise as in a foreign country.

If you want to be a true disciple of Christ, if you are absolutely serious about your commitment to follow Christ, then you must clearly define your relationship to the world. By ‘world’, we mean this human system, this man made system that does not obey the law of God. 1John 2 says, *If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him*. Before you make any kind of pledge to God, you have to make clear what is your relationship to the world. You cannot choose the best of both worlds. If you say ‘yes’ to the Kingdom of God, it automatically implies that you are saying ‘no’, once and for all, to the world.

Changing the order of our priorities

Then, another disciple said to Jesus, *Lord, let me first go and bury my father*. Jesus’ response is just as surprising as his response to the first man. ‘Leave the dead bury the dead. As for you, come and follow Me.’ This reply seems to be contradicting the OT because after all, the 5th Commandment tells us that we are to honor our father and our mother.

To understand this, we have to understand this matter of our relationship to the obligation of the world. There is a change in the order of our priorities. The point is this. We must certainly love our father and our mother. But there are certain circumstances in which we have to make a choice. We cannot do both. When we are faced with a choice, the Lord Jesus is telling us that we must love Him more than anybody else.

Certainly, we must love our father, our mother, our family, and all the people who are dear to us. But if we are in a situation in which we have to choose, we have to choose Jesus first. That’s what He expects from someone who makes a pledge of allegiance to Him. The Lord Jesus expresses the same expectation in Matthew 10:37 where He says, *He who loves father and mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me*. We always have to put the Lord Jesus first.

The word ‘first’ is critical. This disciple said, *...let me first go and bury my father*. The Lord Jesus looks into the heart of this disciple and in His reply to him, He is saying, ‘If you are going to be my disciple, then I have to become the first priority in your life. Nothing has a higher priority than your commitment to Me. Follow Me, and let the (spiritually) dead bury the (physically) dead.’

This reply shows the extent of the commitment that following Christ requires. There is no place for partial commitment. Christ is to be first in every area of our life. If you are not ready for such a commitment, then don’t make any pledge to Jesus because sooner or later, you will find that the cost of following Him will become unbearable. Count the cost before you make any kind of commitment to Him.

But if having counted the cost, you are convinced that you are ready to commit totally your life to Christ, then you are ready for baptism. We have a baptism precisely to show publicly that you have pledged allegiance to God. At baptism, you are declaring that you owe your loyalty to God once and for all.