

One of the biggest problems people have when it comes to understanding suffering is that they think they are Jesus. That is, they think that they are called to pay for their sins through their suffering. This is how they understand the problem: "I've been a bad person, and now I need to suffer." "I gave in to my lust, and now God is punishing me by not giving me a spouse." "I was a bad parent, and now my child's sin or rebellion means I need to atone for my sins through heartache and tears." If that is the problem, this is the solution: "When I have paid for my sins, then God will accept me." "Once I've *suffered enough*, then I'll have a clean conscience."

The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ says something radically different: Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God. The gospel says that *you do not suffer in order to pay for your sins*; Jesus did that for you. You are *saved*, that is, *you can be brought to God*, in a completely different way.

In 1 Peter 3, Peter shows us this different way: The problem really is our sin. We cannot ascend the hill of the Lord to be brought near to God unless we have clean hands and a pure heart. So how can we be made clean? Not through *our* suffering, but through Christ's! Christ suffered for our sins in our place, so that He might bring us to God.

This is the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Today, I want to explore the connections between the gospel and baptism and the mission of the church, and how the ascension plays a central role. The central question that Christianity answers can be asked in several ways: "What must I do to be saved?" "How can I gain access to God?" "How can I deal with my sin?" "How can I get a clean conscience?" At the root, these are all versions of the same question. Salvation should be understood as being in the presence of God with a clean conscience on the basis of forgiven sin. How do I get *that*?

It's important to see that this is not just a *personal* question, this is a question that is central to the mission of the Church: What are we supposed to tell people? We can't say: "Keep these laws". We've all broken them. We can't say: "Do these good works." All of our good deeds are like filthy rags. We can't say: "Punish yourself; beat yourself up. Use suffering to pay God back for your sins." That's not how it works, and even if it was, that is not "good news", that's not the gospel of grace. So what does the gospel tell us to do?

Today's passage gives a profoundly comforting and Christ-centered answer to this most important question, and clear directions for our mission as a Church that fully line up with Jesus' instructions in the Great Commission. But for most of us, coming to grips with the answer that Jesus and Peter give means coming to appreciate both baptism and the ascension much more than we usually do.

Here's how it works: Peter puts the fears of suffering Christians to rest by assuring them that Christ suffered for sins once for all. How does that work? Christ went through our judgment, and came out alive on the other side. "Remember Noah?" Peter says, "It's like that. There was an ark by which a few people were spared, not *from* the waters of judgment but *through* them. The ark saved Noah and his family. Well, that was the antitype of baptism, which saves you now, instead of an ark. Baptism is your door to getting on the ark. The judgment is still coming, but you will be saved through it if you are baptized."

This language makes us uncomfortable, though, especially the comparison between baptism and the ark. Isn't it supposed to be *faith* that saves? Or *Jesus*? Not baptism? And so many teachers and commentators have rushed to the rest of the verse in order to do damage control on Peter's slip of the tongue. They see the remainder of the verse as offering a qualification: He didn't mean *baptism*, he meant something else. But I want better things for you than for you to be embarrassed by Peter's words. **Never** be embarrassed by anything the Bible says! Believing God's Word will never get you in trouble with God. It *will* get you in trouble with people who are embarrassed by God's Word, and want it to say something else, but why worry about what they think? Worry about what God thinks, instead, because God thinks that baptism saves you.

So the question to ask is not *whether* baptism saves you, but *how* baptism saves you. What Peter says in the remainder of the verse is not a *qualification* meaning "not really", but a *clarification* meaning "in this way". What do you mean, Peter, that baptism saves you? I'm glad you asked. Not as a removal of dirt from the body, but the *answer* of a good conscience toward God.

And many people misunderstand the phrase "not as a removal of dirt from the body" to refer to the *rite* of baptism, and "the pledge of a good conscience" to some internal reality only tangentially connected to baptism, one that might be present even without baptism. But this would be a qualification that would obliterate Peter's point that baptism saves. What the phrase refers to is not the *rite* of baptism, but to the *function* of baptism. In other words, the focus of the contrast is not so much between external and internal, but an Old Covenant/New Covenant distinction regarding what is actually accomplished. Turn to Hebrews 9:9-10. This passage tells us that the Old Covenant dealt with laws concerning sacrifices, food and drink *and various washings*, and the end result was the sad reality that *the conscience of the worshiper was not made perfect*. God has always cleansed by washing: with Noah, He washed the whole world, with only a few survivors. In the Old Covenant, the people would come before the priest, and before making an offering, they would wash themselves. If the priest saw dirt, they needed to keep washing!

But the Old Covenant washings were *ineffectual*, not because they couldn't clean dirt off of a body (they could), but because they couldn't perfect a conscience. The Old Covenant washings

“saved” you in the sense that when you washed up before presenting your sacrifice or offering, God didn't strike you dead. Does baptism save you like that? No, baptism saves you *better* than that! In baptism, Peter says, you have what the Old Covenant could never give: the pledge or promise of a clean conscience before God.

You'll notice that I am departing from the ESV translation at this point, using the NKJV. On the whole, I prefer the ESV, which I why I use it in preaching and in my personal Bible study, but this is one of the places in which I think other versions are superior. The word in question could be translated “appeal, pledge, or answer”, but in context, “appeal” makes less sense, because it is *not* our appeal that saves us. That's not Peter's point. The Old Covenant saints appealed to God for a clean conscience through their washing too, but they didn't get one. The appeal doesn't save, because it's common to both. What makes the difference, then?

To understand what Peter is saying, bracket the clarification of verse 21 as a parenthetical remark, and now hear what it says: “Baptism, which corresponds to this [the ark] now saves you, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to Him.” What gives baptism it's saving power? The work of resurrection and ascension, and the authority given to Jesus on that basis. The difference between the Old Covenant and New Covenant is that when God's people washed and appealed and sacrificed before Jesus rose and ascended, they were temporarily spared and told to come back later.

Just imagine that – you have a tremendous debt, and you go to make a payment, and find a sign on the door that says: “There's no one here. Pay what you can for today at the machine and come back later.” You know that frustration of dealing with a machine instead of a person! But your conscience is temporarily okay – you tried. But pretty soon you start to wonder about the *next* payment. That's how the ceremonial system saved you.

But compare that with this: You go to make a payment, and the door is wide open, and sitting right next to your Creditor you see His Son, who says that He has been authorized to cancel your debt entirely, and He gives you a document that proves that the debt has been paid. You walk away, and you can barely believe it. But every time you doubt, you look at the document, and you know for certain that your debt is paid. Your conscience is clear. That's how baptism saves you.

And what makes the difference between those two scenarios is the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. In the Old Covenant, there were *necessary* but *insufficient* sacrifices that the worshipers offered to atone for their sins. Christ's death was the once for all perfect sacrifice.

In the Old Covenant, the fact that the animals stayed dead meant that God was acknowledging the guilt they bore was real. Yup, you really did deserve to die. God was *justified* in

killing you. But in the New Covenant, Jesus' death justified God's judgment against the sin He bore, but His resurrection justified *Jesus* as completely innocent, unworthy of death.

But remember: we explained salvation earlier as “being in the presence of God with a clean conscience on the basis of forgiven sin.” Through death and resurrection you are forgiven and your conscience is clean, but one more thing remains: to be brought into the presence of God.

The Old Covenant had human mediators who had only temporary and intermittent access to God. But Jesus' ascension secures for you a permanent mediator with access to God. Verse 22: “who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God.” In His ascension, Jesus took down the “No One Here” sign. You don't come to a system, you come to a *person*. And not just any person; but the person who by His life, death, resurrection, and ascension has been entrusted with the authority to rule and judge the world! Angels, authorities, and powers answer to Him. His voice on your behalf can never be outranked. This is what the ascension means for you.

So how can your sin be paid for? Verse 18: Christ suffered and died for it! How can you get the clean conscience of verse 21? On the basis of Jesus' resurrection, baptism washes you clean. How can you be brought to God (verse 18)? Jesus knows the way. He's already gone there Himself (verse 22), and in baptism, He joins you to Himself so that He can bring you along with Him.

What does this mean for the mission of the church? It means this: don't ever try to tell the story or share the gospel without baptism and the ascension. How does baptism relate to mission? It *is* the mission! Matthew 28: Go therefore, and make disciples, *baptizing* them! Acts 2:38: repent and be *baptized*! Gal. 3: as many as have been *baptized* into Christ have put on Christ! **Baptism saves you.**

How does the ascension relate to the mission? Ascension is the reason why the mission succeeds. Eph. 1: the ascension is where Jesus was installed as king and given power and authority. Heb. 4: We have access to God because our high priest passed through the heavens. If Christ were not at God's right hand, we would still be facing the “check back later” sign. Jesus would still be walking around on earth, which *sounds* good, but we need Jesus to be talking face to face *with God* more than we need to be able to talk face to face with Jesus. Since Jesus has ascended, He can bring us to God. **The ascension saves you.**

Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? And who can stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and pure heart. You need to be cleansed and you need to be lifted up. Baptism cleans you up, and Jesus lifts you up, through the power of His resurrection and ascension. The mission of the Church is to spread this good news to the ends of the earth.

- In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.