

# Our Sacramental Bath

By Greg Witherow

In the gospel of John, Christ tells the Pharisee Nicodemus that, “unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God”. The requirement to be “born anew” mystified Nicodemus and he asked Christ for a clarification. Christ’s response was, “truly, truly I say to you, unless one is **born of water and the Spirit**, he cannot enter the kingdom of God”. In this private catechism, Christ patiently instructs Nicodemus of the necessity of a rebirth, a rebirth by way of a sacramental bath consisting of water and the Holy Spirit. It is through this baptismal bath where the Holy Spirit pours into our hearts an efficacious dose of regenerative grace. Lest we think this water that Christ speaks of is something other than sacramental baptism, the Apostle John tells us that “*after this*” Christ went out with his disciples to baptize, in effect linking his words with his deeds.<sup>1</sup> This article will survey both the Old and New Testament scriptures to further explore the background and necessity of this baptism “of water and the Spirit”.

To begin with, in the first chapter of our Bibles we find an immediate reference to “water and the Spirit”. In the opening paragraph of God’s Word, we are told that “the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters”. And thus begins the creation story. As the Spirit moved over the waters, the heavens and the earth came into being. Likewise for the New Testament believer, the Spirit moves over the baptismal waters as our re-creation in Christ begins. As God chose to commence the earthly creation with the Spirit moving over the waters, so too does He commence our re-creation with the Spirit moving through the waters of baptism.

In the book of II Kings we find a story about a man named Naaman. Naaman is described as a man of valor, a great man, a man of wealth and as one who was highly honored. Additionally, he was the commander of the army of Syria. His king highly esteemed him as God had granted victory to Syria through Naaman. In many respects, Naaman was a man who “had it all”. But all of this was tainted in Naaman’s sight as he had one significant liability, one that regardless of all his earthly wealth and power held him prisoner, and one that surely at times caused him to deeply despair. The great Naaman was a leper.

Now it so happened that during one of Naaman’s raids into Israel he had captured a young girl, and this girl was compelled into the service of his wife. This girl must have been a saint. Rather than become embittered with her lot in life, a life where she had been torn from her home and her parents and her culture, she seems to have humbly

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<sup>1</sup> The Gospel of John is a sacramental book. The first 5 chapters are filled with stories centered on water. In the stories our attention is drawn to the healing and spiritual renewal of water as used by Christ and John the Baptist. The purpose is to teach us of baptism. In chapter 6 John transitions to the next sacrament, the Eucharist. But notice how John always places his stories in context. In John 6 he points out that the story to follow takes place during the time of the Passover (and therefore in the context of Passover). In John 3 we are told that the Nicodemus discourse takes place at the time Christ and his disciples were baptizing.

accepted what God had allotted for her. She bore her cross well.<sup>2</sup> This nameless servant girl took pity on her new master and longed to see him healed. Growing up in Israel she knew of somebody who could help; namely the prophet Elisha. In the Biblical account, the girl convinces her mistress of the wisdom of going to the prophet. Naaman's wife likewise convinces Naaman.

Naaman begins his journey to Samaria expecting certain things to happen, most of which don't, at least in the manner he expected. After a series of somewhat humorous twists and turns Naaman arrives at the front door of the prophet Elisha in the province of Samaria. Being a man of stature, Naaman had not arrived in Samaria alone. He arrived with an entourage of servants and chariots, generously laden with gifts. Being mindful of the prophets of his native Syria, Naaman wanted to make sure he had ample funds to motivate Elisha to conjure up a sufficient remedy.

Upon Naaman's announcing himself at the front door Elisha sends a servant with a message. "Go wash yourself in the Jordan river seven times, and your flesh shall be restored to you and you shall be clean". Naaman, a man used to living in a world attentive to protocol and rank, was not happy at all with how this encounter was unfolding. First of all he was expecting to hear from the prophet directly, not through some lowly servant, a man of lower rank. And secondly, the Jordan river was an inferior river in his eyes compared to the rivers of Syria.

The whole thing was just not making sense to Naaman. He left in a rage. But God was good to Naaman, as He had put wise people in his life to help him overcome his faults. Not only had God given him a saintly servant girl, He gave him sensible servants who saw Naaman's folly and gently and persuasively talked him into giving the instructions a try. The first winds of conversion began to blow when Naaman admitted that he might have been wrong, when he admitted he was desperate, when he admitted he had no other place to turn. He submitted himself, albeit reluctantly, to the word of Elisha and he dipped himself into the Jordan seven times. It's here where we need to sit up straight, lean forward in our chairs and listen carefully to the wording of the events. The scriptures say that, "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a **little child**, and **he was clean**." This episode is significant for our understanding of baptism. The significance is this. Naaman's leprous flesh was reborn; made anew with the flesh of a newborn child. But he received more than a fresh coat of paint! More importantly he was **made clean; he had a changed heart**. The cleanness referred to here is not "the removal of dirt from the body"<sup>3</sup> but rather a sacramental cleanness.

It was not some magical power contained in the waters of the Jordan river that performed this miracle. This was the Holy Spirit working through the water as it was applied to a humble heart, a heart responding to God's calling. Naaman had descended into the water

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<sup>2</sup> This girl has Mary like qualities. Like Mary she seems to have taken the attitude, "I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word". And as Mary points us to Christ to be healed, so the young maiden pointed Naaman to Elisha to be healed.

<sup>3</sup> "Baptism ... now saves you, *not as the removal of dirt from the body* but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" I Peter 3:21.

as a man of earth. He arose from the water as a man of heaven. It was more than his flesh that had changed; his heart had changed also. In our story Naaman returns to Syria as a servant of the Lord. The water and the Spirit had their effect upon both Naaman's body and Naaman's soul. Likewise, Christ has not come to save only men's souls but our bodies as well. Let us not forget that there is this thing call "the resurrection of the body". In creating new life within us, Christ redeems us body and soul just as he did for Naaman in the waters of the Jordan. In a sense, we are Naaman.

Returning to Nicodemus, Christ said, "you must be **born anew by water and the Spirit**". To compare our stories, Naaman was restored with the flesh of a little child. So too was Nicodemus told that he must, in a sense, become a little child. To accomplish this, both Nicodemus and Naaman would need water and the Spirit to sacramentally become new creations.

To continue with our theme, the prophet Ezekiel speaks of the coming new covenant in the 36<sup>th</sup> chapter of his book. In describing the New Testament era, Ezekiel describes how the Lord will revive His people. "**I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you;** and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And **I will put my Spirit within you,** and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances." In this passage, God is clearly using the language of regeneration, the regeneration of hearts through the sprinkling of water and the working of the Holy Spirit. What is this describing if it is not sacramental baptism? Tell me, what other water could possibly make us spiritually clean? And what is spiritual cleanness other than a justified heart? **Is it possible to have a clean heart before God and not be justified?** Clearly not! Why does God keep pointing us to the outward sign of water and the inward workings of the Spirit? It is because in the mystery of His ways He has chosen baptism as a means of creation in our hearts.

The theme of a new life through water and the Spirit is seen again in the Exodus story. St. Paul tells us in the first Corinthian letter that, "our fathers were all under the cloud (a reference to the holy cloud where the Spirit of God dwelt) and all passed under the sea and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea and all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink". The exodus from Egypt culminated in the Hebrews passing through the parted waters of the Red Sea under the cloud of the Spirit. Just as Christ told Nicodemus that one cannot enter the kingdom of heaven unless one is born of the water and Spirit, so the Hebrews could not enter the Promised Land without passing through water and the Spirit.

Moving into the New Testament, we find a litany of passages depicting the regenerative powers of baptism. In them the scriptures describe baptism as the instrument for washing away sins at conversion. During the Apostle Paul's conversion, Ananias is recorded as telling Paul, "and now why do you wait? Rise and **be baptized, and wash away your sins** calling on his name".

St. Peter, when calling on the people gathered at Pentecost said, “repent and be **baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit**”. The principle of water and the Spirit are tightly interwoven in the language of regeneration and forgiveness. Do we dare decouple baptism from our understanding of being washed clean?

St. Peter tells us in his first epistle that Noah and the eight souls in the ark were saved through water. He then writes “baptism, which corresponds to this [being saved through water in Noah’s ark], *now saves you*, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for **a clear conscience**, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ”. Is St. Peter using reckless language when he pens the phrase that baptism “now saves you”? Would an evangelical be comfortable promoting this teaching of Peter’s without hyperqualifying it to the point where the phrase was void of meaning?

The author of Hebrews also points to a clear conscience, mentioned above by St. Peter. The writer tells us to draw near to God in faith “with our **hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water**”. Again we see the inward workings of the Holy Spirit working in tandem with the outward washing of sacramental baptism.

St. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to live righteously when he says, “**you were washed**, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God”. Later he says in the same letter, “for **by one Spirit we were all baptized** into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit”.

We see this same message in Saint Paul’s letter to the Romans. In chapter 4 he states that Christ “was put to death for our trespasses”. Later he says, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in the newness of life.” Since we participate in his death through baptism we receive the benefit of that death; the forgiveness of our trespasses and a new (i.e. reborn) life.

In writing to Titus, St. Paul states that God has saved us, “not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, **by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit**, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior”.

In reviewing these passages, where do evangelicals get the idea that baptism is merely an outward testimony or symbolic gesture? Evangelicals have been so fearful of attributing powers to baptism, where baptism actually does anything, that they have adopted a minimalist approach that was born in the Anabaptist movement. In contrast it is the Catholic Church that has always believed in the effects of baptism outlined above and as reflected in the Nicene Creed ( A.D. 325) where it is confessed, “We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins”.

Some may protest against baptism being required for salvation saying that faith in the heart is alone sufficient for salvation.<sup>4</sup> They will point to the thief on the cross and the Gentiles in Acts 10. In the case of the thief on the cross, it is true he wasn't baptized when he made his profession of faith and it is equally true that he entered Heaven (even though he was not baptized). But it is also true that in his case there was no Church as of yet (it would be born during Pentecost), so there were no sacraments to administer. But even if there had been a Church, in embracing Christ the thief had the "baptism of desire" (in other words, it is presumed that given the opportunity, he would have chosen to be baptized). The Church has always taught that such a desire is sufficient. Additionally, the Church has always taught that the "baptism of blood" (the blood of martyrdom) is another means of acquiring baptismal graces. In **normal circumstances**, baptism is required as spelled out in the scriptures quoted. However, in **unique circumstances** where baptism is impossible, God works directly on the heart apart from the sacraments.<sup>5</sup>

In Acts 10 the Holy Spirit descended on the new Gentile converts prior to their baptism. Yet this seems to be the exception to the norm (it doesn't occur anywhere else in the Bible) as God needed to make clear to the Jewish Christians, in no uncertain terms, that the Gentiles were equals in his redemptive plans.<sup>6 7</sup>

God wants to wash us clean from the stench and stain of our sin. With the heart of a loving Father He has provided the means of making us clean through baptism. This baptism is not merely an outward sign; it is not merely an outward ceremony. Nor is this baptism an act of magic. This baptism, through the working of "the Spirit moving over the waters" is an outward form with an inward reality. And by the Holy Spirit this baptism makes us a new creation in Christ, cleanses us from all of our prior sins and displaces our heart of stone with a heart of flesh, enabling us to become children of God through faith.<sup>8</sup> Gifted with this beloved sacrament, let us cherish the baptismal font and receive the free gift of Jesus Christ born in our hearts. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Luther authored the slogan sola fide (faith alone). But he also believed in baptismal regeneration and saw no contradiction in the need for faith and the need for baptism. Like Luther, the Lutherans of today include the necessity of baptism in their understanding of faith alone.

<sup>5</sup> All of Christendom acknowledges special circumstances in matters of salvation. For example, most Protestants view repentance and a confession of faith in Christ as normal requirements for salvation. Yet, their doctrines allow for infant children (born or unborn) or severely retarded people to receive the gift of salvation because of their special circumstances. But they would insist (and rightly so) that it would be wrong to take special circumstances such as these and make them the norm for all people.

<sup>6</sup> This passage also demonstrates the "baptism of desire". As Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrangé writes, "That is why St. Thomas does not hesitate to teach that a child-even one who has not been baptized-who after he has reached the full age of reason efficaciously loves the good more than self, is justified by the baptism of desire, because this love, which is already efficacious love of God, is not possible to man in his present state without regenerative grace". Our Saviour And His Love For Us, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Some might also argue that there are two baptisms, one of water and another of the Holy Spirit. But St. Paul makes it clear in 1 Corinthians that there is only "one Lord, one faith and one baptism".

<sup>8</sup> I need to add a quote from Steve Ray, a former evangelical who is now a Catholic apologist. He states, "There is no attempt here to pit baptism against faith, or belief against baptism. Things are rarely that simple. Faith and baptism are two sides of the same coin. Are we saved by faith or by baptism? Are we saved by believing or the Spirit? These are false dichotomies that should have no place in our thinking". Steve Ray, Crossing the Tiber, p. 100 ff.