

Baptism: It's More the Meets the Eye*Titus 3:4-7*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It's a piece of paper, usually one-sided, a few words, a few signatures. It probably costs about \$1.50 to make one, yet it is one of the most powerful pieces of paper that you could possibly imagine. Let me share an example. In 2017, Jody Thompson, an Oklahoma police officer, encountered one of the worst child abuse cases of his career. He found the boy, his name is John, in his home, shivering, trembling, crying. He had endured years of almost constant physical abuse. A surgeon testified that there was not a two-inch square area on the boy's body that was not injured in some way. I won't go any further than that, but the cruelty the boy endured would make you sick. His mother and father were sentenced to 35 years in jail, and of course, they lost custody of John. But the officer's heart and that of his wife, Jeannie, were touched. They took him in as a foster child, then decided to adopt. At about the same time they had made that decision, then they were contacted by protective services. John's mother had been pregnant when she went to jail – now John had a sister, Paisley. John and his wife adopted them both and, together with their biological children, John and Paisley are part of a family of seven.

That little piece of paper I was talking about – it's an adoption certificate. Just think of what it means to John and Paisley! Rescued from a nightmarish life of abuse. Brought into a family that loves and cares for them. The words on that paper mean they will now and always be children of Jody and Jeannie Thompson. That's a powerful story. And while I don't personally know the Thompsons, I have been privileged to attend a legal adoption ceremony in a courtroom. It was an emotional time, smiles, there were tears – tears of joy. And I haven't before or since seen such a look of pure satisfaction and such a big smile on the face of a judge inside a courtroom as I did on that day. There's more to this little paper than meets the eye, wouldn't you agree?

So, when is the last time you witnessed a baptism? Maybe here in church a few weeks ago, maybe you went to the baptism of a relative, maybe it was your own child, maybe right at the hospital? Any way you look at it, the ceremony isn't really all that impressive – at least visually. A little bit of water, a few short sentences, the water is wiped away, the napkin maybe given to mom or dad, then – the service continues, you go home, and the routine of feeding and changing diapers goes on just like it had before! It maybe doesn't seem like much. But just like an adoption certificate, there is much more to baptism than meets the eye.

Today in the Bible verses before us, God shares how. **Titus 3:4-7 But 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.**

Have you ever said to yourself, or maybe to someone else, “You know, it would be really awesome to witness a miracle – to be right there on the spot when it happens”? Do you realize that when you watch a baptism, that's exactly what is happening? No, you don't see the baby levitate, no there isn't a bright light from heaven or a voice like at Jesus' baptism, but look at what God promises in these verses. He “saves” us, he “justifies” us...that we might become his heirs with eternal life. At baptism God makes us part of his family. That's right – baptism is God's adoption ceremony. And just like the ceremony in the courtroom and the paper certificate made John and Paisley children of the Thompsons, baptism makes you and me children of the almighty God. But there is a difference that makes God's adoption even more significant. John and his sister were rescued from abuse at the hands of others. God rescues us from the hell we inherited from our ancestors Adam and Eve and from the sins of our own doing that earn us hell. The Bible makes clear that we are born aliens and enemies of God – sinners from conception. Hostile to him by nature. And day after day as we shared earlier in the confession of sins, our thoughts, our words, our actions are just the opposite of what God demands. But with this little ceremony, God turns the tables. He changes us from his enemies into his family members. He snatches us from hell and puts us on the path to heaven. I would argue that baptism is the purest act and gift of grace that God gives both to a child and to parents. With a handful of water and a sentence, God adopts us – gives us heaven. Promises to act as our parent through the ups and down of this life. But the act itself is so simple, I wonder if sometimes it just seems old hat, or a little footnote in life.

I suppose God could have done it a different way. He could have said, “Now Mom and Dad, if you want your child to be my child, if you want to be sure that he or she is forgiven, if you want the confidence that my heaven awaits, here's what you do. You take a trip to the heart of the swamp in Louisiana. There you will find a rare plant with a dark red flower. Take the flower, let the petals dry up, and grind them into powder. Mix them with the oil of an olive tree that hasn't been pasteurized, then take your child to the peak of the highest mountain in your country, face east, and at exactly 11:00am on the 25th day of July rub the oil on your baby's head while you recite the poem here in my book. Only then can you be sure your child is my child, sins forgiven, heaven awaiting!” If God had done it that way, do you think we might pay a little more attention to the ceremony? Sure! But what would be the problem? “Did we really find the right flower?” “Was the oil from the correct tree?” “Were we really at the peak of the mountain?” “What if there is a storm that day – do we have to wait a whole year?” “What if something happens between now and then?” “I can't take that kind of time off of work.” All of these variables would leave a

parent with nothing but the question mark – “Did I really do it right?” “Will I be able to get it done?” In a case like this, baptism would be a test. That’s not what God intends. Baptism is God’s gift to us, not God’s testing of us, and so he makes it as simple as it could possibly be. Take water – doesn’t matter from where, doesn’t matter what temperature, doesn’t matter if it’s cloudy or clear. Take water – the most abundant resource on earth. Apply it to the person using my name, and you can be absolutely confident that I have adopted that person into my family – forgiveness, heaven are theirs. The miracle of faith planted in the heart. We see it every time we witness a baptism.

But for most of us, the date of our personal baptism is long since past. Does that mean the miracle is done and over for us? Absolutely not. In fact, the miracle continues as God continues. Here’s how that “renewal by the Holy Spirit” couples with the washing of rebirth. That’s not a one-time act. At baptism, God’s spirit enters our heart, and he continues to work in us – strengthening us in the fight against temptation, increasing our faith in the shadow of doubt. The renewal continues so long as we don’t push him aside. Yes, it is possible to lose the blessings of baptism by running away from God, just like John and Paisley Thompson would lose the blessings their parents had to offer if they ran away from home. But so long as we don’t cast him out, God’s spirit continues to strengthen and renew us. Your baptism, my baptism is still actively blessing us today even though it happened 10, 20, 30, maybe 90 years ago.

Now maybe there wouldn’t seem to be a lot of practical application beyond that. “Well, that’s awesome pastor, thanks for the reminder. That’s pretty neat!” And you go home and forget about your baptism till the next time you see one or until this Sunday next year when the topic is baptism. I hope that isn’t the case for you. Think about this – do you think John and Paisley think about their adoption by the Thompson family? I would think yes, probably often. Then let me ask you this – do you think that has an impact on the way that they live? Especially John, right? He knows what it’s like to live in a horrible home. It’s going to shape the way they treat others, it’s going to shape how they view their adoptive parents, and if God wills it, someday, the way they treat their own children. I think it’s safe to say their lives will be shaped by the gratitude they have for that adoption. Do you see where I’m going with this? You and I have a gift that not everyone has. In fact, a minority of people in the world share the adoption that you and I do. You know I am not an adult convert, but I have met quite a few and have gotten to know a handful quite well, some of them members of congregations where I have served. I have noticed this similar trait – they have a profound sense of gratitude and they are dumbfounded when they encounter apathetic Christians – those bored with the faith, who take a “shrugged shoulders” approach, those who don’t seriously want to know what the Bible says before making a life decision. Does that describe you sometimes? I’ll plead guilty to that one. And I think I understand why many adult converts just can’t make sense of us lifelong Christians who fall into this. They know what it’s like to be without this gift – without the certainty of sins forgiven before God, without the confidence of eternal life. I’m thankful for them because they help me remember the value of what many of us have had from infancy.

We know where we stand with God. We know what happens when we die. We know that however low the low, or however high the high, God is there parenting us through, renewing our hearts by his spirit. That same God who gave us this gift taught us how to say thanks. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your strength.” “Love your neighbor as yourself.” That was Jesus’ simple summary of God’s commands. The gift of his commandment and the gift of baptism are related. The latter moves us and empowers us to do the former. Are you feeling left out, alone – like others, even Christians, don’t really care? Is it a struggle just to get up and face another day? Remember that gift, remember your baptism. You are God’s child – his spirit is working in your heart – he has a purpose for you. You are valuable to him and part of his plan to help others. Maybe you’re in your twenties and you’re wrestling with what others expect of you. You’re wrestling with what to do with life, you just feel like it’s all a little bit meaningless. Remember that gift, remember your baptism. You are God’s child, he knows you, you do matter, he will be by your side while you figure it all out. He understands you when others maybe don’t. Are you jealous at what others have and you do not – their new cars, their new house, their children at the prestigious college while you sit mired in medical debt which you don’t know if you can ever pay off? Remember your gift, remember your baptism. Cars and houses are temporary – so is medical debt. God is still parenting you, your inheritance can never perish, fade, or spoil, and his spirit will renew your heart so that in spite of the present trial, you can find joy in each day. Are you bored with church – feel out of touch with the people there, feel like you’ve heard it all already? Remember your gift, remember your baptism. It’s true the message hasn’t changed, and maybe you’re hearing it for the umpteenth time from the same pastor. But let me ask you this, would hearing there is six million dollars in your bank account ever get old? The message is repeated because it’s so important and so valuable, you are still God’s child, you are still an heir of heaven. And this – you are gift to those around you whom I have put you here to encourage. I told you how those adult converts have been a blessing to me. Sometimes we call each other brothers and sisters in a church setting – that’s not just a colloquialism. Baptism reminds us that it’s true. Baptism reminds us of what we have and empowers us to mature so that we find interest and fulfillment in what we give to other. Here’s my last challenge for you today: how will you be a blessing to your brothers and sisters right here before you leave this building today? Whatever it is, it will be one more example of the gift of baptism still at work!

Baptism: It doesn’t look like much – a handful of water, a sentence or two. But there is so much more than meets the eye. What a gift! Don’t overlook it! AMEN.