

# THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

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## Saved. Washed. Reborn. Renewed.

### Titus 3:4-7 (NIV)

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

The book of Titus is a letter written by the apostle Paul to a young pastor named Titus. It's a personal correspondence that God saw fit to preserve for some 2000 years to be a benefit for all Christians, including us. Paul says so much in so little ink. It's almost like one of those love letters from a bygone era of letter writing when spouses, lovers, poured their heart out in words that they probably didn't even know that they were capable of writing but love compelled them to. They eagerly awaited each other's letters. When they received one, they would pour over the letter, read and reread every word to take every ounce of meaning away. Have you ever read one of these letters from the Bible - we call them epistles - in that way, that you hungrily devoured each and every word, unpacked their meaning, having their richness and depth continue on and on? Let's do that to these verses in Titus chapter 3.

"When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us." (verse 4) The kindness of God is more than simply holding open a door. It's more than letting someone go ahead of you at the checkout at the grocery store. This is a trait of God, who he is, what motivates him to do what he does. It is outstanding moral goodness. This kindness is joined together with love. This love is more than roses and boxes of chocolates. The word used here is the basis for our word philanthropy – the love of mankind. God simply loves humans. It's what he does; it's who he is.

God's always present goodness acted to shower love upon all humankind. "Peace on earth, goodwill toward men." You can't help but think of that phrase when you hear that the kindness and love of God appeared. We are teleported back to Christmas Eve for a moment remembering the announcement of "good news of great joy that will be for all that people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:10-11)

That kindness and love of God acted for us also in our Gospel reading today from Luke chapter 3. "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too." (Luke 3:21) Why? Jesus had done nothing wrong. He didn't need to be baptized. He had no sins to be washed away. He was baptized for us, for us to see and hear it, to be washed in our place.

When Jesus was baptized we became witnesses of God's approval of Jesus. Heaven was opened. The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the bodily form of a dove. The voice of God the Father came from heaven declaring about Jesus, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (verse 22)

The kindness and love of God appeared to save us. Save us from what? From hunger? From inconveniences? From political infighting? From violence? From our mortgage? Not exactly. The kindness and love of God appeared to save us from our inability to make ourselves right with God. "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done." (verse 5)

If God would have waited around until we accumulated enough righteousness to merit being saved by him, to be loved by him, we would never earn enough. You may think, "But I've done good things. I've helped people. I've been kind. I've been giving. I've been understanding. I've gone out of my way to serve others." But have you ever failed once to do so? Were you at one time, any time, disobedient to your parents, to your teachers, to your siblings, to your spouse? Have you ever found yourself hating someone? Envying what they have? You know the answer. You have not done enough to be right with God, to save yourself. None of us have.

God's attributes, his kindness and love for humanity, would not allow him to stand idly by while we perish to eternal death in hell. He saved us "because of his mercy." (verse 5) Mercy and grace tend to get used hand-in-hand, but they are not exactly the same thing. Grace is underserved love. It is God's grace that motivated Christ to come to earth and to serve as our substitute, fulfilling all righteousness even as he is baptized for us. We didn't deserve a Savior. We didn't deserve to have God come down and take our sins away, to justify us, to declare us not guilty of our sins. We didn't deserve it, but God saves us. That's his grace.

Mercy is not treating us as we deserve. There's a story about Napoleon and mercy. A woman came to the emperor of France seeking pardon for her son. Napoleon explained to her that pardon was not possible because her son was guilty of committing a serious crime not once but twice. Under the law of the land, the son had been sentenced to death. The mother persevered, "I plead for

mercy for my son." Napoleon answered, "But your son does not deserve mercy." The mother said, "You are correct. My son does not deserve mercy. But if he did, it would not be mercy. And mercy is all I ask for." Napoleon had mercy. He did not treat the son according to what he deserved, but instead he spared the son's life. That is mercy.

Mercy is what caused God to save us. He treats us not as our acts of disobedience, our hate, our envy, our crimes against him deserve. Instead, he saves us. "He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." (verse 5) In other words, he saved us through baptism.

Do you remember your baptism? Do you think about it? Do you think about it daily? Weekly? Annually? Ever? Some of you maybe have your baptismal certificate tucked away neatly in your fireproof safe along with your birth certificate, wedding license, and all those other important documents. You keep it there because it's something that you don't ever want to lose. That's good. But I know some of you have your baptismal certificate framed and hung on a wall. Maybe you put it in your living room or in your bedroom. You placed it somewhere visible because you want to be reminded every day that you were saved by the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

That baptismal certificate can do more than just remind you of an event that took place in the past. Your baptism has power for you right now to help you in your everyday living. It is a washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. God did something for you. He washed you clean of all your sins. He made you pure and holy, wiped those stains of disobedience, hate, and envy away. He gave you rebirth, a new beginning.

It's a new year, and with a new year comes new beginnings. But you don't need 365 days to pass to start anew, not with baptism. Your baptism means that the old is gone, that old way of life, that time when you reveled in disobedience, when you lived hating others, when you were completely enslaved by the pleasures of the world, is done.

Sin ensnares us so quickly. We know that good we ought to do and how often we fail to do it. There are battles that we lose to temptation and we are brought right back to our old way of living, stuck in defeat and failure, stuck in that former life. But the washing of rebirth from God has given me new life. I am not a slave of that old life. I am not trapped into repeating my mistakes over and over again. I am not dead to Christ. Because of my baptism, I am born again to start over. I start over in his mercy. I begin anew in my battle for Christ with a new life, a second chance, a third chance, a new chance every day.

"He saved us through the washing of...renewal." (verse 5) This word more literally means "doing it over again new." This is not so much about second chances as it is about doing it again in a new quality. I have a completely new direction in life. I have been changed for the better by my baptism, changed to live for God. I have been spiritually cleansed. The Old Adam, my sinful nature, that part of me that always wants to do what is evil, to ignore God and be wicked, is drowned. The new man arises. This new man wants to live for God. This washing of rebirth and renewal comes by the Holy Spirit. This is God actively working in my life because of the baptism he gave me.

Because we have been washed, reborn, renewed, and saved, we have "become heirs having the hope of eternal life." (verse 7) Because of our baptism, we are going to heaven. We stand as heirs waiting to inherit eternal life. This is not some wishy washy, will I or won't I make it to heaven. It's not that God could change his will at any time and write me out of going to heaven. No, this is a certain and sure hope because it is based entirely on what God has done to save me. He has justified me, declared me not guilty of all my disobedience and hate and envy because of the gift of Jesus Christ. He fulfilled all righteousness for me, all done by his grace, love that I could never earn and certainly never deserved. This he has done for me when he baptized me.

You have been saved by God through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. If you don't already, maybe it's time to take out that baptismal certificate, get it framed, and put it somewhere where you will see it and remember. Maybe it's time to frame a picture that was taken at your baptism. Put it where you will see it and remember that God saved you through your baptism. He gave you rebirth, a new life to begin again each day, starting clean because of what Christ has done for you. He gave you renewal meaning that you are now a Christian living for God. You have been changed for the better. You are washed, reborn, renewed, and saved! Amen.