

1 Peter 3:18-22. For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, ¹⁹ through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison ²⁰ who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹ and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

Baptism brings you near to God

1. You are saved through water

2. Live in your baptismal grace

Do you know where you are sitting? You may respond, "Of course I do. I'm in church. I'm in the seat that I usually sit in almost every Sunday." "In fact, some of you may say that I have been here a few times, even this week. I know very well where I am sitting." Well then, let me ask you a clarifying question. What part of the church are you sitting in, what is that part of the church called historically in church architecture? That question might be a little tougher and the answer is: you are sitting in the nave. Traditionally the part of the church that you are sitting in is called the nave of the church. Do you know why it is called that? This terminology harkens back to the image of the ark. The word nave is a Latin term meaning ship. In historical church art and architecture the church is often represented by a ship sailing toward heaven. This term along with the very way that our church is built reminds us that we have brought into and kept safe within God's Church. In a way you are God's most precious cargo. Saved from the coming judgment you are kept safe, sealed within this vessel of God's Church, together with your brothers and sisters in the faith.

Here in his letter, Peter makes use of this same kind of imagery. Peter encourages first century believers who were suffering for their faith. Many were tempted to be swept away by a constant stream of immorality and waves of paganism that surrounded them, and so Peter used the picture of Noah and the ark to encourage them. As he does so, Peter speaks of the simple gospel powerfully and forcefully. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Peter writes, ***For Christ died for sins once and for all.*** No matter what happened around these believers Peter wanted these Christians to know that Jesus had forgiven them. Christ Jesus laid down his life to save unrighteous, undeserving sinners, once and for all. The righteous for the unrighteous, what grace! What mercy!

Peter's words of encouragement continue almost in the same sort of progression that we follow when we encourage one another today when we speak the creeds

together in worship. Jesus suffered and died, he rose again, and he descended into hell. Peter writes that Jesus was made alive by the Spirit through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison. This is one of the few places where the descent into hell is taught in the Bible and we understand that Jesus did not go to convert and save those suffering in hell. No, their unbelief had already sealed their damnation. Jesus did not go to hell in order to suffer (he did that on the cross). Rather Jesus went to hell to proclaim his victory over sin and death, Satan and hell itself. Like a conquering general leading a victory parade through Main Street of a conquered enemy capital Jesus proclaimed his victory as he traveled right through the heart of hell. Peter uses this fact to again encourage those First Century believers.

He also uses the descent into hell to set up a simple yet important contrast. *There is a big difference between a believer and an unbeliever.* Peter singles out the example of those who did not believe in the time of Noah and contrasts them with Noah and his family. The spirits of those who refused to believe in Noah's time are suffering the tortures of hell, but Noah's family was saved from such torment.

This is the truth that Peter expounds upon as he harkens back to the image of the ark. A worldwide flood brought destruction upon the earth. The wells of the earth violently burst open and rain fell from the sky for 40 days and 40 nights. Those who did not believe were swept away under the torrent of God's anger and they suffer still in the eternal realms of hell. But there were also a few precious souls that were saved through water. Safely sealed within the ark floating on top of those waters in that boat, that ship, that God commanded Noah to build, Noah and his family were saved.

Peter points out that in this way the waters that surrounded the ark and the waters of baptism are similar. The powerful water of the flood, by God's grace, was a means by which God brought salvation to Noah and his family. In a similar way the powerful water of baptism is a means by which God brings salvation to us.

We are brought into the God's Church through Baptism. Along with its many blessings, baptism is the initiation sacrament; it means being made a child of God. It means being brought into God's family and it often includes being brought into a congregation. Through these precious waters we are brought into the safety of the church, we are sealed into God's care and protection along with his family. But make no mistake about it, baptism is by no means simply a church ritual, it is more than just a right of initiation into church membership, or anything like that, but rather baptism is a sacrament, a holy act of God. It is more than a mere washing. It is more than a few drops of water on a forehead or a brief plunge under water. Baptism is a holy act of God that saves us. The apostle Peter is careful to convey that truth. We writes, ***baptism... now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*** Baptism saves you. In it your sins are washed away and you connected to Christ, his death, and resurrection. In baptism God promises and gives these blessings to you and we can go back to those promises that our Lord makes in baptism and know that he will be forever faithful. Our sins are forgiven. You are a child of God. You are a

new creation created to be like God in righteousness and holiness. In baptism you are given the very gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. God makes this promise to you in baptism and God never breaks a promise. God is faithful.

The promises made in baptism are very important to the believer. They are precious throughout our journey through life for we were born into sin and we sin continually. Even a small child is born into this life as a sinner and that child unfortunately will grow up in a world of sin and commit plenty of sins of her own. But how does God respond to our sinfulness. In his patience he responds to our sin with a flood of patience and grace. He responds with faithful love that took action to save us. He responds with precious promises for us to hold onto until we are brought through this life to our home in heaven.

Jesus responded to the sin of this world, he responded to our sin by suffering and dying for our sins; the righteous for the unrighteous! God uses baptism to bring us those blessings that Jesus has won for us. God uses baptism along with his Holy Word to save us from the destruction that we deserve. Baptism saves us. It spares us from sure destruction that comes to those who don't believe. Christ Jesus suffered and died in order that we might be spared from eternal death. He was separated from God, God forsook God on the cross, so that we might never be separated from God, but instead we would be brought near to God.

We are brought near and kept near to God through faith and baptism so that we may live for God, much like Noah and his family. Declared righteous through faith in God's promise, God sealed them up and kept them safe in the ark, so that they would be preserved in the faith and so that Noah and his family would continue to serve God on earth and forever in heaven. Peter goes onto expand on the account of Noah and the ark as a teaching point on living lives of faith. In chapter 4 of this same letter he describes the unbelieving world as thinking it strange that ***you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation*** (downward spiral of immorality), ***and they heap abuse on you.*** ⁵ ***But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.*** (1 Peter 4:4-5)

The account of the flood reminds us of that there is a big difference between being a believer and an unbeliever in a number of ways. As Noah and his family were spared from the destruction that came to so many, who refused to believe, so we too, have been saved from the destruction that comes to so many who still refuse to believe. There is a real difference between a believer and an unbeliever. We have been saved. We have been brought near to God. We have been brought near and kept near, so that we may live for God.

Baptism reminds us of this as well. We have died to sin, and been made alive in Christ. We are to live in our baptismal grace. We are to encourage one another to live in our baptismal grace. Again Peter building on the imagery that he established in chapter 3 encourages believers to live for God in chapter 4. He writes in the opening verses of this chapter, ***Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with***

sin. ² As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. (1 Peter 4:1-2)

God gave the people on earth plenty of time to repent during the time of Noah. He warned them about their sinful ways and urged them to live for the will of God. For 120 years God was patient in bringing his promised destruction. While the ark was being built the people of that time had a huge visual aid, a daily reminder, that repentance was needed. Judgment was coming. But either they didn't think God would hold true to his promise or they didn't care. And so they went on living in their unbelieving ways. And so when judgment did come, when the rain poured down, and the fountains below the earth burst open, suddenly it was too late.

Nowadays, in our country, there seems to be at least one church in every town. There are these great big visual reminders that God desires that we would be brought near to him. But many, whether they don't think that God exists, or they doubt that he will ever bring the promised judgment, or they think that God doesn't care how they live, or they themselves just don't care, many still refuse to believe.

Such an attitude of indifference threatens to weather and erode our faith as well. When many friends and relatives and neighbors show little concern for their spiritual well-being, when a flood of humanity demonstrates such a widespread indifference to God's Word, when young people look around and see only a few people your own age in church, this can all very easily threaten to sweep you away. But dear friends, there is a big difference between a believer and an unbeliever. See that God has called you to be his own. Be reminded of your baptism and how God saved you. Find refuge in the ark of the church and encourage one another in the faith.

And remember God is faithful. He is faithful to all of his promises. He is faithful in his promise to save us. He sent his Son. He sent his Holy Spirit into our hearts. He is faithful and he brings his people through the temptations and trials of this life to the eternal safety of heaven. And God will be faithful to that promise to bring judgment upon the earth as well. Jesus will come again as judge. And so he urges us to be ready! He draws us near to himself through these wonderful means of grace. He gathers us to himself and seals us in within his Church to keep us safe from the coming judgment. He urges us to be ready and to live for him instead of foolishly plunging with the wicked world into a flood of reckless living or the deadly waters of cold indifference.

And so in the midst of this wicked world we are encouraged by God's Word and we give thanks to God for his gift of salvation. We praise God for his gift of baptism, for through this cleansing, life-giving water that is baptism, our God brings us near to himself, he brings us into his family, and he helps us daily die to sin and rise again to life in Christ. In his love God seals us in and keeps us safe within his church until he brings us to rest on the mountain of the Lord in the glorious heights of heaven. Praise be to God for the comfort and encouragement of his Word! Amen.