

The Promise

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[0 : 00] A few moments ago, I baptized little Samuel. It was very simple, and it has to be that way. I asked a set of questions from the parents, and then I sprinkled a tiny amount of water on Samuel's head. Baptism has been done in the Christian church for over 2,000 years. It is a sign.

We all know what signs are and what they are for. They are to point us. They are a message in themselves. Sometimes signs are self-evident. Driving up here from Edinburgh, some signs are self-evident. A red light means stop, no right turn, go slow, you're driving too fast when these lights come on. These are self-evident. Other signs are not so clear and need a little bit of explanation. That's what I'd like to do today. First of all, by reminding us of what baptism isn't. Baptism is not some kind of ritual. It's not some kind of just something that we go through because it's our tradition. Neither has it impacted Samuel in any way. Samuel is exactly the same little boy as he was half an hour ago. The water has done nothing to change him in any way.

Neither is it a doorway into heaven. And we have to always be careful, especially those of us who believe in infant baptism as this church does. We have to be really careful not to fall into the trap of believing superstitiously that baptism somehow it gets you into heaven. It doesn't.

But talking about doorways into heaven, let's talk about it because baptism is, although it in itself is not the doorway, it is a sign to the doorway. Baptism doesn't center around the parents or the child or the person. It actually centers around Jesus. It's something that points us to the person of who Jesus was and why He came into the world, what He did on the cross and in His resurrection, and what He can do for every one of us by faith in Him. Baptism is connected with a promise.

[2 : 52] And it's that promise that I'd like to look at, particularly in the light of what we've just read in Acts chapter 2, the day of Pentecost, the day in which the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples. They spoke with other tongues. And 3,000 people were converted and brought to faith in Jesus as a result of one sermon. Now, don't tell me that that is not a deeply significant moment in history.

I don't know if it was the biggest baptism service that there ever was, 3,000 people. I don't have the statistics to prove it, but I would love to have been there seeing them all queuing up to be baptized. It would have been an absolutely marvelous occasion, not just because of the baptisms, but because that each one of these people represented a transformed life. They came to understand the gospel. They came to faith in Jesus. And they went home, different men and women, from the way that they had come in the first place. You remember, of course, what happened on that day. It was shortly after Jesus had risen from the dead and He had ascended into heaven. Jesus had commanded His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit was poured out on them. That's exactly what happened 50 days after Jesus had risen from the dead. Now, please note that this was the day of Pentecost. And I think one of the mistakes we make when we're thinking about Acts chapter 2 is to draw what we want out of it rather than to understand it in its original context, which is two things. First of all, that the people who were concerned were Jewish, and the day itself was a day of deep significance. It was the day of Pentecost. But, well, we'll come on to that in a few moments' time. What happened was that as the disciples were all together in one place, something extraordinary happened, something that they had never experienced before. It's just something that they couldn't describe. And it's written for us in the kind of words that only can be found, that you were languages so limited in how this is described. The tongues of fire descended on each one of them.

They began to speak in other tongues. And it's perfectly obvious why they began to speak in other tongues, so that people could understand them. There were people from all over the known world at that time, each one of them speaking in a different language. And all of a sudden, they could understand the message of the gospel. The speaking in tongues in Acts chapter 2 was so that

everyone could understand about Jesus. It wasn't some kind of undefined mysterious experience. It was so that they could understand. And that's quite so obvious from the context of the passage. But then what happened was equally extraordinary. Peter stood up. Now, I'm sure that most of you will know something about Peter.

Peter, you'll know something about his life. He was one of the disciples, and he was the loose cannon amongst the disciples. He was the guy who was likely to say the wrong thing. He was likely to put his foot in it and say something that got him and probably the rest of the disciples into deep trouble. So when he stands up, I can't imagine what the other disciples are thinking. What's he going to say except this time?

[6 : 39] This was the matured Peter. And more importantly, the Peter who was filled with the Holy Spirit. And he then preached a sermon that resulted in the conversion of 3,000 people. Can you imagine what that must have been like on that day? It was absolutely marvelous. So where to understand it in its context? There's one more thing that I need to say. And that is where to understand it in the context of what Jesus had just done. Who is it that's at work in the day of Pentecost? It's God and specifically Jesus who is at work.

I know that it's the Holy Spirit who comes and who lands on the disciples who's poured. But who is it that originates this? It's Jesus. It happens as a result, as a consequence of Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension. So we're not to think about it as some kind of arbitrary event.

We're to think about it as part of the work, the finished work of Jesus, the consequence of his death and his resurrection. Well, as a result of Peter's sermon, it had a huge impact on the people.

They were cut to the heart. All of a sudden, they realized something that they had never realized before that the death of Jesus at their hands, because they collectively were responsible for his crucifixion, they had made the greatest mistake in their life. And they were convicted.

And they said to Peter, well, if everything that you're saying is true, what should we do? And here's what he said. Repent, he said. Turn away from your sin and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

[8 : 54] But then he goes on to say, the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, for all whom the Lord our God will call. So, there's three things in Peter's answer to this question, what shall we do? First of all, repentance and baptism is a pointer to the forgiveness of sins.

That's what the gospel is all about, the forgiveness of sins. It's not what we can achieve by being the best we can be, by using our talents as well as we possibly can. It's not what we can achieve by good deeds. So many people think of religion as something that we have to aspire to, or we have to try hard at, or we have to do things to earn for. But what we're reminded of here is that the message of the gospel is about God saying to each one of us, if we ask him, your sin is forgiven.

I'm going to ask you 2,000 years later, I'm going to ask you that very same question, is your sin forgiven? That's what this message is all about. It's what baptism is all about. It's what Jesus came to do to die on the cross, so the punishment for our wrongdoing and transgression, whatever it is, only you know that, and only God knows that. But that that wrongdoing can be completely cleansed and wiped away. Clean slate, new life, new beginning, transformed life. Paul said at one time, if anyone's in Christ, he is a new creation. And that's what God offers in the gospel because Jesus died to save us from our sins. And that's why the gospel is relevant to every generation, to where we are today in Aberdeen, and wherever we are in the world, and whenever we live in the world, the forgiveness of sins. But baptism also points to the second thing that Peter said, you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit. Like I said, so many people think of religion as something that you earn, something that you work for, that you do your best for. But the Bible speaks about God's gift. You remember that story about

Jesus in John chapter 4 when he sat on the edge of a well in Samaria. His disciples had gone to buy food, and he sat in Samaria at the edge of a well. And a woman, a local woman who was isolated, quite clearly isolated by the rest of her peers and her locals, she came out alone to get water. And he, and they began this conversation. You remember how it resulted. It was a strange conversation because it was unheard of for a man, especially a Jewish man, to speak to a Samaritan woman. But you remember what Jesus said, if you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for water, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water so that you'll never thirst again.

And at that moment, Jesus was declaring to that woman that God was offering to transform her life and to give as a gift himself to her. That's the greatest gift that God could give to anyone, himself. And that's what he offers in the gospel. That's what Peter was talking about when he said, you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. We need to remember, of course, that the Holy Spirit is God, no less God than Jesus, no less God than the Father. And when God offers us the Holy Spirit as a gift, he is offering himself to us, which means that, that as believers, we possess God himself. God himself, God dwells within us. He is part of us. He's united us to himself. And he's promised never to leave us and never to forsake us. But Peter goes on and he says this, he says, the promise is for you and your children. So there's a third element to what baptism represents.

[13 : 55] It represents the forgiveness that Jesus offers. It represents the gift of the Holy Spirit. But it also looks back to a promise. And it's that promise I want to just spend a few moments reflecting on this morning, because here's what he says about it. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, for all whom the Lord our God will call. Now, my question is this, what promise is Peter talking about? Are we clear on this? Are we clear that we understand what Peter is talking about when he talks about the promise? The promise is for you and your children.

Now, not everybody agrees, and you know all this already, not everybody agrees with what we've just done. Not everybody agrees that baptism is for babies. Neither does everybody agree that baptism just involves a little spot of water. Many fine, godly Christians, thousands, millions of them in the world, when they do a baptism service, it will be completely different in one sense, because it's only adults or people who can profess their faith in Jesus for themselves. And their baptism will involve a whole lot more water than we've just used. It'll involve a tank or a river or the sea, but it'll involve them being plunged into the water or immersed into the water and out again. And the church, the Christian church, the Protestant church has been divided. I hope not with hostility, but it has been divided over who baptism. But it's only for consenting adults, adults who profess their faith in Jesus, and it must involve a whole lot, enough water to be plunged into. Whereas we in the Reformed church, we will say, in the Paedo-Baptist Reformed church, we'll say, it extends to infants as well, and the amount of water isn't important. So who's right? Well, I am not even going to begin to try and answer that question decisively. It may be that some of us here today belong to a Baptist tradition, and you may not go along with what we have just done. Let me say how much I respect your position, completely respect your position. And I hope that you equally respect ours, and I hope that I can argue my position biblically as much as you can argue. And we have fellowship, and we love the Lord, and we love each other very much indeed. One of my arguments, one of my arguments for infant baptism is right here in this verse.

And it centers on this question, what is the promise? What is the promise? Now, some Christians will say, well, the promise is self-evident. It's the promise that you've just been speaking about. If you believe in Jesus, if you trust in Him, you will be saved. Your sins will be forgiven. You'll get the gift of the Holy Spirit, and God will transform your life. Surely that's the promise. Let me say from the outset, that is absolutely true. That's the gospel. Let me say it again. I can't say it too often. That's the most wonderful promise in the world. And it applies to you. If you trust and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be saved. My question is, does that reach the depth of what Peter was talking about? And I'm not convinced it does. Why do I say that? First of all, you have to remember that the people in front of Peter, they were all Jewish people, right? So something as extraordinary has happened. And they're kind of unhinged by all this stuff. They've been brought up. They've all come from different places. A lot of them were from Jerusalem, but others had come from far-flung areas in the world. And they had come then to celebrate the feast of the day of Pentecost, which was a major occasion. And what bound them all together was their religion, the Jewish religion, the Old Testament, the law and the prophets. And here was Peter. Something extraordinary was happening. The whole thousands of them have come together, and Peter is persuading them that Jesus is the way to be right with God through his death and his resurrection.

Now, can you imagine the kind of question that they were asking immediately? The question they'd be asking is this, is this a new religion? Is this something new? Because if it is, we don't want anything to do with it. And you know what? They were absolutely right. If it was a new religion, they were quite rightly suspicious of it, and they didn't want anywhere near it. So, Peter had to convince them that what they were seeing was nothing new. Rather, it was the fulfillment of their Old Testament, the law and the prophets that they knew so well. And so, that's exactly what he does. He says, what you're seeing is what Joel prophesied hundreds of years ago. In the last days, and in

order to read this, you have to read back into your chapter. We didn't have time to read it earlier on. But here's the way he explains it. He says, in the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams, and so on and so forth. So, he's authenticating what's happening in the Old Testament. So, and it's vitally important that he does so because he has to persuade these people to be comfortable with a message that he is preaching to them, which is that Jesus is the promised Messiah. Now, that promise did not begin with Joel. It extends back beyond Joel, right back to Abraham's time. And that's why it was important that we read Genesis chapter 12, Genesis chapter 17, because that's where you find the original promise. Genesis chapter 17, because that's where you find the original promise.

[21 : 36] place before the very eyes. Because what's happening is that God is now, as he has never done before, pouring out his Spirit in order to bless all nations, and in order to fulfill the promise that he had made to Abraham all those thousands of years ago. Now, remember what he said, and here's the crucial point when it comes to infant baptism. Remember what God said to Abraham when he called him and when he gave him that promise. He gave him a sign, and that sign was to be placed on their children.

Their children were to be included in the promise. Now, when they grew up, it was then up to them. It was their decision whether they embraced that promise or not. Some of them didn't. Nonetheless, God's command was that they were to be included in the faith community that was going to be created as a result of that promise. And here is Peter using exactly the same language. The promise is for you and your children.

Covenant language. The promise that God had given to Abraham. Same language. They knew what Peter was talking about. He wasn't talking about something new. He wasn't introducing a new concept. He was simply saying, this is God doing what he said he would do thousands of years ago.

And he's going to continue to do it. And it includes you as you believe in his name, as you believe in the gospel, and it includes your children. And for all whom the Lord our God will call. And that's why I would say today that this is one of the passages that I would confidently go to as a basis for the baptism of infants.

Talk to me afterwards if you disagree and quite happily have the discussion with you. Because I believe that the promise that Peter is referring to is the one that goes all the way back to where God announces to Abraham something absolutely marvelous, undeserved. I mean, the world did not deserve God's favor, his mercy, his grace. And yet, we would not be sitting here today if it wasn't for this day, for this marvelous event that took place, and for its consequences. Because we know that whilst it began with the Jewish people, it extended. In fact, one of the things that makes me smile sometimes about when I listen to Peter in his sermon is I ask myself, did he realize what he was saying when he said, a promise is for you and your children and for all who are afar off.

[25 : 05] Whoa! Because as we know in the rest of Acts, we get to discover that a lot of the Jewish people, even in the church, were not comfortable with the all who are afar off. Fine, as long as it's Jewish people, as long as it's our brothers and sisters and our cousins and our relatives and people who can say Abraham is our father.

That's okay, as long as we keep it within ourselves. But hold on a minute, the all who are afar off, we're not quite sure if we're like that. And Peter himself got into trouble later on in Acts because of the position that he took on that.

I'll leave you to discover what that was. But what he's saying here by the power of the Holy Spirit is that this message is going to go out beyond the Jewish people.

It's going to go out beyond Jerusalem and it's going to reach the whole world. And it's going to draw in people of all nations and cultures and ethnicities.

And even in the short time, in the short time in Bon Accord, I can see that that even this little congregation consists of people from different parts of the world or who owe their origins to different parts of the world.

[26 : 20] Isn't it marvelous to belong to the church? The church is not Scottish. It's not centered in Aberdeen. It's not centered in Edinburgh.

Not even in Geneva. The church is worldwide. And it consists of people from all over the world who have come to believe and trust in Jesus Christ.

Their sins are forgiven. The Holy Spirit dwells within them. And they rejoice. We rejoice in the Lord because of what he has done for us in fulfilling his wonderful promise.

And just in a word, as I know the time is up, as we include our children in the promise, we're not to assume that that somehow secures them for life.

Like I said before, they will reach a stage like Moses did when they have to decide is this promise mine or not?

[27 : 36] What am I going to do with this upbringing that I've had? And maybe I'm talking to many of you in here.

You've been brought up in a Christian home. You've been given the riches of the Bible. You've seen an example. It's never been a perfect example.

It never is of how to live the Christian life. But you know that God is the truth, that the Bible is the truth. But you've never taken that step of embracing that promise for yourself.

I hope today is the opportunity that you need to say to God, God, I can't live without you.

There is no other forgiveness. I can't find it anywhere else in the world. And I know that there are many, many, my whole life is infected with wrongdoing and sin.

[28 : 40] the one thing I need is your forgiveness through Jesus Christ. The forgiveness that I know about in the Bible.

Perhaps today is the day when you personally turn to God yourself and make Him your own.

Because He says, He who comes to me, I will never drive away.

Let's pray together. Our Father in Heaven, we bless you for your grace, the grace of God in the Gospel, for the grace that extends way back to when the world was fallen in the first place and our first parents chose to go their own way.

We give thanks, Lord, even then that you were unfolding the seeds, the glimmers of what you would one day do in sending your Son into the world to bring His forgiveness and to purchase that cleansing for us.

So, Father in Heaven, we thank you, we rejoice in what you have done. And we want to place our hope in you and in you alone.

[30 : 01] We pray that today will be a celebration this morning and this evening as we remember what God has done in the death of Jesus. We ask, Lord, that you will dwell within us and reign within us.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.