

The Significance of Baptism

*“I have a baptism
to be baptized
with; and how am I
straitened till it be
accomplished!”*

—*Luke 12:50*

THESE WORDS WERE SPO-

ken by our Lord Jesus during his earthly ministry as recorded by Luke, the historian. They emphasize the total commitment, dedication, sacrifice, and zeal that would mark his baptism on behalf of the sin-sick and dying human family. His was the most important life that was ever lived, and through him we learn the true meaning and significance of baptism. It is a fundamental doctrine and one of the most important aspects of our walk of faith with him in newness of life.

BAPTISM

The word ‘baptism’ is only found in the New Testament. It is derived from a Greek word which means ‘to whelm,’ or ‘to completely cover,’ with water. The Master taught us that being immersed in water symbolizes the giving of one’s life to the Heavenly Father in complete consecration. He promised that his true followers were also soon to be blessed with the spirit of enlightenment and

understanding because of their commitment. He explained, “John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”—Acts 1:5, *New American Standard Bible*

‘STRAITENED’

In our featured scripture, Jesus used the word ‘straitened’ which in other translations of the Bible has been rendered ‘pressed, pained or distressed.’ It points to the very narrow and difficult way of his sacrificial life and ministry. Our Lord had come to earth to die for the sins of mankind, and he could not deviate from the Heavenly Father’s ultimate plan and purpose for his sin-sick and dying human creation. The Master was pressed on every side in his dedication to fulfill the will of his Father. He was thus restricted, limited, and confined to the fulfillment of that purpose.

The same word has been translated ‘pressed’ when describing the Apostle Paul’s ministry. We read, “When Silas and Timotheus were come from Macedonia, Paul was pressed in the spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ.” (Acts 18:5) The word ‘strait’ was also used by Paul when writing to the church at Philippi. He told them, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you.”—Phil. 1:21-24

On another occasion, Jesus used a similar word ‘strait’ which means ‘narrow’ and emphasizes the

narrow way of the Christ. He said, "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it."—Matt. 7:13,14

THE IMMERSER

The scriptural account of Jesus' baptism was recorded in three of the gospels. These accounts were recorded in Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, and Luke 3:21,22. Matthew has included more detail of the event, and we thus turn to his gospel. We read, "Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him. And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."—Matt. 3:13-17

The sacred record indicates that John objected to carrying out Jesus' command to be baptized by him. John recognized our Lord's true distinction and prominence as the foretold Messiah and he felt unworthy to baptize the Lord from heaven. Years later, when speaking of Jesus, the Apostle Paul pointed out this distinction. He said, "For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless,

undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens.”—Heb. 7:26

SYMBOLIC

Water baptism was a symbol of Jesus’ consecration unto death. Paul explained, “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin. Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him: Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”—Rom. 6:3-11

A HIGHER PRIESTHOOD

Jesus fulfilled the requirements of the priesthood when he became thirty years of age, which was the legal age that a priest could offer sacrifice. “From thirty years old and upward even unto fifty years old, every one that came to do the service of the ministry, and the service of the burden in the tabernacle of the congregation.” (Num. 4:47) The Psalmist David later wrote concerning our Lord

Jesus who would be a high priest of a greater priesthood. Therefore, "Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire; mine ears hast thou opened: burnt offering and sin offering hast thou not required. Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart."—Ps. 40:6-8

A VOICE FROM HEAVEN

When Jesus was raised up from the water it symbolized his future resurrection from death. The heavens then being opened to him points to the higher spiritual truths that were opened to his understanding. As an emblem of holy peace and salvation, the dove was an outward representation of God's marvelous power as it descended upon him. "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." (I Cor. 2:14) The Heavenly Father responded to the Master by imparting his Holy Spirit upon his beloved Son.

From the account, we thus read, "Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."—Matt. 3:16,17

SACRIFICIAL DEATH

When Jesus was immersed by John the Baptist, it was merely a symbol of his sacrificial life and death. The reality of his new life was shown by a favor that was later asked of him. We read, "Then

came to him the mother of Zebedee's children with her sons, worshipping him, and desiring a certain thing of him. And he said unto her, What wilt thou? She saith unto him, Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom." (Matt. 20:20,21) Turning to Mark's account, Jesus' question concerning his baptism is more clearly stated. "Jesus said unto them, Ye know not what ye ask: can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? And they said unto him, We can. And Jesus said unto them, Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of; and with the baptism that I am baptized withal shall ye be baptized: But to sit on my right hand and on my left hand is not mine to give; but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared."—Mark 10:38-40

Thus did Jesus reveal the true nature of his baptism, which at that time had not yet been completed in death. His baptism was a symbol of his burial into sacrificial death, a burial so complete that it ended in the grave. His faithful followers are invited to participate with him in his sacrificial death, which, when faithful, will lead to life on the very highest of all spiritual planes.

Jesus expressed this matter further in a statement he made to Peter. "Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of

man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.”—Matt. 16:24-27

The Master explained this to Peter in response to his suggestion that Jesus was making a mistake in going to Jerusalem where he would expose himself to the danger of being arrested and put to death. His answer shows that, because he had entered into a covenant with God which called for the sacrifice of his life, any drawing back would mean the loss of eternal life because of unfaithfulness. He knew that being faithful to his covenant of sacrifice unto death would mean a raising up to newness of life, even to the divine nature in the first resurrection.

FORESHADOWS

There are many situations and experiences in the Bible that serve as types and illustrations of future events. One of these is the story of Noah and his family. They were brought through the waters of the flood that symbolizes baptism.

The Apostle Peter wrote, “Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by

the resurrection of Jesus Christ: Who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him.”—I Pet. 3:18-22

Peter also spoke of the first world that was destroyed, “Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished.” (II Pet. 3:6) The whole human family was threatened with death by the coming flood waters. However, God warned Noah of the danger, and revealed to him that the way of escape was by means of an ark. Noah obeyed the voice of God, built the ark and entered into it before the waters descended. They were thus saved and brought through to life in the new world.

NOAH’S OBEDIENCE

The true spirit of consecration to do the will of God is thus shown in the readiness of Noah to build the ark and bring all of the animals into it. He also preached righteousness to the unrepentant people of his day. He and his family put their trust in God, and by obeying his instructions they placed their lives wholly in his hands.

The flood waters came as foretold and brought death and destruction to all human flesh, except to Noah and his family. They had passed through the deluge safely. It was a severe experience but, because of their obedience to God’s will, they were brought through the deluge alive and were then used by God to begin a new world.

The Apostle Peter said that the eight people who were safely in the ark had been ‘saved by water.’ He then said that this was a ‘like figure’ of the manner in which baptism now saves us ‘by the

resurrection of Jesus Christ.' The baptism by which we are saved through the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not accomplished by our being merely immersed in water, but by our baptism into his sacrificial death.

The apostle put the matter in proper perspective, when he proclaimed, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ."—I Pet. 1:3-7

Jesus voluntarily gave his life in sacrifice, but God's promises were made sure and he raised him from the dead. His resurrection inspires in us a hope of life because it gives evidence that if we lay down our lives in conformity to God's will, he also will fulfill his promises to us. We can trust him that we, too, will be raised up to joint-heirship with the Master. This is the real baptism into death, and the subsequent raising up to life in Christ is illustrated by the experience of Noah and his family in being brought safely through the waters of the flood.

THE CLOUD AND SEA

Another illustration of Christian baptism is symbolized by the typical baptism of Moses and the Israelites in the cloud and in the sea. When writing to the brethren at Corinth, the Apostle Paul spoke of this, and said, “Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ.”—I Cor. 10:1-4

The scriptural account shows that the whole nation of Israel became dedicated to God through their leader Moses. They agreed to follow his leadership and join him on an unknown journey. This indicated their acceptance of the will of God as it was to be shown to them through his representative Moses and his leadership on their behalf. Their spirit of consecration was thus confirmed. The firstborn of Israel were in danger of death, but were delivered through the instructions given to them by God.

The entire nation risked their lives by putting themselves in the hands of Moses. The possibility of death became very real when they later stood facing the Red Sea, and with the Egyptian army bringing up the rear determined to capture them and return them to Egypt. However, God gave instructions to his representative. “Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will shew to you to day: for the Egyptians whom ye (Continued on page 35)

(Continued from page 31) have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever. The LORD shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace. And the LORD said unto Moses, Wherefore criest thou unto me? speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward.”—Exod. 14:13-15

The marvelous power of the Heavenly Father was truly manifest to the people. “The angel of God, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them; and the pillar of the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them: And it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel; and it was a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these: so that the one came not near the other all the night.” (vss. 19,20) The sea was divided by the hand of God, the cloud descended upon them, and they passed safely through the waters.

The scriptural record reads, “The children of Israel walked upon dry land in the midst of the sea; and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left. Thus the LORD saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the sea shore. And Israel saw that great work which the LORD did upon the Egyptians: and the people feared the LORD, and believed the LORD, and his servant Moses.”—vss. 29-31

CHRIST OVER HIS OWN HOUSE

The Apostle Paul makes clear the fact that Moses served as an illustration of our Lord Jesus who will deliver mankind from death under the administration of his future kingdom. Israel represents the

whole world of mankind that will be delivered at that time. "Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus; Who was faithful to him that appointed him, as also Moses was faithful in all his house. For this man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honour than the house. For every house is builded by some man; but he that built all things is God. And Moses verily was faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after; But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end."—Heb. 3:1-6

Although all individual Israelites did not enter into a complete dedication of themselves to the Lord, it does not take away from the true significance of the illustration. God was dealing with his people as a nation, and they came under the terms of the original consecration and baptism established at that early time. When John introduced our Lord Jesus, he was also preaching the remission of sin to the Jews and to bring individuals back into harmony with their original dedication.

A NEW COVENANT

Through the Prophet Jeremiah, God directed his people to a New Covenant arrangement that he was preparing for them. "Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made

with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”—Jer. 31:31-34

DELIVERED FROM DEATH

Symbolically, the children of Israel had followed Moses into the waters of death, and in accordance with the instructions he had received from the Heavenly Father. However, because of their obedience to him they were delivered from death and restored to life and favor with God. Thus was the whole nation together with their leader baptized. First, there was the total surrender of Moses to God, and later of the Israelites as a nation, to do the will of God. After having demonstrated their readiness to follow the Lord, they were then symbolically immersed in the sea and in the cloud.

A SONG OF DELIVERANCE

A wonderful song of deliverance was sung by all the people following their harrowing experiences. “Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the LORD, and spake, saying, I will sing unto the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously:

the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea. The LORD is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation: he is my God, and I will prepare him an habitation; my father's God, and I will exalt him."—Exod. 15:1,2

Throughout the present Gospel Age, our Heavenly Father has invited faithful followers of Jesus who have symbolized their consecration to him by water immersion. The inspiring words of the Master in our featured scripture will become ever more meaningful when the baptism of the Christ will also have been accomplished. "I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!"—Luke 12:50

