

Baptismal Blessings

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[0 : 00] Our text has been announced already from the book of Titus. It's one of Paul's last letters, probably his next to the last inspired writing. Typically grouped with the pastoral epistles because he is writing to a pastor about pastoring.

He's writing, as he says, to his true child in the faith Titus, like Timothy. Titus probably was converted under Paul's ministry. He, tradition tells us that Titus was from Syria, Antioch, the first largely Gentile church.

And it says that his brother may have been Luke the Evangelist. We don't know that for sure. In any event, he was converted through Paul's ministry. Like Timothy is one of Paul's faithful lieutenants and fellow ministers.

But unlike Timothy, he had a sturdy and forceful character. And apparently, Paul was released from prison, the imprisonment with which Acts ends in Acts 28. Travel to Spain, we're told, preached the gospel there and came back to the Mediterranean and preached on Crete, one of the largest of the Greek islands.

Crete like Corinth was notorious in the first century for its vice and wickedness. And yet by the blessing of God, as Paul and Titus went through that island preaching and town after town, many people were apparently converted to Christ.

[1 : 14] Paul went on and left Titus there. And he writes here to instruct him about how to order these churches, these groups of believers in the various towns, particularly focusing on the appointment of elders.

So that's the context of this letter. The subject this morning, as you see from your bulletin, is baptismal blessing. And I'd like to address it by posing and answering two questions, posing two questions and answering, and letting Paul answer them from the text.

The first question I'd pose to you this morning is what is the most august society in this world? Now the answers could range from the sublime to the ridiculous.

I know a certain Scott Solister who might suggest that the Scottish National Rugby Team is the most august society in this world. Others with more refined sensibilities might think, you know, we have the College of Nobel Laureates in Stockholm, Sweden.

In Davos, Switzerland, every year they're rich in the powerful meat. And of course you have here in your own land, your parliament there at the bottom of the Royal Mile, that other parliament in Westminster, there's one in Brussels.

[2 : 25] And there are a lot of ways we might think of societies, groups of people that are august, characterized by dignity or grandeur in various ways. The grandeur of learning, the faculties of the university here in Edinburgh, St. Andrews, Aberdeen, Glasgow, and some of you who are disposed of each other might even grant that concession to some of the other institutions of learning farther south.

But ultimately all of these societies and their glory and dignity come from human sources. And they endure only as long as this world, if that long.

I would suggest to you this morning that there is a society whose glory comes not from man, but from God, and endures not just as long as this world, but far beyond. I would suggest to you this morning, brothers and sisters, and if I address you as beloved, I do that to my own congregation. I hope you won't think we present you as you are beloved for the sake of Christ.

I would suggest the Church of Jesus Christ is the most august society in this world. And I think Paul would say that too, as he writes to Timothy about how to shepherd this congregation of apparently ordinary, cretin people, people again whose culture was notorious for vice.

Six reasons Paul gives why the Church of Jesus Christ, including that those believers on crete is an august society. The first is that they are the focal point of God's eternal love and purpose.

[3 : 53] He says in his introduction, he's a servant of God, of Jesus Christ, for the faith of God's elect. And the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness, of faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God who does not lie promised before the beginning of time.

The Greek is literally before the ages. Before time began, God Almighty purposed and loved a people, including those people. Many of them slaves on crete.

So that's the first reason. Before time, before anything came to be, God loved, knew, and made the Church the focal point of his plan for history. Secondly, the Church is the blessed subject of God's saving work.

The language here is he speaks of God our Savior, and then grace and peace from God the Father, and Christ Jesus our Savior. Jesus Christ is called Savior three times in this brief letter in each chapter.

Here he is called our Savior. The Father's part was to ordain the plan of salvation and to send his beloved Son. The work of creation was an easy work.

[5 : 07] It only required God to speak, and it was so. But the work of redemption cost God that which is most precious, the Father, the suffering of his own beloved Son.

And it required his Son to come into this world as one of us to live for 33 years in the midst of sin and sinners. And then to die as we have already sunk on a cross as the bear of our sin here in chapter 2.

It says, he gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity. And then in chapter 3, Derek read this passage earlier.

When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 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 whom he poured out on us generally through Jesus Christ our Savior.

Father, Son, and Spirit all involved in the work of saving the church. Not only that, the church is the blessed beneficiary of the labors of God's choicest servants.

[6 : 19] Paul, a servant of God and apostle of Jesus Christ. Now this language servant of God is unusual to Paul. He often calls himself a servant of Jesus Christ.

Here he says a servant of God. That title was used by Abraham Moses and David. Paul, acknowledged by secular scholars to be one of the great minds, not just the first century but of all time, promising Pharisee on the fast track to be a leader in Judaism who after the road to Damascus is given over to ostracism, to imprisonment, to stoning and beating.

Why? For the sake of the church. What does he say? An apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God's elect. And the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness.

Fourthly, the church is God's special treasure. I think we find that in two places at least here. An elder must be, verse 7, an overseer is entrusted with God's work.

God must be blamed as the Greek is literally as God's steward, someone to whom God has entrusted something extremely valuable to care for. What is it that God has entrusted to the elders of the church?

[7 : 46] I would suggest two things. The two things that are most precious to him because they're most closely related to his own glory, his gospel, to preserve the gospel faithfully.

He has a problem with false teaching on Crete and his people. They're the shepherd, the souls of the people of God. God entrusts to these elders that treasure which is his church.

And I read earlier where it says in 2.14 that Christ gave himself to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own that language harkens back to Exodus 19 where God said through Moses to Israel whom he brought out of Egypt, you will be my special treasure in all the earth.

The whole universe is mine, but in a special way you will be my delight. It's the same language and idea which he uses here of these Christians on Crete and the churches, the local churches they comprise.

Fifthly, the church is august because its members are so intimately connected with God and with his glory. In chapter 2 we didn't read this, but older women are to teach the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be workers at home so that the word of God may not be dishonored.

[9 : 03] Young women, you wives, you homemakers, you realize that your work as a homemaker, a wife and a mother is connected with the honor of the word of God.

And then he speaks to slaves and there were probably lots of slaves. That was one reason Christianity was often despised. For a century it was looked down on as a religion for common folk and slaves and he tells them that they are to serve their masters well, they are not to rob them, they are to adorn the doctrine of God.

Slaves in their everyday mundane work can adorn the doctrine of God. And so can you. Whoever you are, whatever you do, if you belong to Jesus Christ, his glory is connected with you, he cares about you, and you can adorn his gospel by the way you live your life.

Do your work the way you relate to your family. And then finally, the church will not only exist but will be glorified and blessed to perfection.

We sang just a few minutes ago in Psalm 23 of dwelling in the house of the Lord forever. Paul says it here and he doesn't use this language that often. John uses it frequently. Paul uses it occasionally but twice in this letter.

[10 : 22] He speaks of eternal life. It is a pointed season. He planned it from all eternity but it is a pointed season. He brought his word to light through preaching and trust to me by the command of God our Savior.

And he speaks earlier of a faith in knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life. And then in chapter 3, in verse 7, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

And so the church originates before the creation of the world in the mind and heart of God. In time, Father, Son and Spirit are engaged in saving it. They treasure it.

He gives his servants to build it up. He is intimately connected with them and their lives and their work. And then eternal life, the stress here on life, fullness of blessing, but also eternal life.

This is a society when all the others have been destroyed and passed away. We will continue in blessing and glory forever after time has ceased to be. And so I would suggest, beloved, for those six reasons, the Church of Jesus Christ, whether it's a small church on Crete, whether it's a little congregation in Lockenberg, the congregation there was typically 12 to 15 people, often elderly, but that is an August society comprised of the true people of Jesus Christ.

[11 : 47] And I should say, when I say church here, I'm not speaking of any particular denomination. I'm not talking about every group that uses church in its name or has church over its building. Our confession of faith says the church is where the doctrine of the gospel is preached and embraced.

Gospel ordinances are administered, and gospel worship is practiced in more or less purity. I think we can also add where gospel holiness is evident to some degree in the lives of the people.

That's the church, whatever its name may be. We should also note that the church has two aspects or dimensions. Most of the references in the New Testament to church are about local churches, specific churches, and that's what Paul's talking about here, but there are other references that are to what we call the universal, the invisible church.

I will build my church, said Jesus. Christ loved the church and gave himself for her.

In most of the capitals of the world, you'll find a British embassy. Many of the other leading cities, you'll find a British consulate. Why are they there?

[12 : 58] Because of the nation of Great Britain. Because of a nation that exists that has diplomatic interests, that has citizens who have needs, those embassies, those consuls are an extension, an evidence of the existence of the greater nation.

And I would suggest that visible local churches are a witness and extension of the greater church. All of those loved by God and purchased and redeemed by Christ.

So, the first point, the most august society on earth is the church of Jesus Christ. It's a profound privilege to be a member of the church of Jesus Christ.

He's with her in a special way where two or three are gathered in my name, and in a special way where the people of God meet in the name of Jesus Christ. He's promised to be with them.

He's given to them gifted men to build them up by the preaching of the Word. He's given to them elders and shepherds to provide spiritual oversight to watch over their souls.

[14 : 05] He's given to them the sacraments to build up their faith. The communion of the saints, it's a wonderful privilege to be a member of a visible local church. And greater still to be a member of that body of Christ united to him in salvation, which brings us to our second question this morning.

And that is, if the church of Jesus Christ is the most august society in the world, how does one become a member? Every society has some process by which you're admitted.

You become a British citizen either by being born here or by going through a naturalization process. If you want to be a member of the National Rugby Team of Scotland, you have to play lots of rugby, you have to play it well, you have to work out all the time, and then you have to be recommended and chosen.

And we could think of any society and there is some process by which you become a member. How does one become a member of this most august of societies?

Now you might answer that question in several different ways legitimately, but this morning I would suggest that the answer is by baptism. By baptism, baptism is the official means by which people become disciples of Jesus Christ.

[15 : 30] Jesus said, go make disciples, baptizing them into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And it's clear in the New Testament that the apostles, when people believe the gospel, baptize them and their households as a means of setting them apart from the world and setting them apart to God, bringing them into the church.

Our Westminster Confession says, I think it's chapter 28 in question 165, speaking of baptism among other things, it says, it's the means of solemnly admitting people into the visible church.

Now the New Testament speaks of two baptisms. In fact, the New Testament almost begins with that. It begins with John the Baptist coming to announce the Messiah's arrival and speaking in terms of two baptisms, I baptize you with water, but when he comes, one who's greater than I, he will baptize you with fire, which probably speaks of judgment on his enemies, and with the Holy Spirit.

And I would suggest you that while the word baptism is not in our text, the thing itself is back to chapter 3, verse 4, when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.

I think that's important. We do need to be saved. Some people deny that. You may, but you do it at your own peril, and you call God a liar. Jesus a liar, the angel said to you, is born this day a Savior.

[17 : 09] And Jesus said, I've come to seek and to save the lost, and that's all of us. But he says he saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. He speaks here of Christ our Savior pouring out his Spirit to the effect that we are washed and cleansed, and we're born again and transformed.

And we need both. The Spirit's baptism is his work of joining us to Jesus Christ so that we share in Christ and all of his blessings. The benefit of his death, that's why Romans 6, Paul can say, you've died.

You've been buried. You've been raised again to newness of life because you're united to Jesus Christ, and the Spirit does that and works faith in us.

And so this baptism, it's spoken of a number of places, not always in specific terms, the baptism of the Spirit, 1 Corinthians 12, 13. By one Spirit, we've all been baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free.

[18 : 17] We've all been made to drink of one Spirit. I think that's what Paul is speaking of here. And so what we have, beloved, in a sense, and I want to be careful here, is we have a lesser and a greater church.

We have visible local churches, which are expressions and parts of the greater body of Christ and His redeemed. And I would suggest that we have a lesser and a greater baptism.

The lesser is a baptism by men with water, which admits people into the visible church, and the greater baptism is that baptism by Christ with His Spirit, by which we're united to Him, and it's always accompanied by faith in Jesus Christ.

And so, per take of all the blessings of the Gospel, we're justified by His grace and become heirs of eternal life. Now, the two are connected, but they're not identical.

Our confession talks about a sacramental union that exists between the visible sacrament and Augustine's formulation, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. It's a physical sermon, but it points to this greater baptism by the Spirit.

[19 : 32] And to those who, in the providence of God, come to faith in Jesus Christ, what's pictured here in the way of a cleansing and washing way of sins becomes a glorious spiritual reality.

So, the most August society in the world is the Church of Jesus Christ, and we're admitted to that society by baptism, particularly this baptism of the Spirit, but also in terms of the visible church, this baptism by water, which is itself a great privilege.

Let me suggest five applications very quickly before I close, and the first one is this. I think many of us probably need to rehabilitate our view of the church. It may not be a problem here in the UK, but I know in the US as we become more secular, there's an increasing tendency to look down upon and despise the church, to consider it as irrelevant, marginalized, backward.

And sometimes we can fall into that, we can, like the spies who went into the land, the people looked at us as grasshoppers and we adopted their attitude. We can begin to think of the church that way ourselves.

Brothers and sisters, the church is far from perfect right now. One day she will be, but for all her faults, for all her warts, the Church of Jesus Christ, where there meets in a lovely building like this, or somewhere with a tin roof and a dirt floor and no roof at all, is the most August society in the world.

[21 : 06] And we need to never lose our sense of the glory and beauty of the church, and the privilege that it is to be a member of her. Secondly, we may need to rehabilitate our view of the sacraments.

We can fall into two ditches. One ditch is to make it essentially a magical mechanical thing, which automatically does what I think Paul here attributes to the Spirit, automatically washes away sin and all the rest.

I think that's a terrible error. We can fall in the opposite ditch of regarding it as nothing but almost an empty symbol, when I believe it's more than that.

It is by the blessing of Christ and work of His Spirit a means of grace to His believing people. Thirdly, we need to rejoice greatly with Feng Cheng.

I'm not sure I got that right. Is that close? Who was baptized last night as a believer on the basis of her profession to the session of the church?

[22 : 07] And the baptism we'll witness in just a few moments of Flory Maher MacLeod. I'm sure I didn't pronounce that in proper Gaelic. I was surprised to find that Flory means flipper in Gaelic, but in any case, we need to rejoice greatly with these in their admission to the visible church.

Now, again, in Feng Cheng's case, it's on the basis of her profession of faith. In the case of Flory, it's on the basis of the faith of her parents and God's covenant promises to believers and their children.

And the great encouragement is they raise her in the nurturing ammunition of Christ as she's here at St. C's and partakes of the privileges that go with that. These things that are pictured and promised here will become a glorious spiritual reality in her life.

And we need to pray for her folks as they undertake these duties that the Lord will help them and bless in spite of their inevitable failures. We also need to ask ourselves some significant questions.

Am I a member of this August society? Are you a member of the Church of Jesus Christ this morning?

[23 : 19] Have you been baptized? If you've been baptized in water, then at least in name, you're a disciple of Jesus Christ.

And perhaps your name is on the roll of a church somewhere, but it raises the question, what kind of disciple are you?

If you've been baptized, you're a disciple, are you a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ? Walking closely with Him daily, that's what when He called people to discipleship, He said, follow me, walk with me, are you doing that?

Are you a fruitful disciple of Jesus Christ? Are you bearing fruit in your life to His glory? What kind of church member are you?

If you're a member of a local church, are you there regularly and faithfully to pray for the ministry of the church? Are you engaged in using your gifts and seeking to benefit from it or not?

[24 : 24] Are you despising this most august of human communities and societies? And if you're not baptized, if you're not a member of the church, why not?

Is it because you think you don't need to be saved or you think you can save yourself? Again, Paul is very clear, he saved us not on the basis of our righteous deeds because our righteousness is like filthy rags.

The only righteousness that can save us is the righteousness of Jehovah's Sotekene. Or maybe you think that you're too bad. You could never be forgiven.

God could never forgive you for all that you've done. Brothers and sisters, I read here of a washing by the Holy Spirit of rebirth and renewal. God can cleanse you and He can change you.

And He will if you look in repentance and faith to Jesus Christ. Well, every well-taught Bible student knows that the Bible is all about Jesus, Old and New Testament.

[25 : 29] I would suggest to you that it's also all about the church. It's about Christ and the church He came to redeem. That's certainly true of the book of Revelation, the book with which the Bible and the New Testament end.

It begins with a vision of Christ in the church, Christ in His glory, shining as the sun so that John the beloved disciple who leaned on his breast at the Last Supper fell at his feet as if dead.

Standing in the midst of seven golden candlesticks that we're told represent local churches, seven churches in Western Asia Minor.

But by chapter 7 of the Revelation, we get a new vision of the church in heaven. A great multitude that no one can number from every nation, kindred, tribe and tongue, gathered with the holy angels around the throne of God and the Lamb to bring praise and honor.

Dressed in robes made white because they've been washed in the blood of the Lamb and led by the Lamb as their shepherd to drink the waters of life. And the book ends with a final vision of the church.

[26 : 37] I saw a new heavens and a new earth. The old heavens, the old earth had passed away and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem coming down from heaven, out of heaven from God as a bride adorned for her husband.

I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, The tabernacle of God is among men. He will dwell among them. They will be his people and he will wipe away every tear from their eye. There should be no more death nor more pain, no more sorrow.

The first things have passed away. Brothers and sisters, here is an august society. The most august society imaginable.

Here is the full, final, glorious fruition of the Father's election, the Son's redemption, the Spirit's baptism, and the labors of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers.

Praise God that there is such a society. And may he grant for his glory and his grace that through repentance and faith in Christ and the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit, not only for a McLeod and Feng Shang, but everyone here may find a place in that august society in time and in eternity.

[28 : 03] Amen. Let us pray. Father in heaven, thank you that there is only because of your sovereign grace, a church of Jesus Christ.

Thank you for the privilege of being members of that church in a visible outward way, but also through our union with him through faith in your spirit.

May he take these seeds and bring them to abundant fruition in the life of every here. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.