

Titus 3:4-7

Dear Friends in Christ,

Most of you here today know Ephesians 2:8-9 by heart. You can say it with me if you wish. **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast.** Most of you also know at least a portion of Titus 3 by heart because Luther uses it in the Catechism in Baptism III. Like Ephesians 2, this Scripture reminds us that salvation is all God's doing, it's all grace. But here in his letter to Titus, the Holy Spirit moves Paul to include a reference to Baptism so that we might see that Baptism too is all grace.

The first thing we want to notice today as we consider this portion of the word of God is who is taking the action here. Who is the only one doing things? The answer is very clearly "God." Notice how many ways the Holy Spirit moves Paul to make this clear.

He says, **when the kindness and love of God appeared.** That's Jesus. Jesus is the kindness and love of God who appeared, who left heaven to be born of the Virgin Mary so that he could be the Savior of the world. He is proof of God's kindness. And the word that is translated "love" is the word from which we get our English word, "philanthropy." It means literally, a lover of mankind. Jesus is proof that God so loved the world, that he loves the human beings he created even though we have all rebelled against him.

Paul says that Jesus appeared. He didn't appear because someone found a lamp and rubbed it. He didn't appear because someone found some ancient incantation that, when recited, forced him to appear. There wasn't anything any human being did that forced Jesus to come to earth. It was God's eternal plan and promise of grace. **When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.**

**When the kindness and love of God appeared, he saved us.** God is the one doing the saving. And just so that we don't miss the point, the Holy Spirit has Paul add the phrase, **not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.** The Bible is very clear. If we had to save ourselves, we wouldn't be saved. One sin wipes out any righteous things we do. In God's eyes, we are either righteous, or sinners and just one sin removes you from the category of "righteous" and puts you in the category of "sinner." If we are saved it's 100% God's work, 0% our work, it depends 100% on what God does and 0% on what we do. God saved us. We don't, we can't save ourselves.

A few more phrases emphasize that God is the one taking the action when it comes to our salvation. He says that HE has poured out the Holy Spirit it on us. Again, he is the subject of the verb. He is the one taking the action. This pouring out of the Holy Spirit has been done **generously.** He hasn't held back.

He says that we are in a state of justification. We have already been declared just or not guilty, not because we deserve it, we are guilty, but because of his grace, because Jesus was declared guilty in our place. Because of Jesus God has not only refrained from giving us the punishment we deserve for our sins, but he has chosen to give us the eternal life that we don't deserve. That's what "having been justified by grace" means.

God's goal in all of this is **that we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.** When it says that God saved us, it's not saying that he saved us from financial problems, or from war, or from terrorism. It's not saying that he saved us from physical problems. His goal was to make us heirs with Jesus of eternal life. He wants us to have what Jesus had before he came to this earth and what Jesus now has since he has risen and ascended to heaven. Since this world

and everything in it will one day come to an end, he wants us to know that there is something better in store for us. He wants us to have hope, to be able to look past sickness, disease and death and have absolute confidence that one day we will stand with Jesus at the right hand of God with a risen and glorified body that will live in the presence of God for all eternity. That's why he made sure that salvation was by grace because if it were in any way dependent on us we would not have hope and confidence.

Now we know that when Jesus appeared, when we came to this earth, he came to be the savior of all people. His mission of salvation wasn't limited to the Jews. **God so loved the world. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.** When Jesus died he died for all, no one is excluded. But our sinful nature is so strong that when we hear this good news of the Gospel we are tempted to think, "except me." We are tempted to think "my sins are too great, too terrible. In fact, all the bad things that have happened to me in my life seem to be proof that God hasn't forgiven me." And Satan loves to encourage that kind of thinking. Maybe that's why God chose to give us the sacraments. You see, it really would have been enough for God simply to tell us that he has done it all for us in Jesus; that He saved us by grace. But, in the Sacraments he has given us something we can see and touch. He has given us something visible that is attached to his promise; something personal that makes us realize that God's promise of salvation in Jesus really does apply to us.

Paul says by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that **God saved us through a washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.** Jesus himself was baptized by John at the Jordan, at which time the Father declared that this was his son with whom he was well pleased and the Spirit descended in the form of a dove to assure John that Jesus was indeed the promised savior. Jesus is the one who told Nicodemus that we must be born again of water and the Spirit. Jesus is the one who commanded, not suggested but commanded, that we make disciples by **baptizing in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**

When regular every-day-water is applied to any person using the words that Jesus gave us, the Holy Spirit is at work. Through the word of God joined to the water, the Holy Spirit is being poured out. He is working in that person's heart to give them a rebirth, a spiritual birth. He is working in that person's heart to enable them and to move them to trust the promise that God is giving them, that Jesus paid for their sins; that as water washes dirt from the body, so the blood of Jesus shed on the cross has washed away the guilt of their sins; that they have been clothed with Jesus' righteousness; that they have been united with Christ and are considered by God to be heirs with Jesus of eternal life.

Our salvation is all grace. Baptism is all grace. It's a way that God assures us that we are not saved by righteous things we do, but solely, 100% by God's grace and mercy. It's God's way of providing us with the rebirth, the spiritual birth that we need in order to see this important truth and to trust it. As a result, baptism is also a washing of renewal. Every time we are reminded of our baptism we are reminded that God saved us by grace. That reminder moves us to love him, and to give him thanks and praise. And the best way that we can do that is by dedicating ourselves to serving him.

In the next verse of Titus 3, Paul says, **I want you to stress these things,** (about baptism and salvation by grace) **so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good.** Paul spends the whole chapter of Romans 6 talking about the effect Baptism has on our lives. He says, **What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?**

**Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ... Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.**

It's all grace. God saved us. We didn't save ourselves. We can't do anything to contribute to our salvation, God does it all. Baptism is not something we do to show that we believe God, it's God's way of assuring us that his grace and the salvation Jesus won applies to us personally. It's God's way of giving us the rebirth we need. It's God's way of pouring out the Holy Spirit on us. When we are reminded each day by our baptism that salvation is all God's doing, all grace, we are renewed in our desire to live our lives in a way that serves him and brings him honor, glory and praise.