

A World Under Water

by Watchman Nee

Watchman Nee's sermon emphasizes the significance of baptism as a transformative act that symbolizes a believer's exit from a corrupt world into a new creation in Christ.

Scripture: Mark 16:15

Topics: "Baptism", "Salvation"

Description

Watchman Nee emphasizes the significance of baptism in relation to salvation, arguing that Jesus' words in Mark 16:16 establish a clear order: belief followed by baptism leads to salvation. He illustrates that salvation is not merely about escaping hell or sin, but about a radical transformation and exodus from the corrupt world system dominated by Satan. Through the act of baptism, believers publicly declare their separation from the old world and their entry into a new creation in Christ. Nee uses the example of Noah's ark to show how baptism symbolizes this escape from a doomed order, highlighting the importance of taking Jesus' command seriously. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper understanding of salvation as a transition into a new realm of divine life.

Transcript

"Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned" (Mark 16:15, 16).

To many of us the form of that second sentence comes as a surprise. Jesus did not say that he who believes and is saved shall be baptized. No, he put it the other way round. He who believes and is baptized, he said, shall be saved. It is only at our peril that we change something that the Lord has said into something that he did not say.

Everything he says matters, and he means every word of it. But if this is so, then it must be a fact that only by having faith in him and being baptized are we saved. Some will be puzzled at this. What do you mean? they will protest. But do not puzzle; and do not blame me! I did not say that; my Lord said it. He it was who laid down the order: faith, then baptism, then salvation. We must not reverse it to faith, salvation, baptism, however much we might prefer it that way. What the Lord said must stand, and it is for us only to pay heed to it.

(I make no apology for taking these words of Mark 16:16 as authentic words of Jesus, though I am aware that there are critics who question them. Once in a country village I came across a tailor named Chen. He

had picked up a Gospel of Mark, and when he reached this passage which the critics all affirm does not belong to that Gospel at all, he believed and trusted in the Lord. There were no other Christians in the place and so no one to baptize him. What should he do? Then he read verse 20. God himself would confirm to him his word: that was sufficient. So in his simplicity he decided to test out one of the promises in verse 18. Accordingly he visited several neighbors who were sick. After prayer, he laid hands on them in Jesus' name and then returned home. In due course and without exception, he told me, they recovered. That satisfied him. With his faith confirmed he carried quietly on with his tailoring, where, when I came across him, he was faithfully witnessing to his Lord. (If he could take God's word seriously, must not I?)

So I repeat, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." Do you mean to tell me, you will now exclaim, that you believe in baptismal regeneration? No, indeed I do not! The Lord did not say, "Believe and be baptized and thou shalt be born again"; and since he did not say that, I have no need to believe in that. His words are: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." What therefore I do believe in is baptismal salvation.

So the question naturally arises: What does this statement mean? And what does it mean when Luke tells us that, in response to Peter's exhortation to "save yourselves from this crooked generation," then they that received his word were baptized?

To answer this we must ask ourselves first what we mean by the word "saved." I am afraid we have a very wrong idea of salvation. All that most of us know about salvation is that we shall be saved from hell and into heaven; or alternatively, that we are saved from our sins to live henceforth a holy life. But we are wrong. In Scripture we find that salvation goes further than that. For it is concerned not so much with sin and hell, or holiness and heaven, but with something else.

We know that every good gift that God offers to us is given to meet and counter a contrasting evil. He gives us justification because there is condemnation. He gives us eternal life because there is death. He offers us forgiveness because there are sins. He brings us salvation-because of what? Justification is in terms of condemnation, heaven is in terms of hell, forgiveness is in relation to sins. Then to what is salvation related? Salvation, we shall see, is related to the cosmos, the world.

Satan is the personal enemy of Christ. He works through the flesh of man to produce this pattern of things on the earth in which we have all become involved; not one of us is exempt. And this whole cosmic pattern is peculiarly at odds with God the Father. I think we all know how the three dark forces, the world, the flesh and the devil, stand in opposition to the three divine persons. The flesh is ranged against the Holy Spirit as Paraclete, Satan himself against Christ Jesus as Lord, and the world against the Father as Creator.

What we are speaking of as the cosmos always stands opposed to God as Father and Originator. His was the eternal plan in creation hinted at in the words "It was very good," a plan toward which he has not ceased to work. From before the foundation of the world he had purposed in his heart to have on earth an order of which mankind would be the pinnacle and which should freely display the character of his Son. But Satan intervened. Using this earth as his springboard and man as his tool, he usurped God's creation to make of it instead something centered in himself and reflecting his own image. Thus this alien system of things was a direct challenge to the divine plan.

So today we are confronted by two worlds, two spheres of authority, having two totally different and opposed characters. For me now it is no mere matter of a future heaven and hell; it is a question of these two worlds today, and of whether I belong to an order of things of which Christ is sovereign Lord, or to an

opposed order of things having Satan as its effective head.

Thus salvation is not so much a personal question of sins forgiven or of hell avoided. It is to be seen rather in terms of a system from which we come out. When I am saved, I make my exodus out of one whole world and my entry into another. I am saved now out of that whole organized realm which Satan has constructed in defiance of the purpose of God.

That realm, that all-embracing cosmos, has many strange facets. Sin of course has its prior place there, and worldly lusts; but no less part of it are our more estimable human standards and ways of doing things. The human mind, its culture and its philosophies, all are included, together with all the very best of humanity's social and political ideologies. Alongside these too we should doubtless place the world's religions, and among them those speckled birds, worldly Christianity and its "world Church." Wherever the power of natural man dominates, there you have an element in that system which is under the direct inspiration of Satan.

If that is the world, what then is salvation? Salvation means that I escape from that. I go out, I make an exit from that all-embracing cosmos. I belong no more to Satan's pattern of things. I set my heart on that upon which God's heart is set. I take as my goal his eternal purpose in Christ, and I step into that and am delivered from this.

He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved. What Jesus said he plainly means. I take that step of faith: I believe and am baptized, and I come out a saved man. That is salvation. So never let us regard baptism as of small concern. Tremendous things hang upon it. It is no less a question than of two violently opposing worlds and of our translation from the one into the other.

There is in Scripture another passage which brings baptism and salvation together to illustrate this theme. I allude to Chapter 3 of 1 Peter. There the apostle tells us how "the long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water" (verse 20). The water, he says, is a figure or likeness, or (as the R.V. margin reads) an antitype, of something else. "Which also in the antitype doth now save you, even baptism." So baptism, he reasons, saves us now. Clearly Peter believed in our salvation through baptism as firmly as he believed in Noah's salvation through water. Please remember, I am not saying regeneration, and I am not saying deliverance from hell or from sin. Understand clearly that we are talking here about salvation. It is not just a question of terms; it concerns our being fundamentally severed from today's world system.

To understand better what Peter means we should turn back to his source in Chapters 6 to 8 of Genesis. The picture is instructive. There in Noah's day we find a wholly corrupt world. Created first by God, the earth had become corrupted by man's act on that day when he placed himself under Satan. Sin, once introduced, had developed and run riot, until even God's Holy Spirit cried Enough! Things had reached a state where they could never be remedied; they could only be judged and removed.

So God commanded Noah to build an ark, and to bring his family and the creatures into it, and then the flood came. By it they were "lifted up above the earth" upon waters that covered "all the high mountains that were under the whole heaven." Every living thing, both man and beast, perished and those only who rode the waters in the ark were saved. The significant thing here is not just that they escaped death by drowning. That is not the point. The real point for us is that they were the only people to come out from that corrupt system of things, that world under water. Personal life is the inevitable consequence of coming out, personal perdition of staying in, but salvation is the coming out itself, not the effect of it. Note this

difference for it is a great one. Salvation is essentially a present exit from a doomed order which is Satan's.

Praise God, they came out! How? Through the waters. So today when believers are baptized they go symbolically through water, just as Noah passed in the ark through the waters of the flood. And this passage through water signifies their escape from the world, their exodus from the system of things that, with its prince, is under the divine sentence. May I say this especially to those who are being baptized today. Please remember, you are not the only one who is in the water. As you step down into the water, a whole world goes down with you. When you come up, you come up in Christ, in the ark that rides the waves, but your world stays behind. For you, that world is submerged, drowned like Noah's, put to death in the death of Christ and never to be revived. It is by baptism that you declare this. "Lord, I leave my world behind. Thy Cross separates me from it for ever!"

Speaking figuratively, therefore, when you go through the waters of baptism everything belonging to the former system of things is cut off by those waters never to return. You alone emerge. For you it is a passage into another world, a world where you will find a dove and the fresh leaves of olive trees. You go out of the world that is under judgment, into a world that is marked by newness of divine life.

I want to emphasize again that you were not the only one that went down into the water; your world went down with you. And there it stayed. From the standpoint of your new situation you will find that the water always covers the world to which you belonged before. The same flood which saved Noah and his family drowned the world in which they had once lived their lives-the very same flood. So the same water on the one hand puts you and me on salvation ground in Christ, and on the other hand buries Satan's whole system of things. Not only does your own history as a child of Adam end in your baptism; your world also ends there. In both cases it is a death and a burial with nothing resurrected. It is an end of everything.

This means that you cannot carry over anything from that former world into the new one. What belonged to that former realm of things in Adam stays there and may never be recalled. Formerly perhaps you were an employee in a shop, or a servant in a house. Or perhaps you were the master, or the manager, or director of a business. Still today you may be a master, or still a servant, but you will find that when coming to divine things, when coming to the Church of God and the service of God, there is neither bond nor free, neither employer nor employee. Again you may be a Jew or a Gentile, or any of a hundred-and-one things that were of repute-or of disrepute-in Adam. When you pass through this water, all that system of things goes, never to return. Instead you see yourself in Christ, where there is neither Jew nor Greek, barbarian nor Scythian nor anything else, but one new man. You have entered an order of things characterized by olive trees and olive leaves, whose secret is divine life. The expression "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" colors the whole future (1 Pet. 3:21). It implies that you have passed into something altogether new which God is creating. According to commentators (Robert Young Analytical Concordance of the Holy Bible), the very name Ararat means "Holy Ground." Be that as it may, we praise God that the ark which rested on that renewed earth was filled with creatures, typifying a new creation. Out of the death of Christ God brings into being an entire new creation, and in union with Christ risen he is introducing man into that. In Christ, you and I are there!

You ask me now whether it matters if we are not baptized. My only answer is that the Lord himself commanded it (Matt. 28:19). And it was a step from which he himself refused to be dissuaded (Matt. 3:13-15). Peter describes baptism as the appeal, or testimony, of a good conscience towards God (verse 21). A testimony is a declaration. So through this act you say something, you declare where you stand,

perhaps without using words but certainly by what you do. Passing through the water you proclaim to the whole universe that you have left your world behind and have entered into something utterly new. That is salvation. You take a public stand where God has placed you in Christ.

This helps to explain why in Scripture we find passages concerning salvation which are hard to interpret if we relate salvation only to hell or to sin. It illumines, for instance, the apparently difficult words of Paul and Silas to the jailer at Philippi. The man asked, "What must I do to be saved?" What will your answer be? If you are a sound evangelical preacher in the present day, you will say with assurance, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." But Paul in fact added: "thou and thy house." Do you really mean to say, I can hear you exclaim, that if I believe on the Lord Jesus, both I and my family will be saved? Now once again we must be careful. Paul did not say, Believe on the Lord Jesus and thou and thy house will have eternal life. He said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house." Remember, he is concerned with a system of things, and with the jailer's repudiation of and exit from that system. When, as head of his family, that man makes the declaration that from that day forward he and his house are going to serve the Lord, and when that declaration becomes publicly known, even people passing through the street will point in the door and say, "They are Christian folk."

That is what it means to be saved. You declare that you belong to another system of things. People point to you and say, "Oh, yes, that is a Christian family; they belong to the Lord!" That is the salvation which the Lord desires for you, that by your public testimony you declare before God, "My world has gone; I am entering into another." May the Lord give us that kind of salvation, to find ourselves uprooted entire out of the old, doomed order of things and firmly planted in the new, divine one.

For, praise God, there is a glorious positive side to all this. We are saved "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who," Peter goes on to say, "is on the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him" (verse 22). God has set his Son supreme above everything, and made all authorities his subjects. A God who can do this is well able to bring me, body and soul, into that other realm.

So, to recapitulate, we have here two worlds. On the one hand there is the world in Adam, held fast in bondage to Satan; on the other hand there is the new creation in Christ, the sphere of activity of God's Holy Spirit. How do you and I get out of the one sphere, Adam, into the other sphere, Christ? If you are uncertain how to answer that question, may I ask you another? How did you get into Adam in the first place? For the way of entry indicates the way out. You entered the sphere of Adam by being born into Adam's race. How then do you get out? Obviously by death. And how, in turn, do you enter the sphere of Christ? The answer is the same: by birth. The way of entry into the family of God is by new birth to a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Pet. 1:3). Having become united with him by the likeness of his death, you are united with him also by the likeness of his resurrection (Rom. 6:5). Death puts an end to your relationship with the old world, and resurrection brings you into living touch with this new one.

Finally, what occupies the gap? What is the steppingstone between those two worlds? Is it not burial? "We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death" (Rom. 6:4). From one point of view there is a grim finality about those words "buried into death." My history in Adam has already been concluded in the death of Christ, so that when I walk away from that burial I can say I am a "finished" man. But I can say more, for, praise God, it is no less true that there is the other side. Since "Christ was raised from the dead," when I come out of the water and walk away, I may walk "in newness of life" (6:4).

This double outcome of the Cross is implied too in the preceding words of Romans 6:3. "Are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" Here in a single sentence the two aspects of baptism are again hinted at. It is baptism into two things. First, we who believe were "baptized into his death." This is a tremendous fact, but is it all? Not by any means, for in the second place the same verse says that we were "baptized into Christ Jesus." A baptism into the death of Christ ends my relation with this world, but a baptism into Christ Jesus as a living Person, Head of a new race, opens up for me a new world of things altogether. Going into the water I simply act the whole thing out, affirming publicly that the "judgment of this world" became real to me from the day when the "lifted up" Son of man drew me to himself.

What a Gospel to preach to the whole creation!

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