

The Waters of Baptism

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

18 January 2026

Children's Talk: Let the Lord Wash Your Feet!

Today someone is getting baptised. What is baptism? Baptism is when a child's parents let everyone know that they want to raise their child as a Christian, as someone who knows who the Lord is and works to do what the Lord says. Baptism always involves putting water on the person; sometimes the person goes completely into the water! It's a little bit like a mini bath. And that's actually an important part of baptism.

Did anyone have a bath today? What about last night? Or in the past week? Bathing is something we have to do a lot. Why do we need to bathe? We get dirty every day. Sometimes it's because we spill something on ourselves or go play in the dirt. But even if we are very careful, we will still always get dirty again. So no matter how careful we are, we have to keep bathing.

Many years ago, everyone would walk around in sandals. The roads were mostly dirt and were very dusty. So they also needed to bathe, and they especially needed to wash their feet. Feet sometimes get especially dirty and can seem very gross. It wouldn't be a fun job to clean someone else's feet. But in this story, listen to who cleaned the disciples feet:

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.

...

So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. (John 13:3-5, 12-14)

Who washed their feet, maybe the dirtiest part of their bodies? The Lord did! He didn't care how dirty or stinky their feet were, he just wanted to help get them clean.

The Lord wants to help us get clean too. Not physically clean though; He wants to help us have clean hearts, minds, and actions. If you are really angry at someone, the Lord wants to help you clean up that anger. If you think someone else is really annoying and dumb, the Lord wants to help us clean up those thoughts. If you push and shove with your hands or say mean things with your words, the Lord wants to help clean up those actions. Anything we feel, think, or do that is harmful and selfish, the Lord wants to help us clean up. And that's what baptism is all about: your parents saying that they also want to help you and teach you to clean up all the bad things.

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What on earth does pouring water on someone have to do with becoming a Christian? Everything in the Lord's Word has a meaning, a symbolism, a correspondence between the physical thing itself and the spiritual reality that lies behind it. In the case of water, the correspondence is with truth. Now we could just stop there: water stands for truth, and so it makes sense to use truth in the ritual that stands for a person accepting the most basic truths of the Christian faith. But the Word does not just work on the basis of a code: the nature and qualities of water mirror the nature and quality of truth. So we are today going to look at just two aspects of water, as seen in various stories in the Word, so that we can have a better understanding of truth. The two qualities are:

1. Water quenches thirst and sustains the body
2. Water washes away dirt and grime from the body

Drinking

So first of all, water quenches thirst. We need to drink water on a regular basis. Without water we will die. The Children of Israel, wandering in the wilderness, ran out of water, and thirsted, and feared that it would be the end for them:

And the people thirsted there for water, and the people complained against Moses, and said, "Why is it you have brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"
So Moses cried out to Jehovah, saying, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me!" (Exodus 17:3-4)

Imagine the thirstiest you have ever been. Maybe on a long hike when you didn't bring enough to drink; when you've been working in the garden and lost track of time; when you've been giving it your all on a jog. Think of how dry and yet sticky your mouth gets; how you try to swallow your own saliva but it doesn't help at all;

how irritable you get when you are hot and tired and sweaty and just desperate for a drink. We can sympathize with the Children of Israel bitterly complaining to Moses about the situation.

A lack of truth on the other hand feels fairly far removed from that experience of thirst. But there's actually a direct parallel. If we think of truth as just abstract information, maybe we can still relate thirst a little bit to the experience of really really wanting to know something and not being able to find the answer even after Googling and asking ChatGPT, and it just nags at you in the back of your mind. But of course truth is more than just information: and truth from the Lord is all those things that tell us what is right or wrong, good or evil, at the most important junctures of our lives:

1. What's it like when you don't know what's right for how you raise your child who is struggling to make friends at school? That is a real desperate thirst for truth.
2. What's it like when you are trying to mend a relationship and can't tell if it's right to push back against someone and share a different perspective or if it's more important to listen and empathize? That is a real desperate thirst for truth.
3. What's it like when you have heavy responsibilities at work with pressure coming from all sides and the complex decisions lie in your hands? That is a real desperate thirst for truth.

The thirst for water is like a desperation for truth, because we need truth to live well, to live good lives, to make the choices that will bring us closer to the Lord and to other people.

And although it does not by any means always feel like it, the Lord provides these truths, just as He provided water in the wilderness for the people:

And Jehovah said to Moses, "Go on before the people, and take with you some of the elders of Israel. Also take in your hand your rod with which you struck the river, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock in Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink."

And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. (Exodus 17:5-6)

When we go to the Lord and His Word, we do receive the guidance that we are desperate for. We do learn how to raise our children, how to mend fractured relationships, how to make tough decisions that affect other people. Now that doesn't come easy, and sometimes we feel like giving up, like the children of Israel wanted to. But if we immerse ourselves in the Lord's Word, if we keep trying to learn from Him, we will start to have those insights that quench our need to know how to live well. It may be that we only realize in retrospect that the Lord has given us these truths to guide us, but when we do finally see just how much His truth has made a difference, it is like the relief of that first sip of water when you are dying of thirst. Baptism is the beginning of this learning, an introduction into the truths from and about the Lord.

Washing

The second value of water we are going to look at is for washing. We all wash on a relatively regular basis (I assume). If we don't wash, the grime and dirt and grease builds up and it starts to feel gross. If you've ever gone through a few days of water cuts, and not been able to get properly and truly clean for days, doesn't it start to feel gross just being in your body and manky clothes? And that hot shower when the water comes back on feels glorious, as does the feeling of putting on fresh clothes afterwards. The way we use water to wash relates to the way we use truth to clean up our spiritual lives. In Isaiah the Lord commanded the people:

Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes.
Cease to do evil,
Learn to do good. (Isaiah 1:16-17)

When evil builds up it makes us feel gross about ourselves and uncomfortable in ourselves, much the way we feel if we are unclean. We need to regularly wash away those evils, and we do that by means of truth.

Now *how* we do that is almost as important as that we do it. In traditional Christianity the doctrine developed that faith, by itself, washed one clean of the guilt of sin. If you had faith in the Lord, as represented in baptism, then you didn't need to feel guilt over anything in your past and could trust that you were now saved. The waters of baptism and faith in the Lord washed it all away. But the New Church says that is not at all how it works: faith, or the truths that you believe, must be combined with charity and love, and lived in your daily choices. One passage even uses the illustration of washing yourself, much like the Isaiah passage:

Man himself ought to purify himself from evils, and not wait for the Lord to do this without his cooperation. Otherwise he would be like a servant going to his master, with his face and clothes befouled with soot and dung, and saying, "Master, wash me."

Would not his master say to him, "You foolish servant, what are you saying? See, there are water, soap, and a towel; have you not hands of your own and the power to use them? Wash yourself."

So will the Lord God say, "These means of purification are from Me, and your ability to will and do are also from Me; therefore use these My gifts and endowments as your own, and you will be purified;" and so on. *True Christian Religion* §331)

If we want to become spiritually clean we can't just sit around waiting for the Lord to make it happen, we have to do something with the means and tools that the Lord gives us. Other passages make clear that those means that the Lord hands to us are truths. The purpose of truth is not just so we can know what is right and wrong; the purpose of truth is so that we can see where we ourselves have gone wrong and so we can get back onto the path of doing right!

One way of thinking of it is that you don't wash by just standing in the shower or by throwing your clothes into a bucket of water. You need to do some scrubbing, sometimes some intense scrubbing of particularly dirty spots. Knowing truth isn't enough to make you clean. You need to examine your life and then apply the truth, sometimes applying it with difficulty and great force. That's how truth cleanses us of sins. This is a real challenge: it's easy to apply truth to other people, much harder to apply it to ourselves. This is part of why we regularly have to go through the process of examining ourselves honestly and applying truth directly to ourselves.

Let's say someone examines himself and realizes that he has been stealing: not physical things, but rather stealing by making everything about himself. Whenever plans are made, it's all about him and his needs. Whenever a conversation happens he turns it to be about his experiences and ideas. It is a truth that it is wrong to steal. And so in these situations when he is inclined to steal as it were, he keeps at the forefront of his mind, "You shall not steal." He starts to practice the opposite behaviour: he becomes generous with trying to help others get what they need and creating space for them to be heard. The Lord's truth has enabled him to wash himself clean, to cease from evil and learn to do good. And in doing this the guilt of his past behaviour, the sense of shame in himself can be washed away. Not by just having faith, but by living his faith. This is the purpose of all truths: to point out where we have gone wrong and to get us back on the right track. That doesn't happen automatically by knowing the truth. It happens by regularly applying the truth, especially in hard times when temptations rise. Baptism is the beginning of this washing, the start of becoming equipped with the truths that need to be applied to life.

Baptism is only the very beginning of this lifelong process of learning truth from the Lord. Although there are infinite truths to learn and apply, it is useful to return to the most important ones, the ones contained in the questions I asked earlier today:

1. Do you acknowledge the Lord Jesus Christ to be the one God of heaven and earth?
2. Do you acknowledge that evils are to be shunned as sins against Him, and that a life of good is to be learned and lived?
3. Do you acknowledge that the Lord reveals Himself in the Sacred Scriptures and in the Heavenly Doctrine of the New Jerusalem?

These simple truths, that the Lord is our God, that evil is to be rejected and goodness lived, and that the Word and the Heavenly Doctrine are the source of these truths, are the heart of the wisdom that will quench our thirst for guidance in the toughest questions of life and of the wisdom that will enable us to become washed clean of even the worst of our evils.