

Baptism saves. That's a truth that is clearly stated in the Bible, such as in 1 Peter 3, Titus 3, Romans 6, and Galatians 3, to name a few places. And – not but, and – Baptism is a beginning. It's not a one-and-done event, a box that's checked and then forgotten. Rather, it's the beginning of the full Christian life, the reality of being part of the people of God.

We see this foreshadowed in our Old Testament reading from Joshua, and then also in our Lord's own baptism in the Jordan River. Looking at these two accounts from Holy Scripture helps us understand this great working of God, as well as gives us both confidence and direction as those who are the baptized.

Looking at the reading from Joshua, we see many examples and illustrations pointing to what God would do in Jesus. This is a very common element of the Old Testament: pointing ahead to Christ. One of the first things to note is that what is happening is in keeping with a promise that God had given.

Roughly five hundred years earlier, God had promised to Abraham that his descendants would be given the land of Canaan. As time went on, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all traveled through the land, but never got to claim it as their own. Their children went to Egypt, and for a while, it seemed that the promise might not come true, as they were forced into slavery by the Egyptians.

But God is faithful, never forgetting His promises, and when He knew that the time was right, He sent His servant Moses and brought the people out of slavery and to the land that He had promised them centuries before. Now, under Moses's successor, Joshua, the people will at last see the promise be fulfilled by God.

This same idea of God fulfilling His promises is seen in the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River. Even before the promises were made by God to Abraham about the land, God had promised the coming of the Christ, the Savior, who would deliver mankind from sin and restore them to Himself. And that promise was even longer in coming than the time that the children of Israel spent in Egypt. It was so long, in fact, than many had started to doubt it, or to reinterpret it with their own ideas, or to look for others to be their salvation.

But God is faithful, and never forgot His promise to save His people from sin and death by coming to them in the flesh. And so, centuries after the prophets had quit speaking, God raised up a new prophet in John the Baptist, and when the time was right, Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan, to be baptized by John and fulfill His promise.

When each of you were baptized, God likewise gave you a promise. He made you His child, putting His name on you, and He promised to bring you into the place He has prepared for you in His house. The new heavens and earth are the promised land that our Lord is leading all of His people toward.

Now, this journey takes a long time – your whole life, in fact. Your time spent in this life is like the Israelites wandering through the wilderness. You've been brought out of slavery to sin and death, just as the Israelites were brought out of slavery in Egypt. But you're not yet in the promised land of

heaven, just as the Israelites didn't instantly go from Egypt into Canaan. And during this time you'll be tempted to doubt, or reinterpret God's word to fit the current culture, or go seeking other saviors altogether, just as the Israelites were tempted.

But recall the words of Scripture: "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." God made a promise on the day you were baptized into His holy name, and He will never break His promise.

In addition to the promises of God found in Baptism, we also see in Scripture how God works by using men to be the agents through whom His divine power acts. When the Israelites had been brought to the banks of the Jordan, God gave Joshua very specific instructions for how they would cross over. Joshua relayed these instructions to the people: "And when the soles of the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off from flowing, and the waters coming down from above shall stand in one heap."

Here we see that it is certainly God's power at work. No man could claim that he had anything to do with the rivers of the Jordan – which we're told was then at flood stage – standing up in a heap. Totally and completely the power of God. And how did God exercise this power? Through the priests. It was when their feet entered the river that it stopped flowing.

Does this mean that the priests contributed some of their own power to stopping the river? Not at all! And could God have stopped the water in a different way? Of course He could have! But in His perfect wisdom, God ordained this specific way for the people to cross over into the Promised Land. He would work through the hands – or really, the feet – of man to exercise His almighty power.

We see this again at our Lord's baptism. Jesus has come to the Jordan to begin His public ministry. This is the moment when He will no longer be merely the carpenter's son from Nazareth. No, heaven will open, the Holy Spirit will descend, and the voice of the Father Himself will sound from glory, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

It is God who has taken on human flesh, working in ways beyond our understanding to merge the divine and the mortal while still being fully each. And this is the One who will be the Lamb of God, who will take on the sins of others, even of the whole world, and at the same time remain completely innocent Himself.

But how does the Lord of heaven and earth begin this saving work? By being baptized by John. John is completely confused, as would be any ordinary person. What good can a baptism for the remission of sins be for someone who has no sin? Or even more to the point, how can a sinner baptize God? How can the imperfect do something for the perfect?

But despite all these questions, Jesus simply tells John, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." In God's perfect wisdom and infinite knowledge, He had arranged for this to be the plan from before the foundation of the world. John the Baptist contributed nothing of himself to this miraculous act of God, and yet God had chosen to work through him nonetheless.

This teaches us how Holy Baptism works for us still today. Again, the Scripture is clear that Baptism saves, grants new life, joins to the death and resurrection of Jesus, regenerates, is the channel

for the Holy Spirit – all things that are totally beyond our ability to effect, or even completely understand, for that matter.

Can God grant these things apart from Baptism? Yes, He can. But Holy Baptism is how God has arranged for these things to ordinarily take place. Like the instructions given to Joshua to bring the people across the Jordan, Holy Baptism is how God has given for people to be brought into His Church.

And as John was merely the vehicle for God's power, so it is today with Baptism. The pastor, or whoever baptizes, is merely the person through whom God is working. Baptism is not a work of man any more than the drying up of the Jordan was the working of the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant. The only thing present in man is faith, and remember, that faith is itself a gift from God, the working of God the Holy Spirit in the heart. God uses man's hands, but it is entirely God's doing.

The last point that we'll consider today is how the texts show us that Baptism is both a saving act of God and also the beginning of the life of salvation. When God, keeping His promise and exercising His power, brought the Israelites across the Jordan, was that the end of their story? Did they just go into the Promised Land and drink milk and honey and live happily ever after? Not at all!

Note where the people crossed over: directly opposite Jericho. Right after this event would be a battle, where they would have to begin fighting to conquer the land and drive out the wicked peoples of the land. When they were faithful, the Lord preserved and blessed them. He fought for them, crushed their enemies, preserved them from those who desired their destruction, and gave them peace and provision.

It wasn't until the people took His blessings for granted, when they desired to be like the peoples around them rather than the chosen people of God, that they would be driven back and eventually taken out of the land. It was the faithlessness of the people, not God, that eventually saw them lose the promised blessing of God.

Their faithfulness is contrasted with the perfect faithfulness of Christ after His baptism. Note that the Father doesn't say, "This is my Son, and He did what He was supposed to and now He's done," and then beam Jesus back into heaven. No, after Jesus is baptized, his struggle greatly increased. Immediately following, Jesus goes out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And the path that began at His baptism led finally to His passion and death, where He would be tested incredibly and suffer far beyond anything we would endure on this earth.

Yet Jesus remained faithful, walking in the way His Father had set before Him. And the Father ensured that His Son was brought to the final destination. Despite many people wanting to kill Jesus throughout His ministry, no one succeeded until the hour that had been appointed in ages past. And even after the Son had offered up Himself as the perfect sacrifice, the Father raised Him again, showing that even death could not hold the Christ. The Father had declared Jesus to be His beloved Son, and this remained true through trial, temptation, death, and finally resurrection.

The paths of the people of Israel and of Jesus show us where our Baptism leads as well. In Baptism, we are saved. We are made God's children. We are given new lives of faith. And it is life –

something that is lived out. Like the Israelites and like Christ, we are called in our Baptism to follow the way of the Lord.

As St. Paul exhorts in Philippians, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” This doesn’t mean you’re the one earning or winning your salvation – again, that’s totally God’s work. But recognize what a precious gift it is, how much greater it is than anything this fleeting world could offer, and treat it with the reverence – fear and trembling – that such a divine gift deserves.

Yet at the same time you fear the Lord, have peace and joy when facing the world. Paul continues in the very next verse, “For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” You aren’t on your own in this world. God fights for you as He fought for His ancient people. He works within you, to bring you to desire the good and drive out the evil. And He works outside you, protecting you and providing for you every day of your life.

As He brought Jesus through death to life everlasting, He will do the same for you, because your Baptism has joined you to the death and resurrection of Christ.

In your Baptism, you have received the promises of God. The Lord poured out His almighty power on you using the hands and voices of ordinary men. And He has brought you over from death to life and set you on the path toward the eternal Promised Land. In His own Baptism, and His death and resurrection, Jesus fulfilled all righteousness, and in your Baptism, He has given that righteousness to you.

In His holy name, amen.