

# Holy Baptism

*Text: Ezekiel 16:1-22; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 26*

*Speaker: Rev. Angus Stewart*

Beloved, some of the truths of Lord's Day 26 on baptism are illustrated in Ezekiel 16. This chapter speaks of a female who represents, as verse 3 points out, Jerusalem – the capital of Judah, which really represents Israel as a whole, since the northern kingdom had already been destroyed by the Assyrians. The history of Old Testament Jerusalem, Judah, and Israel is presented here in the form of a personal narrative: the story of a woman, from birth to maturity. Her origins, her condition, her growth, and eventually – though not our focus here – her descent into harlotry.

The woman is described as a foundling – a lovely old English word for an infant who has been deserted, exposed, and left to die, only to be found by someone else. A little one cast out, helpless and unwanted, discovered by another and cared for. The girl in this story is found, given life, nurtured, and adorned – only to later fall into sin. But in this sermon, we consider her beginnings: this infant cast into the open field, polluted in her own blood, until God passed by and said unto her, "Live" (v. 6). This is the divine "This Is Your Life" – only here, nothing is airbrushed or omitted.

There are two main features in this divine biography. First, there is no attempt to cover over the bad. In fact, the sins of Jerusalem are set forth in lurid detail and dark colours. That is even the stated goal of the passage: "Son of man, cause Jerusalem to know her abominations" (v. 2). God wants His people to see the depths of their depravity, to feel shame, and to return to Him. But second, and even more profoundly, this passage magnifies the riches of God's grace. It shows us His love and mercy toward those who deserved nothing.

## Its Great Necessity

A revealing story is told of a married couple who approached a minister seeking baptism for their newborn child. They added a strange request: that the sermon avoid mentioning sin. "Children are born innocent," they said. "Isn't that what the white baptismal gown symbolises?" But the minister replied: what about the water? Water signifies washing – and washing presupposes dirt. That is the symbol that matters. You don't wash someone who is clean. Baptism is not sentimental. It is a *confession*: this child needs *cleansing*. Their

request wasn't just mistaken—it was humanism and Pelagianism, denying original sin and the necessity of grace. Such views are utterly foreign to the gospel.

Answer 69 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* puts it plainly: “Christ appointed this external washing with water, adding thereto this promise, that I am as certainly washed by His blood and Spirit from all the pollution of my soul, that is, from all my sins, as I am washed externally with water.” “Pollution” means *moral defilement*. “Filthiness” speaks of *inward sin*. And it is *in the sight of God* that this matters – not man’s opinion, but the judgment of the Holy One. Ezekiel 16 sets this before us in stark imagery.

Verse 3 reads, “Thy birth and thy nativity is of the land of Canaan.” Jerusalem was not born in Eden, but in a land full of idolatry and perversity. Leviticus 18:25 says, “the land itself vomiteth out her inhabitants.” That is where Israel was born – and where we are born too. Not in purity, but in *corruption and guilt*.

Her ancestry adds no honour. “Thy father was an Amorite, and thy mother an Hittite” (v. 3). That is, your origin is *pagan*. These nations were guilty of the abominations listed in Leviticus 18—sins so vile they defiled *the land*. The Israelites might have resented this, but it was true. Spiritually, they had nothing to boast of. Neither do we.

Even godly parents can pass on only one thing to their children: sin. Grace is not inherited. All of Adam’s children are conceived in iniquity. “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps. 51:5). That is the truth of our condition. Trace your family tree back far enough, and you will find nothing but idolaters, rebels, and sinners. No one is born holy.

Ezekiel 16:4 describes Jerusalem’s condition at birth: “Thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed in water... thou wast not salted at all, nor swaddled at all.” These are basic acts of care. But this child received none of them. Verse 5 explains why: “None eye pitied thee... but thou wast cast out in the open field.” She was not merely neglected – she was despised and exposed to die.

And she did die. Verse 6 says: “When I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said... Live.” The child was dead. And that is our spiritual state. Ephesians 2:1: “And you hath he quickened, who were *dead in trespasses and sins*.” Baptism is necessary because we are born spiritually dead. We are polluted, guilty, and helpless. Without Christ’s cleansing blood and Spirit, we perish.

## **Its Twofold Nature**

Baptism has a double meaning. It is both a *rebirth* and a *washing*. Both aspects are beautifully illustrated in Ezekiel 16.

First, regeneration. The infant lies dead in blood, and God draws near. “When I passed by thee... I said unto thee... Live.” That is the moment of quickening. That is sovereign, divine regeneration. The child did not call out to God. The child could not choose Him. She was dead. God, and God alone, gave life. “I said... Live.” That is not an offer. It is a command of sovereign power. The word of life went forth and accomplished what it said.

This is how Scripture describes the new birth. John 1:13 says believers are “born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” James 1:18 declares, “Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth.” The word “Live” in Ezekiel 16 is the word of truth. It is the word of almighty power that creates what it commands. The catechism echoes this in Answer 70: “It is to be renewed by the Holy Ghost.” That is the internal baptism – the spiritual birth signified by the sacrament.

Second, baptism is a washing. Verse 9: “Then washed I thee with water; yea, I thoroughly washed away thy blood from thee.” This infant was covered in blood and filth. God did not leave her that way. He cleansed her. Answer 70 continues: “It is to receive of God the remission of sins freely, for the sake of Christ’s blood, which He shed for us by His sacrifice upon the cross.” This is pardon. This is forgiveness. Not in symbol only, but in reality.

Water baptism, then, declares: “Your guilt is gone. Your soul has been washed. You are clean in Christ.” The sacrament is a divine seal. It is God’s testimony to the believer. Answer 69 explains: “That I am as certainly washed... from all the pollution of my soul... as I am washed externally with water.” The reality is inward, but the sign is visible and sure.

## **Its Ensuing Life**

What follows the new birth and cleansing? A new life—life with God. And Ezekiel 16 does not stop at regeneration. Verse 7 says, “I have caused thee to multiply... thou art come to excellent ornaments.” The dead child now thrives. She grows into beauty and maturity. Then comes union with God. Verse 8: “I spread my skirt over thee... and entered into a covenant with thee... and thou becamest mine.” This is the marriage of God and His people. The imagery

matches the betrothal scene in Ruth 3. God makes His own the bride He has raised from death.

Verse 10 continues: "I clothed thee also with broidered work... girded thee with fine linen... and covered thee with silk." Verse 11: "I decked thee with ornaments... bracelets... a chain... a jewel... earrings... a crown." She becomes a queen. The bride is gloriously adorned – not because of anything she had, but because of what God gave. He even fed her: "Thou didst eat fine flour and honey and oil... and thou didst prosper into a kingdom."

All this grace has a purpose. Answer 70 says: "that so we may more and more die unto sin, and lead holy and unblameable lives." This is sanctification. Those washed in Christ's blood are consecrated to holy living. Baptism is not a one-time event, but a summons to daily repentance and obedience.

Verse 14 summarises: "Thy renown went forth... for thy beauty: for it was perfect through my comeliness, which I had put upon thee." This is the beauty of holiness. Not outward adornment, but the hidden man of the heart. I Peter 3:4 describes it as "a meek and quiet spirit... of great price." Psalm 96 calls us to "worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness."

So what about us? Are we walking in the light of our baptism? Do we live as those who have been washed and renewed? Is our daily life fitting for one who is joined to Christ? Does our conduct reflect the inward grace that the sacrament signified? Answer 70 concludes: "to be members of Christ; that so we may... lead holy and unblameable lives." That is the Christian life – a life of devotion, of worship, and of holiness.

Psalm 45 speaks of this consecrated beauty: "Hearken, O daughter, and consider... forget also thine own people, and thy father's house; so shall the King greatly desire thy beauty." The bride leaves behind all others to belong to Christ alone. That is the beauty of holiness. That is baptism *lived*.

*Our Father in heaven, we thank Thee for the beautiful truths of Thy word and ask for the beauty of Thy holiness to be wrought in us, that we be stirred up by Thy Spirit to consecrate ourselves afresh to Thee. Remove from us unbelief, carnality and worldliness. Inspire us, Lord God, to live as the bride of Jesus Christ. Amen.*