

Session 3: Born of Water and the Spirit

Baptism: where the rescue reaches you

PART 1 · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that the New Testament speaks of Baptism not as a symbol of a salvation already received elsewhere, but as the moment God applies the rescue to a person: new birth, forgiveness of sins, union with Christ's death and resurrection, incorporation into his Body.

Catholic Touchstone. "Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit" (CCC 1213). Justification, the subject of the next two sessions, "is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith" (CCC 1992). This session is where the study's past tense, "you have been saved," gets a date and a place in each participant's own life.

What You Need to Know

Last week ended with God doing everything: I will sprinkle clean water upon you, I will put my spirit within you. Tonight's session opens with Jesus telling Nicodemus, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:5). Ezekiel's promise and Jesus's requirement use the same two words. Let the group make that connection themselves; it is the hinge of the night. The God who promised water and spirit through a prophet delivers water and spirit in a sacrament.

Know the New Testament's baptismal grammar cold, because it is stronger than most Catholics expect. Peter's first sermon centers its response on a command and a purpose clause (his exhortation continues through Acts 2:40): "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ **for the forgiveness of your sins**; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Ananias to Saul: "Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins" (Acts 22:16). Paul: baptized into Christ's death, buried with him, raised to walk in newness of life (Rom 6:3-4); "as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal 3:27). Peter again, in the sentence Protestant commentators wrestle with most: "Baptism... now saves you" (1 Pet 3:21). And Paul to Titus: "he saved us... by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). None of this language is decorative. The inspired writers talk about Baptism the way you talk about the thing that actually did something.

Two precisions keep the night Catholic rather than magical. First, 1 Peter 3:21 carries its own anti-magic clause: Baptism saves "not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." The water does not work like soap or like a spell; it works because God acts through it; in adults it engages the person's faith and conscience, and infants are baptized in the faith of the Church, professed on their behalf (CCC 1250, 1252). Sacraments are God's instruments, not our technology. Second, the effect can be received by an infant precisely because it is God's work and not the recipient's achievement: the whole of Session 2 was preparation for that sentence.

Finally, hold one distinction quietly in reserve; do not teach it tonight. Baptism confers an indelible spiritual mark that no sin can erase (CCC 1272), *and* the life of grace it confers is a life, which Scripture treats as something that can be wounded and even killed in the baptized. The Catechism itself says the mark remains "even if sin prevents Baptism from bearing the fruits of salvation." If a sharp participant asks tonight whether baptismal grace can be lost, do not dodge and do not lecture: say "the Church distinguishes the mark, which is forever, from the friendship, which is alive, and Sessions 7 and 8 are where we open that question with the texts in front of us." Then write it on the parking lot list. That question is the study.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

The Old Testament is soaked in baptismal foreshadowing, and the New Testament authors do the connecting themselves, which makes for superb live discovery. **The flood:** Peter says Noah's family was "saved through water," then adds, "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you" (1 Pet 3:20-21). **The Red Sea:** Paul says Israel was "baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Cor 10:1-2), the very passage your group read in Session 1; the Exodus map now pays its first dividend, because the rescue-through-water that began Israel's journey prefigures the rescue-through-water that begins ours. **Naaman:** the Syrian general, told to wash seven times in the Jordan, nearly refuses because it is too simple and the river too ordinary; when he obeys, "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child" (2 Kings 5:14): restored like a child, in the Jordan, where John would one day baptize. **Circumcision:** Paul calls Baptism the circumcision "made without hands" (Col 2:11-12); since God commanded circumcision, the sign of entry into his covenant people, for infants on the eighth day (Gen 17:12), the group can discover for themselves why the Church has never seen infant Baptism as a departure from biblical religion.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Justin Martyr

First Apology, ch. 61 (c. 155)

Writing an open explanation of Christian practice to the Roman emperor, St. Justin describes how converts are "born again" through washing in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and says this washing is called *illumination*, because those who receive it are enlightened in their understanding.

This is one of the earliest surviving descriptions of Christian Baptism outside the New Testament, and there is nothing "merely symbolic" in it: within living memory of the apostles' students, the Church is speaking of Baptism as new birth and light.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Gregory of Nazianzus

Oration 40, On Holy Baptism (381)

Preaching on Baptism, St. Gregory piles up its names in wonder: it is gift, grace, anointing, illumination, the garment of immortality, the bath of rebirth, the seal, and everything that is precious. Baptism is called gift, he explains in substance, because it is given to those who bring nothing.

The Catechism quotes this very passage in its own teaching on Baptism (CCC 1216). Sixteen centuries later, the Church still cannot say it better.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · Tertullian

On Baptism, ch. 1 (c. 200)

The early Christian writer Tertullian (a witness of the early African church, though never canonized) opens his treatise on Baptism with a famous image: "we, little fishes, after the example of our *ΙΧΘΥΣ* Jesus Christ, are born in water."

Ichthys, Greek for fish, was an early Christian acrostic: *Iēsous Christos Theou Huios Sôtēr*, "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior." The image says what the early Church ordinarily taught: Baptism, by Christ's own command, is the regenerating bath in which Christians come to life.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1213. Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through it we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God.

CCC 1263-1266. The effects, stated without hedging: all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins (1263); the baptized becomes a new creature, an adopted son of God, a member of Christ, a temple of the Holy Spirit (1265); sanctifying grace, the grace of justification, is infused (1266).

CCC 1257. "God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments." The one-sentence answer to the good thief question, and a model of Catholic precision: the sacrament is truly necessary and God is truly free.

CCC 1272. Baptism seals the Christian with an indelible spiritual mark that no sin can erase, even if sin prevents Baptism from bearing the fruits of salvation. Leader background tonight; load-bearing in Sessions 7 through 9.

CCC 1992. Justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith. The bridge into Sessions 4 and 5.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · leader only, never read aloud

Ezekiel payoff (let them find it). When John 3:5 is read, someone should remember last week's "clean water" and "new spirit." If no one does, ask innocently what tonight's two key words were promised through a prophet last week. This is the study's first full plant-and-payoff; let the group enjoy it, and tell them to stay alert, because the study will keep doing this.

Exodus map, second station. Session 1 planted the map; tonight 1 Corinthians 10:1-2 marks Baptism as the Red Sea crossing. The group is now *in the wilderness* on their own map. Do not mention what happened to the wilderness generation; that is Session 7's floor to drop.

The mark and the friendship (guard the door). If the "can baptismal grace be lost?" question surfaces, park it warmly for Sessions 7 and 8, using the mark/friendship distinction only as far as written in What You Need to Know. Do not preview the answer; the sealed guesses depend on the question staying open.

Sealed guesses. Still sealed. Session 8.

Session Goals

1. The group discovers the Ezekiel 36 / John 3:5 connection themselves: promised water and spirit, delivered water and Spirit.
2. Participants can cite at least three New Testament texts in which Baptism effects something (forgiveness, new birth, union with Christ), not merely signifies it.
3. The group works through the "just a symbol" objection at full strength and answers it from the text.
4. Participants can explain the good thief in one Catechism sentence (CCC 1257).
5. Each participant leaves intending to find and mark their own baptism date.

Time Note

Plan for 90 minutes; this is a full night. Win 12, Build 55, Send 12, prayer 6. If running long, cut **Build question 2** (fold Acts 22:16 into your own summary after question 1) and compress the **Dig Deeper** box to one spoken sentence; Naaman already lives on the Take-Home rather than in the discussion, so he costs you nothing. Never cut the Ezekiel/John discovery, the steelman chain, or the circumcision discovery: those three carry the session.

PART 2 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, through water you saved Noah, through water you led Israel out of slavery, and through water and the Holy Spirit you have given us new birth. Tonight, teach us what you did for us in Baptism, and make us grateful for a gift most of us were too young to remember receiving. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · Opening Questions

- What do you actually know about the day of your own baptism? The date, the church, who was there, any stories?
- Why do you think water shows up in so many rescue stories, in Scripture and everywhere else? What is it about water?

BUILD · Into the Text

Live discovery, first thing. Say: "Last week we read God's promise in Ezekiel 36. Tonight we start with Jesus, at night, talking to a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Read John 3:3-5. Then somebody tell me why this passage should sound familiar." Wait. Let them find it.

1. What did Jesus say is required to enter the kingdom of God, and where have we heard those two words together before?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:5). Water and spirit: the exact pair God promised through Ezekiel: "I will sprinkle clean water upon you... a new spirit I will put within you" (Ezek 36:25-26). The promise made through a prophet in exile is delivered by the Son in person. From the earliest centuries the Church has heard John 3:5 as spoken of Baptism, and the surrounding chapter agrees: immediately after this conversation, Jesus and his disciples go into the Judean countryside and people are being baptized (Jn 3:22-23).

Also notice the stakes as Jesus states them: this is entry language. Born of water and the Spirit, or no entry into the kingdom. Whatever Baptism is, Jesus does not talk about it as optional decoration.

2. Read Acts 2:38 and Acts 22:16. Peter is preaching to the crowd at Pentecost; Ananias is speaking to the newly converted Saul. In each case, what is baptism said to *do*?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Acts 2:38: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ **for the forgiveness of your sins**; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Baptism is *for* forgiveness and is joined to receiving the Spirit. Acts 22:16: "Rise and be baptized, and **wash away your sins**." Saul has already met the risen Jesus on the road, already believes, and is still told his sins are washed away in baptism.

Neither text says baptism *pictures* a forgiveness that happened elsewhere. Both attach the forgiveness to the washing.

3. Read Romans 6:3-4 and Galatians 3:27. What does Paul say happens to a person *in* baptism? Watch his prepositions.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Baptized *into* Christ Jesus, baptized *into his death*, buried *with him*, raised to walk in newness of life; "as many of you

as were baptized into Christ have **put on** Christ." Paul's prepositions are union language: baptism joins a person to Christ's dying and rising, the way being plunged under water and brought up again enacts a burial and a raising. This is why the Church says the baptized person is a "new creature" (CCC 1265). Something happened, in the strongest sense of the word.

Live discovery. Say: "Peter reaches back to the oldest water-rescue there is. Read 1 Peter 3:20-21. What Old Testament event is he pointing to, and what does he dare to say about it?"

4. What does Peter say Baptism does, and what does he immediately clarify that it is *not*?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

He points to the flood: eight persons "saved through water," and then the astonishing sentence: "Baptism, which corresponds to this, **now saves you**." The Greek word behind "corresponds to" is *antitypos*: the flood was the type, Baptism the fulfillment. Then Peter guards it from magic in the same breath: "not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, **through the resurrection of Jesus Christ**." The water is not soap and not a spell; it saves because the risen Christ acts through it and it engages the person before God.

That double move, "now saves you" plus "not as a removal of dirt," is the entire Catholic doctrine of sacraments in miniature: truly effective, never mechanical.

Build, Then Press

Leader: present this at full strength; it deserves it, because millions of sincere Christians hold it.

A Baptist friend, who loves the Lord, says: "**Baptism is an ordinance, not a means of salvation. It is the outward symbol of an inward faith, obedience after the fact, like a wedding ring: precious, commanded, but not the thing itself. Look at the evidence. Paul said 'Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel' (1 Cor 1:17); would he say that if baptism saved? And the thief on the cross was never baptized, yet Jesus promised him Paradise that very day. Salvation is by faith; water is the picture of it.**"

5. That is a serious argument from a serious Christian. Take its two proof texts in turn: read 1 Corinthians 1:13-17 in context, and Luke 23:39-43. Then answer from everything we have read tonight.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

First honor its strength: it protects grace from magic, and 1 Peter 3:21 itself makes the anti-magic point. The disagreement is not about whether God alone saves; it is about whether God has chosen to save *through* the washing he commanded.

On 1 Corinthians 1:17: read verses 13-16 and the problem comes into focus: Corinthian factions were branding themselves by their baptizer ("I belong to Paul... I belong to Cephas"). Paul thanks God he personally baptized few of them, precisely so no one could say they were baptized in his name, and he names exceptions he did baptize (Crispus, Gaius, the household of Stephanas). His point is about his role and their factions, not about baptism's power; the same Paul wrote Romans 6:3-4 and Galatians 3:27.

On the thief: the Church has an exact answer, and it is one sentence long: "God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments" (CCC 1257). The thief hung beside the Lord of the sacraments, who is free to give what his sacraments give. The Church has always confessed that the desire for Baptism, and martyrdom for Christ, bring its fruits to those who cannot receive the water (CCC 1258-1260). The exception is real, and it proves the rule rather than dissolving it: nobody argues from the thief that preaching or faith are optional; his case is extraordinary in every respect.

And to "symbol": ask the friendly question. If Baptism were only a picture, what do we do with "for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38), "wash away your sins" (Acts 22:16), "buried with him... raised" (Rom 6:4), "put on Christ" (Gal 3:27), "now saves you" (1 Pet 3:21), and "the washing of regeneration" (Titus 3:5)? A wedding ring is a fine image for what a symbol is; but Scripture talks about Baptism the way we talk about the wedding vows: the moment the thing

itself happens.

Live discovery. Say: "One more. Read Colossians 2:11-12. What does Paul compare Baptism to? Then read Genesis 17:9-12 and find the detail about when that older sign was given."

6. What is Baptism's Old Testament counterpart in Colossians 2, and what does Genesis 17 tell us about who received that sign? What follows?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Paul calls Baptism a circumcision "made without hands": in Baptism "you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God" (Col 2:11-12). Circumcision was the God-commanded sign of entry into the covenant people, and Genesis 17:12 commands it for infants on the eighth day. Children were never too young to be brought into God's covenant; their entry rested on God's covenant command, not their own comprehension; and so the Church baptizes her infants within her own professed faith.

This is why the Church baptizes infants and has from ancient times, and why Session 2 matters here: if Baptism were our achievement, an infant could not receive it. Because it is God's gift to the helpless, an infant is in some ways the *clearest* case: empty hands, receiving everything (CCC 1250 makes exactly this point: the sheer gratuitousness of grace shines forth in infant Baptism). Note honestly: Scripture nowhere narrates an infant's baptism by name; it narrates whole "households" baptized (Acts 16:15, 33; 1 Cor 1:16) and gives us the covenant logic. The practice comes to us from the Church's living tradition reading that logic, which is exactly how the apostles expected the faith to be handed on.

DIG DEEPER · One Baptism, Confessed in the Creed

In the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381), regularly professed at Sunday Mass, the Church confesses: "I confess one Baptism **for the forgiveness of sins**." The phrase is lifted straight from Peter's Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:38). When the Church wrote her creed, she did not say Baptism pictures forgiveness; she confessed it is *for* forgiveness, and she has said so at Mass ever since.

A good pocket fact: the earliest Christians argued about many things, but the broad early witness, East and West, held Baptism's saving efficacy in common.

SEND · Taking It Out

- You were probably baptized before you could remember it. How does it change things to learn that the biggest thing that ever happened to you happened before your first memory?
- Who could you tell this week about what your Baptism actually did? A godchild, a sibling, a friend who thinks Catholic baptism is empty ritual?

Live It This Week

Find the date. Call your parents or your parish and find the date of your Baptism. Write it in your Bible next to Romans 6:4, and consider marking it every year like the birthday it is.

Use the water. Each time you bless yourself with holy water entering a church this week, do it slowly, as a deliberate renewal of your Baptism.

Renew the promises. One evening this week, pray the baptismal promises: reject sin, profess the Creed, and thank God for the day he made you his own.

Closing Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Lord Jesus, in the waters of Baptism you buried our old life and raised us into yours. Thank you for the day we

cannot remember, whose seal can never be lost; keep us faithful to the grace it planted. Make what you planted in us grow, keep us close to you, and bring to the font those who are still waiting at the water's edge. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

Romans 6:4 (RSV2CE)

PART 3 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Passage	Where it is used in this session
John 3:3-5	Opening live discovery: born of water and the Spirit (Build Q1)
Ezekiel 36:25-27	Discovery target: the promised water and spirit (from Session 2)
John 3:22-23	Context: Jesus's ministry moves straight to baptizing (Q1 answer)
Acts 2:38	Baptism for the forgiveness of sins (Build Q2)
Acts 22:16	"Be baptized, and wash away your sins" (Build Q2)
Romans 6:3-4	Baptized into his death, buried and raised (Build Q3, memory verse)
Galatians 3:27	"Put on Christ" (Build Q3)
1 Peter 3:20-21	Live discovery: the flood; "Baptism... now saves you" (Build Q4)
1 Corinthians 1:13-17	Steelman text read in context (Build Q5)
Luke 23:39-43	Steelman text: the good thief (Build Q5)
Titus 3:5	"The washing of regeneration" (Q5 answer)
Colossians 2:11-12	Live discovery: circumcision made without hands (Build Q6)
Genesis 17:9-12	Discovery target: covenant sign given to infants (Build Q6)
Acts 16:15, 33; 1 Corinthians 1:16	Household baptisms (Q6 answer)
2 Kings 5:14	Naaman in the Jordan (leader background; on the Take-Home)