

## Spiritual Washing

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Now Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great and honorable man in the eyes of his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Syria. He was also a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper.... Then Naaman went with his horses and chariot, and he stood at the door of the house of Elisha. And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored to you, and you shall be clean." But Naaman became furious, and went away and said, "Indeed, I said to myself, 'He will surely come out to me, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place, and heal the leprosy.' Are not the Abanah and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?" So he turned and went away in a rage. And his servants came near and spoke to him, and said, "**My father, if the prophet had told you to do something great, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, 'Wash, and be clean'?"**

So he went down and dipped seven times in the Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. *2 Kings 5: 1, 8-14*

John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance <sup>[b]</sup>for the remission of sins. Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

Now John was clothed with camel's hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose. I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

It came to pass in those days *that* Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And immediately, coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove. Then a voice came from heaven, "You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Immediately the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness. And He was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan, and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to Him. *Mark 1:4-13*

Can you not understand that the evils which are called sins and iniquities render man unclean and impure? How can man be cleansed and purified from them except by actual repentance, and by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? Actual repentance is to examine oneself, to recognize and acknowledge one's sins, to hold oneself responsible, to confess sins before the Lord, to pray for help and power to resist them, and thus refrain from them and begin a new life; and all this you must do as if of yourselves. Do so once or twice a year, when you come to the holy communion; and afterward, whenever the sins of which you have found yourselves guilty recur, say to yourselves, 'We will not do this because it is a sin against God.' This is actual repentance. *True Christian Religion 567*

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Imagine finishing a hard day of work, tired, with sore muscles, covered with sweat and dust. What is better than standing in the shower or soaking in a deep bath, relaxing, and letting all your tension dissolve away in the soothing water? A bath can cleanse, heal, refresh and renew.

Just as we pick up dirt and odors throughout our days of work and play in this world, we also pick up negative thoughts and feelings from our spiritual environment. We have always with us both angels from heaven and evil spirits from hell. Angels flow into our inner self (if we are open to their influence) and evil spirits spew their poison and filth into our outward self. We likely have no awareness of the evil spirits' presence unless we observe our negative thoughts and feelings. If we resent other people, feel superior to them, put them down, get annoyed or angry with them, or if we feel anxious, worried, afraid, worthless, or hopeless, it may be time to wash away the resentment, worry, anger, fear, or shame with a reviving spiritual bath.

Washing our bodies has long been symbolic of spiritual washing, which is the process of removing the negative and hurtful impulses that cling to our thought and feelings as dirt clings to our bodies. Again and again the Lord invites us to experience His cleansing power.

**“Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. ...though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”** *Isaiah 1:16-18*

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; According to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. **Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.... Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow....** Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. **Create in me a clean heart,** O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. *Psalms 51:1-2,7, 9-10*

O Jerusalem, **wash your heart from wickedness,** that you may be saved. How long shall your evil thoughts lodge within you? *Jeremiah 4:14*

For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. And I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and you shall be My people, and I will be your God. And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. *Ezekiel 36: 24-29*

## Physical Washing

In ancient Israel there were many religious rituals that involved washing. Often people who did not understand that these acts were symbolic might think that those acts of physical washing could somehow make a person acceptable to God. Baptism is an example of external washing. Many Christians have thought that baptism is necessary for salvation because of the Lord's words: **“He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.”** *Mark 16:16*

Yet why would we think that the Lord was speaking only of the baptism or washing of the body and not the washing of the spirit?

The Lord's Word is very clear that washing one's body, even if it is in baptism, does nothing to remove evils from one's spirit.

"Though you wash yourself with lye, and use much soap, yet your iniquity is marked before Me," says the Lord God. *Jeremiah 2:22*

What is the washing of the hands and feet but an external affair which is of no use unless the internal is clean and pure? Nor can the internal be cleaned and purified by such a washing. *Secrets of Heaven 2162*

Everyone who thinks from any enlightenment can see that the evils of the heart and mind were not wiped away by the washing, but only the uncleanness of the body and the garments, and after this was wiped away the evils still remained. Evils cannot possibly be washed away by water, but by repentance. *Secrets of Heaven 10235.*

Surely everyone of sound reason is capable of seeing that washing our face, hands, feet, and all our limbs - even washing our whole body in a bathtub - does no more than wash away dirt so that we look clean and properly human to others. Surely everyone can understand that there is no physical act of washing that can reach our spirit and cleanse it as well. *True Christianity 672*

Therefore no matter if you wash with rainwater, dew, and the purest possible springwater, or, as the prophet says, if you are cleansed with lye, hyssop, and soap every day [[Jeremiah 2:22](#)], you will still not be purified of your wickedness unless you avail yourself of the means of regeneration that were covered in the chapters on repentance [[509-570](#)] and on reformation and regeneration [[571-625](#)]. *True Christianity 673*

People who have been baptized should be aware that baptism itself does not give them either faith or salvation but it does bear witness that they will receive faith and be saved if they are regenerated. *New Jerusalem 207*

Understanding baptism (and holy supper) depends on a knowledge of correspondences. Correspondences are like symbols, yet they are more than symbols. In baptism the water is a symbol of truth, yet it is not an arbitrary symbol. Rather there is a functional relationship between water and truth—as water cleanses our bodies, truth cleanses our minds. As water satisfies our thirst, truth satisfies our desire for understanding. The physical uses of water *correspond* to the spiritual uses of truth. There are many passages in the Word where water plainly stands for truth. As I read some of these passages, I invite you to imagine that they are like streams of water, flowing over you and through you, soothing, healing, and bearing you up.

Ho! Everyone who thirsts,  
Come to the waters;  
And you who have no money,  
Come, buy and eat.  
Yes, come, buy wine and milk  
Without money and without price. *Isaiah 55:1*

"For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven,  
And do not return there,  
But water the earth,...

<sup>11</sup> So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth;

It shall not return to Me <sup>[c]</sup>void,  
But it shall accomplish what I please,  
And it shall prosper *in the thing* for which I sent it.

*Isaiah 55:10-11*

“Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak;  
And hear, O earth, the words of my mouth.

<sup>2</sup> Let my <sup>[a]</sup>teaching drop as the rain,  
My speech distill as the dew,  
As raindrops on the tender herb,  
And as showers on the grass.

*Deuteronomy 32:1-2*

<sup>13</sup> Jesus answered and said to her, “Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, <sup>14</sup> but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.” *John 4:13-14*

Now, we don't become spiritually clean simply by knowing and understanding truth, any more than we become physically clean by looking at a lovely stream or lake. No, we have to immerse ourselves in truth and apply it to our lives. This is what we call “repentance.”

This was the message of John the Baptist. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matthew 3:2) “He went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” (Luke 3:3, Mark 1:4)

When Jesus began to preach, His first message was the same: “*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:15) He said the reason He came was to call sinners to repentance. (Mark 2:17, Matthew 9:11-13, Luke 5:32) “Unless you repent you will all perish.” (Luke 13: 1-5) Jesus repeated this message throughout His ministry, rebuking those who did not repent. (Matthew 11:20, 12:41)

Now the English word “repent” can sound harsh and threatening. Often it comes in the context of warning people that God is about to punish them. The Greek word for repent (*metanoia*) is more hopeful and encouraging. It literally means “changing your mind.” Is it better to say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” or “Change your mind, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”

One reason why the message of repentance has sounded so negative is that it has become a threat to control people's behavior. They say, “You will go to hell unless you believe what I say.” “God will punish you if you don't do what I tell you.” Yet fear of hell does not lead to repentance but to a kind of false repentance called “contrition.”

The Protestant Christian world holds that there is a certain type of anxiety, pain, and terror (which they call “contrition”) that comes over people who are going to be regenerated. It comes on before they have faith and is followed by the consolation of the Gospel.

They claim that this contrition arises in them as the result of fear of the justifiable anger of God, and therefore fear of the eternal damnation that clings to us all because of Adam's sin and because of our resulting inclination toward evil. *True Christianity 512*

It is only a thought and a confession that we have been born into the sin of Adam and into an inclination toward the evils that spring from that sin, and that therefore the wrath of God is upon us and we deserve damnation, destruction, and eternal death. Clearly, then, this contrition is not the same as repentance. *True Christianity 513*

While it is true that when we are in a hellish frame of mind we can only get out of it by having a change of heart, the fact is that *threatening people with hell does not change anyone's heart.*

No one is reformed in a state of fear because fear takes away freedom and reason or liberty and rationality. For love opens the interiors of the mind, but fear closes them, and when they have been closed, the person thinks but little, and only about what then presents itself to his consciousness or senses. All fears that invade the mind have this effect. *Divine Providence 139*

The idea of “contrition” makes repentance a matter of being afraid that we are going to hell because God is angry with us. This is much different from how the Lord portrays repentance in the New Testament. Think of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), who wasted his life with partying and sex. Then when he realized that his life was miserable, he repented. He changed his mind, and returned to his father, who “had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him,” and then prepared a celebration for his returning son. “There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:10)

Naaman came to Elisha to be cleansed of his leprosy. Naaman was looking for an impressive, magical miracle in keeping with Naaman’s own high status. Yet Elisha told Naaman to do something very simple and easy—wash in the Jordan River seven times. It is clear from Naaman’s anger and self-righteousness that he needed cleansing not only for leprosy, but also for his spiritual life. Yet the process was easy, just taking one small step at a time. The process of repentance does not bring about a sudden, miraculous change in our lives. It is accomplished little, by little. Naaman’s washing seven times describes how we have to make an effort to change not just once, but many times.

The life that leads to heaven is easier than we might think.

There is no need to walk around looking pious with a sad, tearful face and a bowed head. We can be happy and cheerful....as long as we keep God appropriately in mind and act honestly and fairly toward our neighbors. *Heaven and Hell 358*

This battle is hard only if we have given free rein to our cravings and indulged in them deliberately, or if we have stubbornly rejected the holy principles of the Word and the church. Otherwise, it is not hard. We need only resist evils in our intentions once a week or twice a month and we will notice a change. *Doctrine of Life 97*

Repentance, spiritual washing, and true baptism are not a heavy burden to bear, but a release from burdens. It is the means to renew, healing, and new beginnings, leaving behind misery and experiencing new joy.

Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. *Matthew 11:28-29*