Sermon 13 On holy baptism

Basil of Caesarea (c. AD 330–379)

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EXHORTATION TO BAPTISM. BY ST. BASIL THE GREAT.
[Translated by Francis Patrick Kenrick]

The wise Solomon, distinguishing the times for the various affairs of life, and assigning to each one what is suitable, said: "There is a time for all, and a time for every thing; a time to be born, and a time to die. But, making a slight change in the sentence of the wise man, in proclaiming to you the saving Gospel, I say to you; there is a time to die, and a time to be born. What reason is there for this inversion? Solomon treating of birth, and dissolution, in conformity with the nature of bodies, spoke of birth before death, (for it is impossible to die without being born): but as I am about to treat of spiritual regeneration, I place death before life: since it is by dying to the flesh, that we come to be born in the Spirit; as even the Lord says: "I will kill, and I will make to live. Let us then die, that we may live. Let us mortify the carnal feeling, which cannot be subject to the law of God, that a strong spiritual affection may arise in us, through which we may enjoy life and peace. Let us be buried together with Christ, who died for us, that we may arise again with Him, who proffers new life to us. For other matters there is a time peculiarly appropriate: a time for sleeping and for waking, a time for war and for peace: but the whole period of man's life is the time for baptism.

For as the body cannot live unless it breathe : neither can the soul live unless she know the Creator: for ignorance of God. is death to the soul: and he that is not baptized, is not enlightened; and without light neither can the eye perceive sensible objects, nor the soul contemplate God. All time, then, is opportune to receive salvation through baptism—night or day, hour or minute, even the least conceivable space of time. But it is just to regard as more suitable, the time which is more nearly connected with it: and what time is more closely connected with baptism than Easter day, since the day itself is a memorial of the resurrection, and baptism is the powerful means for our resurrection? On resurrection day, then, let us receive the grace by which we rise again. On this account the Church with a loud voice calls from afar her catechumens, that as she already has conceived them, she may at length usher them into life, and weaning them from the milk of catechetical instruction, give them to taste of the solid food of her dogmas. John preached a baptism of penance, and all Judea went forth to him: the Lord proclaims a baptism whereby we are adopted as

children; and which of those who hope in Him, will refuse to obey his call? That baptism was introductory: this is perfective: that separated from sin: this unites with God. The preaching of John was of one man, and he drew all to penance: and you, instructed by the prophets:

"Wash yourselves: be clean:"—admonished by the Psalmist: "Come ye to Him, and be enlightened:"— having the joyful proclamation of the Apostles: "Do penance and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost:"—invited by the Lord Himself, who says: "Come to me all you that labour and are burdened, and I will refresh you: (for all these passages have occurred in to-day's lesson)—you, I say, tarry, and hesitate, and put off. Although instructed in the divine word from your infancy, have you still not yet yielded to truth? always learning, have you not yet attained to knowledge? through life an inquirer, a seeker even to old age, when will you become a Christian? when shall we recognize you as our own? Last year you awaited the present time, and now again you put off to a future season. Take care that your promises extend not beyond the term of your life. You know not what the morrow will bring forth. Do not make promises concerning things not subject to your control. We call you, O man, to life: why do you shun the call? We invite you to partake of blessings: why do you disregard the gift? The kingdom of heaven lies open to you: he that invites you cannot deceive: the path is easy: there is no need of length of time, of expense, of toil: why do you delay? why do you refuse?

why do you fear the yoke, as a heifer that never has borne it? It is sweet: it is light: it does not hurt the neck; but it ornaments it: it is not a yoke put on forcibly: it must be cheerfully assumed. Do you perceive that Ephraim is styled a wanton heifer, because, spurning the yoke of the Law, she wanders far away? Bend then your stubborn neck: submit to the yoke of Christ, lest rejecting the yoke, and leading a loose life, you become an easy prey to wild beasts. "O taste and see that the Lord is sweet. How shall I make those who know it not, sensible of the sweetness of honey? "Taste and see. Experience is more convincing than any reasoning. The Jew does not delay circumcision, being mindful of the threat, that "every soul that,is not circumcised on the eighth day, shall be destroyed out of her people: and you delay the circumcision—not that which is made by hands, in the stripping of the flesh, but that which is accomplished in baptism, while you hear the Lord Himself: "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. And in that ceremony pain was endured, and an ulcer was caused: but in this the soul is refreshed with heavenly dew, and the ulcers of the heart are healed. Do you adore Him who died for you? Suffer then yourself to be buried with him by baptism.

Unless you be planted together with him in the likeness of his death, how will you become partner in his resurrection? Israel was baptized in Moses in the cloud, and in the sea, presenting therein types for your instruction, and sensibly exhibiting the truth which was to be shown in the latter days: and you shun baptism, not as typified in the sea, but really perfected: not in the cloud, but in the Spirit: not in Moses, a fellow-servant, but in Christ,

our Creator. Had not Israel passed the sea, he would not have escaped Pharaoh; and if you pass not through the water, you will not be delivered from the sad tyranny of the devil. Israel would not have drunk of the spiritual rock, had he not been typically baptized: nor will any give you true drink, unless you are truly baptized. He ate the bread of angels after baptism ; and how will you eat the living bread, unless you receive baptism previously? He entered into the land of promise, on account of his baptism: how can you enter into paradise, if you are not sealed by baptism? Do you not know, that an angel with a flaming sword is placed to guard the way to the tree of life—an awful and burning sword for unbelievers; but easily approached, and shining with mild radiance to believers? For according to the will of the Lord it turns: and its glittering side is presented to the faithful: its burning edge to the unsealed.

Elijah was not terrified at the sight of the chariot of fire, and the fiery steeds approaching him: but eager to ascend on high, he dared to mount the awful seat; and while yet in mortal flesh, he joyfully took the reins, to guide the flaming chariot: while you hesitate, not to mount a fiery vehicle, but to ascend into heaven through water and Spirit. Why not rather run to obey the call? Elijah showed the power of baptism on the altar of holocausts, having consumed the victim, not by fire, but by water: although the nature of fire is most opposed to water. When the water, with mysterious significance, was for the third time poured out on the altar, the fire began, and it blazed up as if fed by oil. ”And he said: Fill four buckets with water, and pour it upon the burnt offering, and upon the wood. And again he said: Do the same the second time. And when they had done it the second time, he said: Do the same also the third time: and they did so the third time. The Scripture hereby shows, that through baptism, he that approaches to God, is admitted into his household ; and that a pure and heavenly light, through faith in the Trinity, shines forth in the souls of those who approach Him. If I were distributing the gold of the Church, you would not say to me: ”I shall come to-morrow, and to-morrow you will give me some:

but at the present time, you would press for your portion, and unwillingly bear to be put off. Now that the munificent Lord offers you, not coloured earth, but purity of soul, you frame excuses, you number over many causes of delay, instead of running to receive the gift. O ! strange thing! you may be renovated without being put in the crucible: you may be formed anew, without being broken in pieces: you may be healed without suffering pain: and still, you do not value the favor. If you were the servant of men, and freedom were offered to slaves, would you not hasten at the appointed time, and engage advocates, and implore the judges, that by every possible means your freedom should be obtained? Yes, you would submit willingly to the blow given for the last time, so that you might thenceforward be free from lashes. Now the divine herald calls you to freedom, slave as you are, not of men, but of sin; that he may free you from bondage, and make you a fellow citizen of the Angels, and even, by grace, an adopted child of God, heir of the blessings of Christ: yet you allege that you have not time to receive these gifts. O! wretched impediments! base and endless occupations! How long, then, must pleasures be sought after? How long must

passion be indulged? We surely have lived long enough for the world: let us live henceforth for ourselves. What is equal in value to our soul?

What can be compared with the kingdom of heaven? What adviser should be listened to in preference to God? Who is more prudent than the All-wise? Who is more useful than He, who alone is good? Who is nearer to us than our Creator? Eve gained nothing by listening to the suggestions of the serpent, rather than to the command of God. O! senseless words! I have not time to get cured: let me not yet see the light: do not yet present me to the King. Do you not speak plainly to this effect, nay, still more absurdly? If you were loaded with debts to the treasury, and a reduction of the claim were offered to the public creditors, and some one should maliciously attempt to deprive you of the benefit proffered to all, you would be angry with him, and exclaim against him as interfering with your right to a share of the general indulgence. And now that not only the pardon of past debts, but gifts for the time to come are proclaimed, you do yourself an injury which no enemy of yours could inflict, and imagine that you have suitably provided for yourself, and adopted wise measures, by neglecting to accept forgiveness, and continuing to death laden with sins. Yet you know that even he who owed ten thousand talents, would have been entirely forgiven, had he not provoked the severity of his creditor by his inhumanity towards his fellow-servant.

We must also take care, that the same happen not to us, if, after obtaining grace, we pardon not our debtors ; which is required of us, that the gift bestowed may be perpetually preserved.

Enter into the recesses of your conscience: refresh your memory. If your sins are numerous, do not despair on account of their multitude: for where sin has abounded, grace will abound more, if you will just accept grace: to him who owes much, much also will be forgiven, that he may love the more. But if your faults are trivial and venial, and not to the death of your soul, why are you anxious about what may happen to you hereafter, while you have hitherto lived without reproach, although you were not as yet instructed in the law of Christ? Consider your soul as now placed in a scale, drawn to one side by the angels, to the other by demons. To which of them will you give the affections of your heart? What shall prevail with you? the pleasures of the flesh, or the sanctification of the Spirit? present enjoyment, or the desire of future happiness? Shall the angels receive you; or shall those who hold you now, continue to hold you fast? When preparing for battle the generals give a watchword to the soldiers, that they may the more easily call on one another for assistance, and recognize one another, should they be mixed up with others in the conflict. No one can know whether you belong to us, or to our adversaries, if you don't manifest your brotherhood by mystic signs, if the light of the countenance of the Lord is not signed upon you. How can the angel claim you?

how can he rescue you from the enemy, unless he recognize the seal? how shall you say: 'I am of God:' if you do not bear the mark? Do you not know that the destroying angel passed by the houses that were marked with blood, while he slew the first born in those that were not marked? A treasure unsealed is easily laid hold of by robbers; a sheep without a mark is carried away with impunity.

Are you young? secure your youth against vice, by the restraint which baptism imposes. Has the vigor of life passed away? Do not neglect the necessary provision for your journey: do not lose your protection: do not consider the eleventh hour, as if it were the first; since even he who is beginning life, ought to have death before his eyes. If a physician should promise you, by certain arts and devices, to change you from an old to a young man, would you not eagerly desire the day to arrive on which you would find your youthful vigor restored? Nevertheless, while baptism promises to restore to her pristine vigor your soul, which your iniquities have brought to decrepitude, and covered with wrinkles and defilements, you despise your benefactor, instead of hastening to receive the proffered boon. Are you without any solicitude to witness the miraculous change which is promised—how one grown old, and wasted away by corrupting passions, can bud forth anew, and blossom, and attain to the true bloom of youth? Baptism is the ransom of captives, the remission of debts, the death of sin, the regeneration of the soul, the robe of light, the seal which cannot be broken, the chariot to heaven, the means to attain the kingdom, the gift of adoption. Do you think that pleasure is preferable to these and such like blessings? I know the cause of your delay, although you cloak it with various pretexts.

The things themselves cry out, although you are silent. 'Allow me to use the flesh for shameful enjoyments, to wallow in the mire of pleasures, to dip my hands in blood, to plunder the property of others, to act deceitfully, to perjure, to lie; and then I shall receive baptism, when I shall cease from sin.' If sin is good, persevere in it to the end: if it is hurtful to the sinner, why do you continue in pernicious pursuits? No one that wishes to get rid of bile, should increase it by hurtful and intemperate indulgence: for the body must be cleared of what injures it, and nothing done to increase the power of disease. A ship keeps above water as long as it can bear the weight of its cargo: when overloaded it sinks. You should dread lest the same happen to you, and that your sins being exceedingly great, you suffer shipwreck, before you reach the hoped-for haven. Does not God see all that is done? Does He not perceive your secret thoughts? or does He co-operate in your iniquities? "You thought unjustly," He says, "that I shall be like to you. When you seek the friendship of a mortal man, you attract him by kind offices, saying and doing such things as you know will please him:

but wishing to be united with God, and hoping to be adopted as a son, while you do things hateful to God, and dishonor Him by the transgression of His law, do you imagine to obtain His friendship by the things which are particularly offensive to Him? Take care, lest multiplying evils in the hope of being ransomed, you increase sin, and miss pardon. 'God is not mocked!' Do not trade away grace. Pleasure is the devil's hook, dragging us to ruin: pleasure is the mother of sin: and sin is the centre of death. Pleasure is the food of the everlasting worm; for a while its enjoyment delights: but its fruits are more bitter than gall. Delay is equivalent to saying: 'Let sin first reign in me: afterwards the Lord shall reign. I will yield my members as instruments of iniquity to sin: afterwards I shall present them as instruments of justice to God.' Thus also Cain offered up sacrifices, reserving the best things for his own enjoyment, and giving those of an inferior kind to God, the Creator and

Benefactor. Because you are strong, you waste your youth in sin. When your limbs are worn out, then you will offer them to God, because you can no longer use them, but must lie by, their vigor being destroyed by inveterate disease. Continence in old age is not strictly continence, but incapacity of indulgence. A dead man is not crowned: no man is just merely because unable to commit wrong. Whilst you have strength, subject sin to reason:

for virtue consists in this, to decline from evil and do good. Mere cessation from evil of itself is worthy neither of praise nor of censure. If, on account of advanced age, you cease to do evil, it is the consequence of infirmity. We praise such as are good from choice, and such as necessity withdraws from sin. Moreover, who has marked out for you the limit of life? who has defined for you the length of old age? who is the surety on whom you rely for what is to happen to you? Do you not see infants snatched away, and others in the age of manhood carried off? Life has no fixed boundary. Why do you await that baptism should be for you as a gift brought by a fever? Will you wait until you are unable to utter the saving words, and scarcely to hear them distinctly, your malady having its seat in your head? You will not be able to raise your hands to heaven, or to stand on your feet, or to bend your knee in adoration, or to receive suitable instruction, or to confess accurately, or to enter into covenant with God, or to renounce the enemy; probably not even to follow the sacred minister in the mystic rites; so that the bystanders may doubt whether you perceive the grace, or are unconscious of what is done, and if even you do receive the grace consciously, you have but the talent, without the increase.

Imitate the eunuch. He found an instructor on the road, and he did not spurn instruction; but although he was a rich man, he caused the poor man to mount into his chariot: a grand and splendid courtier placed at his side a private individual, on whom others would look with contempt: and when he had learned the gospel of the kingdom, he embraced the faith with his heart, and did not delay to receive the seal of the Spirit. For when they drew nigh to a stream, 'behold,' he says, 'here is water:' thus showing his great joy: behold what is required: what prevents me from being baptized? Where the will is ready, there is no obstacle: for He that calls us, loves mankind, the minister is at hand, and the grace is abundant. Let the desire be sincere, and every obstacle will vanish. There is only one to hinder us, he who blocks up the path of salvation, but whom by prudence we can overcome. He causes us to tarry: let us rise to the work: he deludes us by vain promises: let us not be ignorant of his devices. For does he not suggest to commit sin to-day, and persuade us to defer justice till the morrow? Wherefore the Lord, to defeat his perverse suggestions, says to us: 'To-day, if you hear my voice.' He says: to-day for me: to-morrow for God. The Lord cries out: 'To-day hear my voice.' mark the enemy:

he does not dare counsel us utterly to abandon God, (for he knows that this were shocking to Christians,) but by fraudulent stratagems he attempts to effect his purpose. He is cunning in evil doing: he perceives that we live for the present time, and all our actions regard it. Stealing from us, then, artfully to-day, he leaves us to hope for to-morrow. Then when the morrow comes, the wicked distributor of time appears again, claiming the day for himself,

and leaving the morrow to the Lord: and thus perpetually, by using the bait of pleasure to secure for himself the present time, and proposing the future to our hopes, he takes us out of life by surprise.

I once witnessed a stratagem of a bird. Her young ones being easy to be taken, she threw herself before them, as a ready prey to the fowlers, and fluttering in view of them, she neither could be caught, nor yet did she leave them without hope of catching her: and having in various ways deluded their expectations, keeping them intent on her, and afforded to her young ones the chance of flight, at length she herself flew away. Fear lest you also be deceived in like manner, since you prefer uncertain hope to the certain opportunity of present good. Come, then, at once, to me: devote yourself entirely to the Lord: give in your name: be enrolled in the list of the church. The soldier's name is enrolled: the champion enters on the combat, after his name has been inscribed on the lists: a naturalized citizen is registered on the city books. By all these titles you are bound to give in your name, as a soldier of Christ, a champion of piety, and one who aspires to citizenship in heaven. Have it inscribed on this book, that it may be inscribed above. Learn, be instructed in the evangelical discipline,—restraint of the eyes, government of the tongue, the subduing of the body, lowliness of mind, purity of heart, annihilation of pride. When constrained to do any thing, add cheerfully something to what is exacted: when despoiled of your property, do not have recourse to litigation: repay hatred by love: when persecuted, forbear: when insulted, entreat. Be dead to sin:

be crucified together with Christ: fix your whole affection on the Lord. But these things are difficult: what good thing is easy? Who ever raised a trophy while asleep: who ever, while indulging in luxury and music, was adorned with the crowns of valor? No one, without running, can gain the prize: brave struggles merit glory: combats win crowns. "Through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of heaven: but the beatitude of the heavenly kingdom succeeds these tribulations: while the pain and sorrow of hell follow the labors of sin. If any one consider it attentively, he will find that not even the works of the devil are performed by the workers of iniquity without toil. What exertion does continence require? The voluptuous man, on the contrary, is exhausted by indulgence. Does continence diminish our strength in a like degree as detestable and unbridled passion wastes it away? Sleepless nights are, indeed, passed by those who devote themselves to vigils and prayers; but how much more wearisome are the nights of such as are wakeful for iniquity? The fear of detection, and the anxiety for indulgence, utterly take away all rest. If, fleeing the narrow path which leads to salvation, you pursue the broad way of sin, I fear lest continuing on it to the end, you come to an inn suitable to the road.

But you will say: the treasure is hard to be guarded. Be vigilant, then, brother: you have aids, if you will— prayer as a night sentinel—fasting a house guard—psalmody a guide of your soul. Take these along with you: they will keep watch with you, to guard your precious treasures. Tell me, which is it better to be rich, and anxiously to guard our wealth, or not to have any thing to preserve? No one, through fear of being despoiled of his property,

abandons it altogether. If men in each of their pursuits considered the misfortunes that may ensue, all human enterprise would cease. Agriculture is liable to the failure of the crops: shipwreck may defeat commerce: widowhood may soon follow marriage: orphanage may prevent the education of children. We, however, embark in each undertaking, cherishing the fairest hopes, and committing the realizing of them to God, who regulates all things. But you profess to venerate holiness, while in reality you continue among the reprobate. See, lest you hereafter repent of evil counsels, when your repentance may be of no avail. Let the example of the virgins serve as an admonition. Not having oil in their lamps, when they had to enter with the bridegroom into the nuptial chamber, they perceived that they were without the necessary provision: wherefore the Scripture styled them foolish, because, in going about to purchase, having spent the time in which the oil was wanted, they were, contrary to their expectations, shut out from the wedding.

Take care, lest putting off from year to year, from month to month, from day to day, and not taking with you oil to nourish your lamp, the day at length arrive to which you do not look forward, when it will be impossible to live any longer. There will be distress on all sides, and inconsolable affliction, the physicians having tried every remedy to no purpose, and your friends having lost hope. Thy breathing will be dry and difficult: a violent fever will burn and inflame your interior: you will heave deep sighs, and find no sympathy. You will utter something in low and feeble accents, and no one will hear you: every thing uttered by you will be considered raving. Who will give you baptism then? Who will remind you of it, when you will be plunged in deep lethargy? Thy relatives are disheartened: strangers care not; the friend hesitates, to remind you, fearing to disturb you: or perhaps even the physician deceives you, and you have not lost hope, being deceived by the natural love of life. It is night, and there is no attendant at hand: there is no one to baptize you. Death is impending: the demons seek to carry you off. Who will rescue you? God, whom you have spurned? But He will hear you: forsooth you now do hearken to Him! Will He give you a respite? you have made so good use of the time already given you!

Let no one deceive himself by vain words: for sudden destruction will rush upon you, and a storm of vengeance will overwhelm you. The angel sorrowful will come, and will force and drag away precipitately your soul, bound fast in sin, attached strongly to the things of life, and mourning without power of utterance, the organ of lamentation being closed. O! how you will be ready to tear yourself in pieces! how you will sigh! In vain you will repent for your omissions, in compliance with evil suggestions, when you shall see the joy of the just, at the splendid distribution of divine gifts, and the sorrow of sinners in profound darkness. What will you say, then, in the anguish of your heart? Alas! that I have neglected to cast away this heavy load of sin, when it was so easy to rid myself of it, and that I have drawn down on me this weight of woes! Alas! that I washed not away my stains, but remained defiled by sin! I should have been now with the angels of God! I should have been enjoying the delights of heaven. O! perverse counsels. For the temporary joy of sin, I am tormented for eternity! for the pleasure of the flesh, I am delivered over to fire! The judgment of God

is just. I was called; and did not obey: I was instructed; and I did not pay attention: they besought me; and I scoffed at them.

Such are the reflections you will make, bewailing your lot, if you be snatched away without baptism. O! man, either fear hell, or aim at the kingdom: do not disregard the call. Do not say: Hold me excused, for this or that reason. There can be no semblance of excuse. I am moved to tears, when I reflect that you prefer shameful actions to the great glory of God: and clinging to sin, you deprive yourself of the promised blessings, so that you may not see the good things of the heavenly Jerusalem. There are myriads of angels, the church of the first born, the thrones of Apostles, the chairs of prophets, the sceptres of patriarchs, the crowns of martyrs, the choirs of just. Conceive the desire to be enrolled with them, being washed, and sanctified by the gift of Christ: to whom be glory and power for endless ages. Amen."

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.