

## **Why Baptism Is Such a Big Deal**

**Leviticus 1:1-9 Romans 6:1-4**

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We can be glad—especially the ones baptized this morning—that we don't practice baptism today the way one group did long ago. The group wasn't actually Christian, though they did practice baptism. They belonged to a group called the mystery religions, so named because many of their practices were shrouded in secrecy. They called their baptism taurobolium. It's kind of gross. They baptized their candidates for membership by immersing them in the blood of a bull. Literally. It gives a whole new meaning to being "washed in the blood," doesn't it?

Christian baptism has always had at least a little bit of mystery about it. In the Roman Catholic Church, baptism is called a sacrament, meaning that it is a literal channel--not symbolic or figurative--a literal channel of God's grace. God is present at baptism in a way that God is not ordinarily present, they say. Some Protestant denominations believe that baptism is necessary for salvation. Regardless of what you believe, what has happened in your heart, or how you live, you cannot be "saved," they say, until you have been baptized. Then on the other end of Protestant thinking are the Quakers who don't baptize at all. They have no sacraments or ordinances in the Quaker tradition.

I hope that all of us who are Baptists know the connection between our name "Baptist" and the word "baptism." This simple act we've observed this morning has been a big deal to Baptists. During the Protestant Reformation, our forefathers and mothers embraced what was then a radical new practice: believer's baptism. They refused baptism for their infant children. They demanded that their children wait until they were old enough to understand and choose baptism for themselves. While that may not seem like a big deal to you or me, it certainly was in their day. Some of our forefathers and mothers were imprisoned because they would not permit the baptism of their infants. They were accused of child abuse. Some even died to defend what they believed to be truth. They called their battle for baptism "the watery war." It was such a passion for them that they were branded with certain nicknames meant to be derisive. The Dippers, they were called at one time, because they dipped each candidate three times—in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The name that finally stuck, though, is the Baptists.

When we walk through the waters of baptism—as Katie and Clara have done—we are making a public statement that we have embraced the life and way of Jesus of Nazareth. For Baptists, baptism is a symbolic act, the outward expression of what has happened within us. These two girls today want you and everyone else to know that they have embraced the way of Jesus. The things that he stood for they will now stand for. The causes he championed, the principles that motivated him, his devotion to personal righteousness and social justice—these will be the stakes around which their lives will turn. The rest of us celebrate their testimony and try to remember our own baptisms and the vows we made. Can you remember your baptism? It may have been in a warm pool like the one we have here. It may have been in a cold creek or a lake or a swimming pool. It may have been by sprinkling or pouring or full immersion. Remember your baptism and know that it was a big deal.

**The Apostle Paul got it right in the text from Romans 6. He describes baptism as a real—though not literal—sharing in the death of Christ.** Listen to the question he presents to the church in Rome: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus *were baptized into his death?*"

Some crazy theology was being taught in Rome. It went something like this: if God's grace comes into the world to forgive sin and you want more of God's grace in the world, then we need to sin more. It's a logical way of thinking, right? And some were saying, "Let us sin all the more so that grace may abound all the more!" But listen to what Paul says in the first two verses of our text from Romans.

*What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?*

Paul says that it is contradiction for those who have been baptized and embraced the way of Jesus to then embrace a way of life that is at odds with that. There is a disconnect, Paul says, because in our baptism we shared in the death of Christ. A part of us stayed in that water. All our failures, our life of sin—all that remains buried in the water of baptism. We've been freed from it. So Paul asks, how can we who have been set free go back to that from which we were freed?

**Now listen to what Paul says next. He says that the symbolic death that occurs in baptism is followed by resurrection.** These are Paul's words: "Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as

Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, *so we too might walk in the newness of life.*" As surely as Jesus Christ was resurrected to life, so too are those who die with Christ in baptism. Baptism is a doorway. It is entrance into the life of faith. When one rises from the waters of baptism, hair wet and disheveled, make-up smudged, a holy mess—at that moment God whispers in our ear, "Now go and walk in the newness of life. Turn loose of those things that have enslaved you, and have the courage to be free to be responsible."

I want to tell you about some people I've baptized. Now, most baptisms are fairly un-dramatic, like the two today. These two girls grew up in the church and baptism is natural. However, some have a bit more drama, like a man I baptized in Birmingham named Greg. He owns a small business. When we met, he was married and had a small son. He and his wife were having problems. They were separated, and it looked like they would divorce. He told me of how the strain of the divorce and all the other troubles in his life culminated one rainy night. Like Forrest Gump, he started running. At night. In the rain. Fully clothed. He wasn't running to any place in particular. He was just running in the rain wearing a pair of jeans and a shirt. After a while he stopped and looked at himself. Of course, he was soaked, water dripping from his chin and even his elbows, mostly from rain but also from tears. His life had not turned out as he had hoped, and he was trying to run away from it.

As he turned to walk back home, he made a decision: the next Sunday he would go to church. It turned out to be my church. Over the next few months, Greg and I became friends, and after a while, with no pressure from me, he asked to be baptized. He said that he wanted to start life again, this time with God in his life.

The day of his baptism I said those familiar words: "I baptize you, my brother, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." I dipped him into the waters of baptism and then raised him to live in the newness of life. Again, he was soaked, water dripping from his chin and elbows. But this time he had a new life, a new start. God said, "Now go and walk in the newness of life."

And then there was a woman from New York named Janet. Her years had taken her through many states and even more painful experiences. At one point, she confessed, she was a prostitute and a drug abuser. She bounced from religious experience to religious experience. Her young daughter was tragically killed when hit by an automobile, and her angry, bitter son wanted nothing to do with her. Her life was as close to a total wreck as any I have ever known.

When I met Janet she was living with a truck driver to whom she was not married. We began to talk about her life, about the pain she had experienced, the disappointment. She began to weep and said that she wanted help. I told her the only thing that I thought could help her. I told her about the love and forgiveness of Christ, and how he could help her to build a new life. She pondered that for several weeks and then, without any pressure from me, she asked to be baptized. A few weeks later her male companion asked to be baptized. A few weeks after that they were married. God said to them, "Now go and walk in the newness of life."

One other. A man named J.R. His sister called me from another state, asking that I go visit her brother who was dying of lung cancer. He was not a Christian, she said. So I called and arranged a time to go by and meet J. R. and his wife. When I walked into his house, it was filled with cigarette smoke. Why stop now, he said.

I visited J. R. weekly and we struck up a meaningful friendship. We talked about life. We talked about faith. And we talked about death. Each week he grew weaker and weaker. Finally, again without any pressure from me, he asked to be baptized. By this time, the cancer had spread through his body and he was quite weak. I'll never forget his baptism. I got into the water first and two other men stood on the side and we helped J. R. into the water. I had placed an aluminum folding chair in the water and he sat down in it. After some emotional comments by me, I pronounced the baptism liturgy, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." He then leaned forward into the water and came back up. God said to him, "Now go and walk in the newness of life."

He did for about three weeks.

Now let me say this—that is a big deal. These people found a new life. That is a big deal.

There's no mystery. Baptism is our way of saying that we belong to Christ. It is a public statement that we have embraced the life and way of Jesus of Nazareth, the outward expression of what has happened within us. Is there someone here who wants to be baptized, to have the waters of grace wash over your life? There's no pressure here, not from me, not from this church. We simply extend the invitation of the One who says, "Now go and live in the newness of life. Turn loose of those things that have enslaved you, and have the courage to be free and responsible."

### Closing Prayer

Christ our Lord, who walked through the waters of baptism yourself, we hear your call now to follow. Give us courage to do so. Amen.