

**Following Christ in Baptism**  
**Romans 6:1-11**  
**November 10, 2019**

What is baptism? What does it mean? Why do it? On our tour of Israel last March we visited the site of Jesus' baptism on the Jordan river. (Slide 1) A few of the men wanted to be baptized there and the leader took them under the waters of the Jordan and baptized them. It was a huge thrill for the men and their families. We baptize because Jesus told us to spread the good news and baptize folks in his name.

When I was just a tad younger than Oscar I was baptized at my parent's kirk in Scotland. (Slide 2) Obviously, I don't remember anything about that day as I was only a few months old. But jump ahead 18 years I experienced another baptism, this time as a person of faith. I had become a Christian in a small church in west Toronto where my brother was an elder. That night is vivid in my memory, unlike my first baptism. You might ask why twice? We Presbyterians believe that when our children are baptized the parents and god parents stand in for them before God. Then when they become of age to make their own decision, they are confirmed by the church and become members of the body of Christ officially. My second baptism was in a congregational denomination who didn't baptize infants and believed one must become a believer before baptism. Well today we baptized Oscar within the covenant of grace that Reformed communities of faith like this one, believing that he will confirm that baptism when he becomes an adult.

Following the New Testament model I was baptized as a believer. In my case it was by immersion. Now I have to confess that when I read Paul in our passage today it seems pretty obvious that going down into the water and back up again captures the spiritual shift that happens when a person becomes a Christian. Paul says: (Slide 3)

*That's what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. Each of us is raised into a light-filled world by our Father so that we can see where we're going in our new grace-sovereign country (The Message).*

In other words, becoming a believer in Jesus and entering into baptism is like shifting homes. Where we once lived, under the Lordship of self and the world, is left behind when we say yes to Jesus. We move into a new home where Jesus Christ is Lord. Our baptism symbolizes this shift in ownership, from self to Christ. We belong to him now. We have died to our old self and life and become alive, just as Jesus did in his resurrection, to God and his grace. Baptism doesn't make us a Christian; it simply signifies that we have chosen to become one. Baptism is our public confession that we have already made that move toward God in our lives. This is what Paul is getting at in our reading today.

Oscar has been given the sign of the covenant. And just as circumcision in the Old Testament signified that one belonged to God and Israel, baptism is a sign of God's claim on us. Heather and Joe, along with the god parents, Eaton & Cynthia, have promised to stand in for him, and to raise him in the faith. Without this baptism is merely a social passage.

My dear brother Nic took his son, along with family and friends, to his baptism at the cathedral Kirk in our hometown. The boy had the sentimental baptismal gown passed down from grandparents. After the service they all went back to his home to have a party. My brother or his wife never entered a church again for the rest of his life. It is no surprise that neither did the boy who was baptized. Baptism of infants is only meaningful and biblical when the parents and care givers live out the covenant of grace in their lives.

In my previous church where I served for 24 years I learned a sad statistic. Of all the parents who had been members of that church during the previous fifty or so years, fewer than two or three of their children (who had all been baptized) were connected to the faith. And we are talking about hundreds of families in a church that boasted over 600 members in 1950. How was that possible? The reality is that infant baptism had papered over the cracks in the theological system by which we lived.

Baptism is supposed to signify a very different picture from this. Paul is anxious for his readers to realize that believing in Jesus means that life now moves to the beat of a different drummer. We can no longer

be held captive to the things that shaped our lives before we accepted Jesus as our Lord. He says: **(Slide 4)** *If we've left the country where sin is sovereign, how can we still live in our old house there? Or didn't you realize we packed up and left there for good? That is what happened in baptism. When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace—a new life in a new land!*

I don't know why that message connected with me right at that moment in my young life. Perhaps I was feeling vulnerable having just moved to a new country and the security of family and friends had been left behind. All I know is that I was open to the message. I wonder sometimes what would have happened had I stayed in Scotland. Would I have heard the message? And if I had would I have been receptive? I simply don't know! What I do know is that from that moment on in my life I could say, "once I was blind but now I see."

What about you today? Have you been searching for something more than life seems to be offering you? Are you open to exploring this message of Jesus?

The Psalmist has reached a point in his life when he can look back and see how God has secured his life. He sings: **(Slide 5)** *I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.*

I'm not suggesting that one needs to be in a desolate place in life in order to hear this strange news about God in Christ dying for us. But perhaps it is when we are out of our comfort zone, when we are feeling a bit lost and confused, when the messages from society no longer seem true, it is then that God can break into our lives with grace and power. This man says at the end of his song that he is poor and needy. It is when he reaches the bottom, when all the usual supports are gone; it's then that he remembers whom he belongs to. He shifts his focus back to God and remembers how supportive, how

faithful and reliable God has been in his life. Both Paul and this Psalmist are singing from the same song sheet. I hope you are too.

Our baptism, whether as a child or as an adult, signifies that we belong to a new master. We are either immersed in the water or it is sprinkled on our heads as we did today. Both are done in the name of the Trinity, Father, Son and Spirit, and under the sign of the cross. The water reminds us of the cleansing power that faith in Christ possesses. It doesn't mean that we live perfectly and without mistakes and failures. We are still sinners saved by grace as the New Testament never tires reminding us. But we certainly now seek to live out that baptism in our ethics, our relationships, our goals and indeed in every corner of our lives.

If you are a person who is seeking, wondering, searching for answers, I invite you to consider this story of God's love for us in Christ; it is a story of God's love for the human family and this love is demonstrated powerfully on the cross. Consider this good news story as a way home for us, to the place we have all been searching for, even when we weren't aware of it. If you are a person, like me, whose baptism is far back in our past, then I trust that our reflection today will help jog our memory and fire our determination to live as Paul asks us to here in our reading: *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 newness of life.*

Let us remember our baptism and give thanks.

***Amen***