

# Baptized with Jesus

Romans 6:3-14

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As we have been working our way through the book of Romans, we have consistently talked about how Paul is building an argument throughout the book. That process continues in our passage today, although we will also see Paul finally begin to move into some application from these truths he has been teaching thus far. Paul wanted his readers to think clearly about the issues he's mentioned so that when it came time to put things into practice, they would think about them correctly. In our passage today, Paul continues his argument for a bit before getting to his application, so let's dig in.

## Baptized into Christ

Last week, we looked at the first two verses of Romans chapter 6, where Paul addressed the objection that the gospel of grace leads to people indulging their sinful desires. He anticipated that some would twist his words to say that if we are saved by grace alone, as Paul described, then sin is actually good because it leads to more grace, and thus greater glory for God.

Paul's answer to that charge was to point to the fact that his statements about grace cannot be separated from the rest of his argument in chapter 5. He argued that when we became part of Jesus' family, we ceased to be part of Adam's. In a sense, the old person who was enslaved by sin was dead, and a new person was living in Christ. Therefore, Paul says, Christians will not continue in a life of sin—because that's not who we are anymore! It's like when a person marries into the royal family. They are no longer seen as a commoner and are expected to act like royalty. If that is true for human kings and queens, how much more is it true for members of God's family!

Having made that argument, Paul continues with these words in verses 3 and 4,  
<sup>3</sup>Or have you forgotten that when we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we joined him in his death? <sup>4</sup>For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives. (Romans 6:3-4, NLT)

You may have picked up on a somewhat surprising word in these verses—baptism. Why does Paul now speak of baptism? These verses have led to much debate and disagreement amongst believers, so I want to slow down and unpack what I think Paul is really saying here.

Before we try to understand what Paul is saying, we must acknowledge a difficult truth. None of us comes to scripture without bias. Each of us has certain experiences, beliefs, desires, and expectations that influence how we might interpret a given passage. As I have read the various commentators make their arguments about how best to understand this passage, it is usually relatively easy to identify their biases.

Those who subscribe to a believer's baptism by immersion viewpoint invariably see this passage as supporting that view. They argue that Paul's description here only makes sense if He is referring to baptism by immersion.

Those who believe in infant baptism argue that clearly this cannot refer to the physical rite of baptism, because what Paul describes does not make sense with their view. These people therefore conclude that what Paul is saying is more symbolic than anything else.

And there is yet another camp that believes baptism is essential for salvation and that the process of salvation is not complete until we have responded with baptism. These people lean heavily upon these verses, arguing that Paul says baptism is what unites us to Christ.

As I tried to make sense of this, I had to be honest about my own biases. I grew up in this church, where infant baptisms happened occasionally, but believer's baptism by immersion was the norm. When I went to college, I became involved in a Southern Baptist church and ministry that insisted that the only acceptable form of baptism was for believers, and by immersion. They taught that if you got "baptized" before you got saved, then you didn't get baptized, you just got wet. I attended a Southern Baptist seminary that held a similar view. Personally, I find believer's baptism to make the most sense to me, and I believe immersion is the most vivid picture of what Christ does in our lives. But I don't believe the scriptures are really concerned about the mechanics of baptism, because nowhere is there an instruction manual for how to properly perform the ritual. If you've read through the ceremonial laws in the Old Testament, you know that if the specific details were important, they'd have been given to us! This leads me to believe that the greater concern is not the mechanism of baptism, but the heart behind it and what happens when we participate in it.

So, now that you know my own personal biases (and you've hopefully identified your own), what was Paul saying? I do not think Paul is saying that the act of baptism itself causes us to be identified with Christ. I understand how people can conclude that from these verses, but a good principle is to use scripture to interpret scripture, and other places in the Bible (including the rest of Romans!) lead us to a different conclusion. Since we must assume that Paul didn't contradict himself, he must mean something different here.

Paul talks about baptism in another place that might help us to understand what he is saying here.

I don't want you to forget, dear brothers and sisters, about our ancestors in the wilderness long ago. All of them were guided by a cloud that moved ahead of them, and all of them walked through the sea on dry ground. <sup>2</sup> In the cloud and in the sea, all of them were baptized as followers of Moses. (1 Corinthians 10:1-2, NLT)

Here Paul speaks of the Israelites in the wilderness being baptized as followers of Moses when they followed the cloud that guided them by day and when they walked through the Red Sea on dry ground. But when the people walked through the Red Sea, the only people who were covered by water were Pharaoh's soldiers! So, what does Paul mean when he says the Israelites were baptized as followers of Moses?

I think Paul is using baptism to point to our identification with Christ (or Moses). Baptism is supposed to be an act of obedience and identification with Christ. In our society, getting baptized doesn't mean much outside of the Church. But in first century Rome (and in many places around the world still today), choosing to be baptized and publicly identifying yourself with Jesus Christ has a profound practical impact. For many, their lives are forever changed. They are disowned by their families, they may lose business in the community, they may be harassed and even killed for this act. What mattered was not the mechanics of the act or how much water was used, it was their willingness to stand together with Christ.

This, I believe, fits with Paul's description of baptism here. When the Israelites passed through the sea, there was no going back. They had entered a new life once and for all. The same is true for the Christian. Baptism is intended to be a sign that we are identifying ourselves with Jesus. It is a commitment from which we cannot come back.

I believe that is the sense in which Paul uses baptism. He views baptism as part of the life of a Christian. A Christian trusts Jesus, repents of their sin, receives the Holy Spirit, gets baptized, and follows Christ for the rest of their lives. These things go together and cannot really be separated. As such, I think Paul is not talking so much about the act of baptism, but that he uses baptism to refer to the big picture of what God does in the life of a Christian. His point is that when we are united with Christ we die with Him to our old, sinful lives, and are raised again to a new life that starts now and lasts forever. It is also a reminder that though these earthly bodies will eventually die, we will be resurrected with heavenly bodies to live with Christ in Heaven.

Paul, in referring to baptism is continuing the argument he began in verses 1 and 2—when we are united to Christ, we are reborn into a new life. We are no longer who we once were, we are new creations entirely. I believe that looking to this passage to bolster a particular view of baptism misses Paul's point (and his intention) entirely.

### **The Results of this Baptism**

I believe if we follow Paul's line of reasoning here, we discover that Paul is essentially saying the same thing in verses 1 and 2, verses 3 and 4, and now also verses 5-11.

<sup>5</sup> Since we have been united with him in his death, we will also be raised to life as he was. <sup>6</sup> We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin. <sup>7</sup> For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin. <sup>8</sup> And since we died with Christ, we know we will also live with him. <sup>9</sup> We are sure of this because Christ was raised from the dead, and he will never die again. Death no longer has any power over him. <sup>10</sup> When he died, he died once to break the power of sin. But

now that he lives, he lives for the glory of God. <sup>11</sup> So you also should consider yourselves to be dead to the power of sin and alive to God through Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:5-11,NLT)

In these verses, Paul continues to point to the parallels between us and Jesus. He is showing us that we are no longer part of Adam's family and lineage; we are part of Jesus' family and lineage. As such, we are like Jesus, and no longer like Adam.

Paul lists several parallels for us.

**First, our old lives are gone.** Paul says that our old, sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. This is the same argument he's been making. Who we were before is gone, and now we are new people.

Paul's statement that our sinful selves have died and that we are no longer slaves to sin is perplexing to many. What does this mean? I believe Saint Augustine had a helpful approach to explaining what this means. Augustine wrote in Latin, but we'll look at his explanation in English.

He said that prior to the fall, Adam was able to sin, but had not sinned. After the fall, humanity became slaves to sin and thus we became unable to not sin. Because of Jesus, we are delivered from that slavery and now we are able to not sin. But we cannot say that we are not able to sin...yet. That final stage will only happen once we have been glorified and live with Jesus in heaven.

So, what Paul is saying is that now we do not have to be controlled by sin. It will continue to exert influence on our lives, but we now have the freedom to resist it and go in a different direction.

The second parallel is **we will live with Him**. This truth has a dual meaning and application. The first one, which most of us think of is the fact that when our lives on this earth come to an end, we will continue to live with Christ in Heaven for all of eternity. In other words, we know that Jesus has given us power over death, so that we will live even though we die. This is great news! It gives us confidence as we face death and gives us perspective as we live this life.

But there is another sense that we must not overlook. The other sense says that not only will we live with Christ in the future, but we live with Christ right now. And like Jesus, we are to live in obedience to the Father. That is not something we are supposed to wait until Heaven to do, it is something we are to do even now. The comforting truth in this is the reality that we do not have to live in our own strength, but that Christ is with us. He is helping us as we walk with Him each day.

In verse 11, we see Paul change his approach a little bit. He now gives his readers some instruction, saying that we should consider ourselves to be dead to the power of sin and alive to the power of Christ.

At first, this might seem like just saying that we need to have a positive mental attitude. We just need to believe that we are free from the power of sin, and then we will be—we can manifest our own freedom through the power of our thinking. That sounds a lot like what the new age thinkers of our day say. So, is that what Paul is saying?

Not at all! Remember, Paul has told us that we *have died* to sin. It is in the past. It is over and done with. I believe he is simply telling us that we need to keep reminding ourselves of what is true! We become so used to sinning that we sometimes feel like we are trapped and have no other choice. But he is urging us to keep telling ourselves the truth—we are not who we used to be; we are a new creation with the power to go in a different direction. Paul is telling us to live in light of the freedom we know is ours. Keep reminding yourself that you are free, and then live like it!

## Paul's Application

In the concluding verses of this section, Paul does something he hasn't done yet in the book of Romans. He gives some practical applications and exhortations of what we are supposed to do in light of what he's said. Up to this point, Paul has just been building a case, but now he is moving to the application of these truths. Verses 12-14 are direct, but very practical.

<sup>12</sup> Do not let sin control the way you live; do not give in to sinful desires. <sup>13</sup> Do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin. Instead, give yourselves completely to God, for you were dead, but now you have new life. So use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God.

<sup>14</sup> Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace. (Romans 6:12-14, NLT)

These exhortations are the natural conclusion to what Paul has said. He has told us that we are dead to sin, so now he is telling us to live like that's true! He tells us to resist the temptation to sin and instead live in obedience with the Lord.

In verse 13, Paul says not to let any part of our bodies become an instrument of evil, but instead to give ourselves completely to God.

James Montgomery Boice, the late preacher from Philadelphia had a very helpful way of looking at the command to not let any part of our bodies become an instrument of evil, so I am going to use his divisions of the body to speak of how we can put Paul's instructions into practice in our lives.<sup>1</sup>

**First, we must guard our minds.** Many times, when we think of sin, we think primarily of things we do. But the reality is that sin usually starts in our minds. It starts with what we think. If we want to keep our minds from becoming an instrument of evil, we must

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<sup>1</sup> The divisions of body parts (though not the applications) come from: Boice, James Montgomery. *Romans: The Reign of Grace*. Vol. 2. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991—.

choose carefully what we allow our minds to dwell upon. We are in control of what we think about, though we often don't realize it. So, we need to choose to think about things that are good and godly, rather than simply following along with the mindset of our society today. This means meditating on the things we know to be true from God's Word and reciting those truths to ourselves, lest we be taken in by the mantras and lies of our day. The first battlefield is our minds, and we must not neglect that part of our body.

**Second, is our eyes and ears.** What we choose to watch and listen to has a profound effect on the way we think. If we choose to watch things that treat people as objects, we will begin to think of people as objects. If we listen to people who are constantly angry see crises in everything because it gets them ratings, we will find that we become angry and see everything as a crisis as well. It might be helpful to think of the things we watch and listen to as a diet for our mind. If we feed our mind worldly thinking, we should not be surprised when that becomes our thinking. We should be intentional about feeding our minds truth, about watching and listening to things that encourage us toward Christ, toward a focus on His kingdom, rather than toward something else.

**Third, is our tongues.** James speaks extensively about the need to control our tongues. The challenge is that what comes out of our mouths is often a reflection of what is in our minds! And much of the time we speak without really thinking through what we are saying and how that affects others. We must remember the power that our tongues have. We have the power to build people up or tear them down by what we say. We can point people to Jesus or turn them away from Him by what comes out of our mouths. We must be diligent to ensure that our tongues do not become an instrument of evil but are used for the glory of God.

**Finally, is our hands and feet.** We can be engaged in all sorts of activities—and most of us are. Each of us has skills and abilities. We devote our energies to all sorts of things. The question is what are we doing, and why? Are we using our skills, abilities, time, energy, resources, etc. for things that honor the Lord or for ourselves? Are we focusing on serving others or only on making things easier for us? Do we serve the Lord, or do we simply do what everyone else is doing? Are we focused on honoring the Lord or our own entertainment? Once more, Paul is telling us to be intentional with what we do, because everything we do can either be an instrument of evil or an instrument of service to God. We must guard our hands and our feet to keep them from being lazy, idle, or involved in things that distract from the things of God.

Paul's point in these verses is to help us move from theory to practice. He is showing us that because of Jesus, we are forgiven and we are able to walk in an entirely new direction! But we have all developed patterns of thinking and acting that are consistent with people who are slaves to sin. He is calling us to not only understand the truths he is teaching, but to embrace them and live in the light of them. He wants us to experience the joy and freedom that comes from knowing that Christ has saved us so that we might live our lives together with Him!

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