

“Sentenced to Death by Baptism”

Romans 6:1-11

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?” Such poignant words from the Apostle as he proclaims the good news of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, a faith that is effected by the Word and the waters of Baptism. On the day we acknowledge the Baptism of our Lord, we are reminded of the importance and efficacy of those waters. In our baptisms, all of our sins were washed away, but in Jesus’ baptism, all of those sins were washed onto Him. Our baptisms made us white in the blood of the Lamb, removing the stain of sin that condemned us. Our Savior’s baptism was the moment when His ministry began as He took every sin of the world upon Himself and bore that stain to the cross for our salvation. He went there to die, so that we might live, and in our baptisms we are made partakers of that victory as those who have been baptized into His death.

In the criminal justice system, a guilty person must face a sentencing before a judge once they are convicted. And for the most heinous of crimes, the sentence is very often one of death. For their crimes committed against society, they are sentenced to die as punishment for their transgression. As believers, we also have been sentenced to death, as it were. For our crimes of unrighteousness and sin, we have been sentenced to die, but, as believers, ours is a different kind of death – we have been sentenced to death by baptism. In those waters, our old Adam was killed, dead to sin in Christ, in order that we might share in His resurrection on the last day. We are identified in our faith by way of our baptisms, and it is Christ’s death, burial and resurrection that define us as Christians. But while our sentence of death by baptism has been carried out, and we are now dead to sin but alive in Christ, we live in this “now, not yet” tension as we await the fulfillment of our baptismal identity in Christ when He returns again in glory.

It is important for us to make a distinction between death for sin, death to sin, and our dying with Christ in baptism. When we think about death for sin, our thoughts will typically go straight to the Law. And Paul makes it plain in 2 Corinthians that the “letter” of the Law kills, and that is its purpose. It shows us our sin and condemns sinners to hell. It is not given to save, as the Pharisees have long taught the Jews to believe. When Adam and the woman were cast out of the garden, the sentence of death for our transgressions was sealed. Nothing in our power can change the reality of that fate. If left to face the Judge alone and be held accountable to our own works when we come to

the day of judgment, we will find ourselves cast out into the darkness, into a place where there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” as we read in Matthew’s Gospel.

We can see this in Exodus 32:9-10 when the Lord says to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.” The people of Israel transgressed the Law, which Yahweh laid before them, to have no other gods before Him. For their sin of idolatry, He would consume them and destroy them, left to stand alone to face His judgment. Death would be their punishment for their sin, a death to be followed by eternal agony separated from God.

But the Israelites were not alone. As a type and prefiguring of Christ, Moses interceded before the Lord on their behalf and called on the Lord to fulfill His promises saying, “Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.’” In the face of certain judgment, God fulfilled His promise of forgiveness to His people, because of Moses’ intercession.

Just like God’s people in the wilderness, what we all deserve is death and eternal fire for our sin. What we have received is the free gift of salvation offered to us on behalf of Christ’s intercession, who died that death which we deserve. His holy, innocent blood is the cost of our salvation, and He paid it willingly on the cross at Calvary. In baptism, the righteousness of Christ is appropriated to us, burying our sinful unrighteousness and raising us up to walk in “newness of life.” And understanding that we ought to die for our sin, being dead in our trespasses and worthless before the Father, we know what it means to die to sin, and be alive in Christ.

We are dead to sin by His gracious gift. Just as one cannot be awakened from physical death by the shaking of a loved one, sin cannot awaken us who have died with Christ and now live in His grace. That is what it means to have died to sin. Just as one who is dead can no longer live and breathe in the world, we who are dead to sin can no longer live and breathe in sin when we cling to the truth of Jesus and the forgiveness He won for us in His death on the cross. And it is in His death that we die to sin, because He died for our sin. In baptism, we receive God’s purifying forgiveness and are guaranteed our entry into the land that was promised. We receive these gifts because we have already died with Christ. It is a temporal fact that has already been realized in our washing of water and the Word. So, we live in the “now” of that death, connecting us directly to a historical event that occurred almost 2000 years ago. But we also live in the

anticipation of the “not yet” truth of our share in the resurrection of Christ when the Son of Man comes again in glory.

As we await the glorious coming of that day, we must battle sin on a daily basis here in our time. The Holy Spirit, given to us in our baptisms, brings us the gift of God’s holy Word, which is our weapon in this battle. “For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword...,” as we read in Hebrews 4:12. Being dead to sin does not mean we do not still have to fight against it, but that we willingly stand in the trenches, side by side with fellow Christians. We battle against the devil and his demons, clothed in the righteousness of Christ, one with our Savior and with each other, daily drowning ourselves in our baptisms to kill the Old Adam that still lives in us, as Luther says in the Large Catechism.

Having died to sin, we now walk in newness of life, ready to show the world the joy we have received in the gift of water and Word. As Christians, we are called to love one another, just as Christ has loved us, and we love one another by sharing in His means of Grace. In our proclaiming of the Gospel to all who would hear, the Holy Spirit brings hearts to faith and to the font, and begets a new man who will receive the very body and blood of Christ in the Supper. The believer joins with the entire communion of saints to receive the joyous and blessed gift of forgiveness that brings with it the assurance of eternal life before the face of God. They have become one with Christ in those baptismal waters, and as we are all members of the body of Christ, they have become one with all those who believe in justification through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross.

Paul brings baptism to the forefront of the believer’s faith in his letter to the Romans. It cannot be escaped that we become one with Christ and each other in the floodwaters of grace poured out on us by the Holy Spirit in that moment. He further solidifies it in his letter to the Ephesians, chapter 4, where the Apostle writes:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

It is in this one baptism that we all hold fast to each other and to our Lord. It is the baptismal boat of faith that keeps us afloat in the faithless waters of this world. And it is the gift that was inaugurated when the Baptizer washed our sins onto our Lord in the waters of the Jordan.

The struggle of every believer is that we are still living and breathing in this sinful world. This is the reality of living as a Christian in what seems like such a desolate and hopeless place. Constantly beaten down by the power of sin, death, and the devil, we find ourselves desperate for help. And our help comes by God pulling us out of the drowning cesspool of sin, and drowning us instead in the pure waters of His regenerative Word of absolution. He declares of us, as He declares of Christ in our Gospel lesson, “You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased.” In our baptisms, we become sons of God, heirs to the Kingdom as one with Jesus. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:17, “But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with Him.” That oneness in the Lord in which we all share, as one with each other, is the wondrous truth that we are baptized children of God. It is in those baptismal waters that we become one. Having received our sentence of death by baptism and having died together with Christ, we will thus be raised up to eternal life together on the last day. And by the blessed gift of faith in Jesus, and by our election to His grace, we will live together with all the saints in His heavenly glory for all eternity. Amen.