

## **PRACTICING BAPTISM**

By Pastor Gary Brouwers

### **The Gift of Baptism - Explanation of the sacrament of baptism**

God reveals the truth about His character and His work primarily through scripture, but He also knows we need help understanding those truths. To bring His truth deeper into our minds and hearts, God gives us sacraments, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and the sacrament of baptism. In both, God provides a physical experience of the gospel. He allows us to touch and taste and see and smell the gospel that we hear from scripture. Through the sacraments, God changes us. He nourishes our faith, He strengthens our conviction, and He transforms us more and more into the likeness of Jesus. We don't fully understand what God is doing through the sacraments. God's work is a mystery, beyond our comprehension.

Repeatedly, we experience God's truth through frequent celebrations of the Lord's Supper. We regularly return to the table to be reminded of the sacrifice of Jesus, the nourishment of His life, and the unity of the body of Christ. The nature of this sacrament includes automatic reminders from our elders, pastors, or worship teams that return and engage with the gospel through the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

The sacrament of baptism is different. We receive God's promises in our baptism, whether as a child or when we're older, but too often, we live this sacrament in the past. We struggle to experience our baptisms in the present. We might be encouraged to think about our baptisms as we witness someone else being baptized, but sometimes we can go for months or even years without a reminder. The nature of baptism does not include automatic and regular reminders to engage with the gospel through this sacrament. As a result, the truths communicated in our baptisms can fade, we can begin to forget that our sins have been washed away through the blood of Jesus, that sin no longer has power over us, and that we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

However, with the support of the church, and some intentionality on our part, we can develop a structure that encourages us to remember and experience God's work in the sacrament of baptism. By reconnecting with our own baptisms, we grow deeper in our awareness the covenant God made with His people. We find joy, courage, freedom, and peace as the truths of our baptisms are refreshed.

For many, remembering our baptisms might feel unfamiliar and unnecessary. However, God's people have always benefited from intentional reminders that

keep God's truth fresh in our minds. In the Old Testament, feasts and festivals were scheduled throughout the year. Memorials of uncut stone were set up to remind the people of God's powerful interventions. God established the Sabbath as a weekly reminder of our dependence on God. It is normal for God's people to use ritual and practices to renew our awareness of God's work in our life.

Now, here, we have an opportunity to practice our baptisms, to be reminded that we live under the covenant promise, that God is our God, and we are His people, baptized into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

### **How and Why - Types of baptism, and their Biblical connections**

Ever since Jesus lived, died, rose again, and ascended into heaven, His Church has recognized and practiced the sacrament of baptism. The true Church recognizes the importance and necessity of this sacrament. However, throughout the Body of Christ, the sacrament has been celebrated in different ways. There are three primary practices of administering baptism, each based on scripture and each communicating a different truth:

- **Sprinkling:** God promises, in Ezekiel 36:25-26, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." When someone is baptized by sprinkling, this truth is reinforced, that our sins have been completely washed away, and that we have a new heart, a heart that wills and desires the same things that Jesus wants.
- **Pouring:** God promises in Joel 2:28, "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions." When the water is poured in baptism, we become more aware that we have been filled with God the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to live new, transformed, Christ-like lives.
- **Immersion:** In Romans 6:3-4, we are asked:

Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."

In the sign of baptism by immersion, we experience being buried with Christ in the death of our old self, and being raised to a new life, His resurrected life. Therefore, Romans 6:11 says, "Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." In our burial with Jesus, sin loses its control. We don't

have to sin anymore. In our resurrection with Jesus, we are given His power to obey, to hope, to persevere.

These truths, expressed through baptism, apply to each of us, no matter what form of baptism we received. God nourish us with all of the gospel truths we experience in our baptisms. We might have been baptized by sprinkling, but God reinforces the truth that we descended with Christ into the tomb, that we were buried with Christ. We may have had water poured over us, but in baptism we experience the reality that our hearts of stone have been replaced with hearts of flesh through the sprinkling of Jesus' blood. We might have been immersed in a pool, but our baptisms convince us that God the Holy Spirit has been poured into us and fills us with His life.

### **Like a Tree Planted by Water – A Baptized Life**

Imagine what it would be like to live your life, knowing that you have been freed from the power of sin, aware of the resurrection of power of Jesus in you. What would it be like to go to work or school, experiencing God the Holy Spirit filling you with His wisdom and comfort? Instead of living with regrets or shame, imagine living with gratitude flowing from your new heart of flesh.

This is the baptized life, when we stay wet with the waters of baptism. Practicing our baptisms keeps our faith fresh and nourished. Even during dry seasons, when we find reading scripture to be difficult and boring, when our prayers feel forced and God seems silent, our baptisms can give us a sense that God is still doing something, that while our experience might feel dry, we are still filled with the Spirit.

Jeremiah 17:7-8 describes a life that is refreshed by our baptisms:

Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.

Like a tree planted by water, our faith continues to grow when we regularly reconnect with our baptisms. Like a well-watered tree, we remain pliable, compliant with God's will, able to bend but not break, even through life's storms.

### **Remembering - The practice of remembering**

By remembering our baptisms, we can grow in gratitude for the fullness and freedom we have received through faith in Jesus. We can also become more aware of the areas of our life that need healing. Remembering our baptism can create a growing desire for the life that Jesus offers.

There are a number of practices that can refresh and remind us of God's truths. These include, but are not limited to:

- Daily, weekly, monthly, annual examens: A spiritual examen is a regular check-in. Examens take many shapes and forms, and could include questions such as the following:
  - How have I experienced the power of sin, even though sin no longer has control of me? How do I experience my old self being buried with Christ? How do I experience my new, resurrected life, having been raised with Jesus? How have I witnessed my freedom from the power of sin?
  - What regret and shame has resurfaced? How has my baptism reminded me that shame and guilt no longer control my life? How do I experience God's forgiveness, and how do I respond to His gift of grace?
  - What evidence have I seen of the Holy Spirit living in me? Do I perceive myself as full, half-full, or empty of the Spirit? What happens when I forget that I am constantly full of the Spirit, that He doesn't come and go?
- Before or after the worship service, come to baptism font and touch the water. Allow the wetness of the water to reassure you of the truths communicated through baptism.
- In baptism, God makes one, overarching covenant promise, to be our God and for us to be His people. Under that promise are hundreds of other promises, found throughout scripture. Read and reflect on one of those promises each day. How does your baptism convince you that God is faithful to His promises?
- Identify the anniversary date of when you were baptized. If you don't know, pick a day. Each anniversary, celebrate your baptism day using the following:
  - Music: Choose a special song for your baptism day. Use the words and music to absorb the truths more deeply.

- Art: Regardless of your ability, illustrate an aspect of your life in Jesus. Allow the visual to reinforce the reality of who you are in Christ.
- Journaling: Take a written snapshot of your relationship with God, honestly but gratefully recognizing the fulfillment of God's promises, while acknowledging that there is more to come
- Light a candle: Each year, light the same candle in honor of your baptism. Meditate on the deepening hole where the flame has burned. Allow the aging candle to increase awareness of God's faithfulness over time.
- Perform an act of service in honor of the day: Use that resurrected life that you have received from Jesus. Exercise the power of the Spirit who fills you to participate in the expansion of God's kingdom.
- Retreat: Take a day, or a portion of the day, to go somewhere special where you can spend some time with God. Use this time for prayer, rest, reading, worship, or some other way that allows you to experience God's love for you.
- Set goals and assess growth: Use your baptism day to set goals for the growth of your faith, and then check on the progress you've made toward those goals.
- Read: Read that book you've been meaning to read.
- Fast: Disconnect from sources of comfort and strength that distract you from God.
- Feast: Celebrate the lavish love of God by enjoying His gifts for you!
- What other ideas do you have that fit your personality?

### **Support – Helping the people of our congregation to remember their baptisms**

We get help from the leadership and structure of our church as we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Communion is usually scheduled by the pastor, elders, or worship team.

In the same way, we can also use some help from the leadership as we reconnect with our baptisms. Our pastor and elders can provide support in the following ways:

- The church can publish this resource, either on the website or by making paper copies available.
- Monthly encouragements and reminders to celebrate our baptisms can be communicated through the bulletin or communication system of the church.
- Church leadership and administrative staff can help each person to identify the anniversary of their baptism. Anniversary dates can be published each month in a bulletin or newsletter.
- A week in advance, a pastor or elder can encourage each member of the church to reconnect with their baptism on the anniversary. Pastors/elders can celebrate with the members. They can also be alert and available to help when a member is struggling to live with the freedom, fullness, and power that is available to them.

### **Remember and Reconnect**

Most of us have lived much of our lives unaware of the effects of the sacrament of baptism, and most of us are just fine with that. But what if God desires to give us more than just a “fine” life? Galatians 3:26-27 says, “In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

Remember, God baptized you, and God is refreshing your baptism. He’s reminding and reinforcing your reality, that you have been clothed with Christ., that you were buried with Him and have been raised to life with Him, that you are forgiven, you are filled with the Spirit, and freed from the power of sin. Live, as a tree with roots going deep into the water. Live, baptized!