

**“O Jerusalem, wash your heart from wickedness, that you may be saved” (Jer 4:14)**

**✠ Lecture VIII: Baptism in The Holy Pauline Epistles ✠**

Thus far we have considered three passages in the Holy Gospels and two in the Holy Book of Acts that tell us something about the meaning of baptism. All of these passages are anticipatory of baptism, that is, they are statements and exhortations recorded prior to baptism itself. The rest of the passages to be considered are taken from the Holy Epistles, and they all deal with baptism as an accomplished fact. They are statements made primarily to Christians who have already been baptized. They are meant to increase our understanding of the meaning of our own baptism. They tell us more about what actually happened when we were baptized.

**“Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in the newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection.” (Rom 6:3-4)**

The basic point of the passage is that we are “baptized into Christ Jesus,” namely, into a saving union with Lord Jesus Christ our Redeemer. What are the results of our being united with Lord Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection? This union provides us with our regeneration or rebirth to new life, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Cor 5:17). We can see, then, how crucially important our union with the Lord is. It is the key to our salvation. In view of this importance, we should be vitally interested in the time when this union with the Lord begins. Exactly when does our death to sin occur, and exactly when do we receive “newness of life”? In a very clear and straightforward manner **Rom 6:3-4** affirms that baptism is the time when we are united with Lord Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection, and thus the time when we experience our own death to sin and resurrection to new life.

There is absolutely no indication that this union with the Lord in His death happened as soon as we believed or repented. We did not believe into His death; we did not repent into His death. St. Paul explicitly says we “were baptized into His death” (v 3). If this is not plain enough, he repeats the idea in verse 4: “we were buried with Him through baptism into death.” What is true of our union with Lord Jesus Christ in His death is true also of our union with Him in His resurrection. In verse 5, St. Paul said, “For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection”. Moreover, St. Paul also said, “Buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God” (Col 2:12). The Lord’s crucifixion and resurrection are the events, which save us, but the power of these saving acts is applied to us in baptism.

In the first five chapters of Romans, St. Paul has established the fact that we are justified by faith in Lord Jesus’ saving work rather than the obedience to the Old Testament Law. Such is the essence of salvation by grace. In chapter 6 & 7 he is dealing with possible objections that might be raised in opposition to his teaching. The first is that such an idea would seem to encourage people to sin all the more. “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? (Rom 6:1)

In response to this objection St. Paul wants to emphasize the unthinkable nature of sin and the possibility and expectation of holy living in the Christian life, so he appeals to what happened in our baptism. He does not say, “Remember when you first believed” or “Think about the time you bowed your head and received the Lord into your heart”. He says, “Remember your Baptism!” Why should he so magnify baptism if this were not the specific point where the life-changing and heart-renewing work of God was actually accomplished?

**“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free – and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.” (1 Cor 12:13)**

This verse shows the relation between baptism and membership in the Church, it also emphasizes the unity of the Church since we all share the common origin of our membership in the Church. That is, the Church (body) is united because we all came into it by the same doorway; the one Holy Spirit acting in the one baptism. Thus baptism itself is one basis of the unity of the Church. This agrees with “There is one body (Church) and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all” (Eph 4:4-5)

**“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” (Gal 3:26-27)**

To understand the point of the above verse we must understand the point of the whole context of **Gal 3:1-4:7**. The central idea here is the significance of our father Abraham and our role as his **sons**. St. Paul affirms that the gospel itself was preached to Abraham when God promised that through him “all the nations shall be blessed” (**Gen 12:3; Gal 3:8**). That is through Abraham the full contents of the gospel offer would be made possible for all families and nations of the earth. These gospel gifts are described as “the blessing of Abraham” (**Gal 3:14**), as “the promises” (**Gal 3:16**) spoken to Abraham, and especially as “the inheritance” (**Gal 3:18**) which Abraham was given the privilege of leaving to his offspring or heirs. Now, the main question that arises at this point is this: who are Abraham’s heirs? Who will inherit these gospel blessings? To put it another way, who is considered to be a **son** of Abraham? In this context there seem to be no difference between a “son of Abraham” (**Gal 3:7**) and a “son of God” (**Gal 3:26**). Sonship is the crucial idea. It is essential to have the status of a **son**, since in the Old Testament economy ordinarily only sons could inherit the family assets. As long as any sons were living, women and slaves did not receive an inheritance. Only if there were no sons could the daughters be heirs (**Num 27:1-11; 36:1-12**), and only if there were no natural heirs at all could slaves be designated to inherit the property (**Gen 15:3**). Thus to be an **heir** of Abraham, one must be a **son** of Abraham. Until we are sons, our status is no different from that of slaves (**Gal 4:1-7**); we have no claim to the inheritance. At this stage in the argument, St. Paul makes the very unexpected point that Abraham has **only one true son and heir**, namely, Lord Jesus Christ (**Gal 3:16**). He notes that the promises were given to Abraham and to his **seed, singular**. They are not given to many seeds, plural, but just to the one seed or offspring, which is Lord Jesus Christ. Technically speaking He is the only seed “to whom the promise had been made” (**Gal 3:19**). Thus He is the only true son and heir of Abraham. The rest of us, whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free, male or female, all seem to be left out!

Nevertheless, though Lord Jesus Christ is the only true son and heir, anyone who is “in Christ Jesus” (**Gal 3:14**) or united with the Lord is counted as part of Lord Jesus Christ Himself and therefore as a son and therefore as an heir! This is the main point of **Gal 3: 26-29**. Of course Lord Jesus Christ is still the only natural son; the rest of us are sons by adoption (**Gal 4:5**). Now, how can we become one with Lord Jesus Christ? Since we are baptized “**into Christ**” (**Rom 6:3; Gal 3:27**) and we “**have put on Christ**”(Gal 3:27) therefore, we are all “**one in Christ Jesus**” (**Gal 3:28**). Thus, what is true of Lord Jesus Christ in a sense becomes true of us too. The whole point of this is that because we are one with Lord Jesus Christ, we share His sonship and heirship with regard to the blessing of Abraham. It does not matter if you are a Gentile, or a woman, or a slave. If you are “in Christ” you will be treated like a son and therefore will receive the inheritance anyway, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (**Gal 3:28-29**)

Now according to the above passage, how does anyone “put on Christ” and thus share in His sonship and inheritance? The two conditions specified by St. Paul are **Faith and Baptism**. The primary requirement for sharing in the Abrahamic inheritance is faith. This is one of the main themes of the Holy Epistle to the Galatians since the Churches of Galatia were under pressure from a group known as the Judaizers to include circumcision in the list of requirements for becoming a Christian. Since circumcision was the primary symbol of the whole Mosaic Law, this was equivalent to requiring obedience to the Old Testament Law as a condition for receiving the saving grace – an impossible contradiction. This is the background for the crucial statement “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (**Gal 3:26**). Here “sons of God” is no different from “sons of Abraham” (**Gal 3:7**); the inheritance is through Abraham but is ultimately from God. The important point is sonship itself, since only sons could be heirs. “Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham” (**Gal 3:7**), “So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham” (**Gal 3:9**). Verse 26 is very clear that faith is necessary for the status of sonship but verse 27 is just as clear that baptism is the action that unites us with Lord Jesus Christ, thus making our sonship possible, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (**Gal 3:27**). We may remember that the common Protestant understanding of baptism is that it is an act that **follows** the reception of salvation in order to symbolize the fact that one has **already** become one with Lord Jesus Christ, But if this were true, the order of **Gal 3:27 would have to be just the opposite**, “as many of you as have put on Christ were baptized into Christ”, but this is not what it says, because this is not how it happens. It is the other way around, as the verse indicates. We are sons of God through faith, but this sonship is not acquired **as soon as** we have faith. Rather, it is acquired when this faith leads us into the baptism, which unites us with the Lord. This should serve as a caution against the common error of equating the biblical expression “through faith” with the quite different concept “as soon as we have faith”. As an analogy, having ten dollars may be a necessary prerequisite for getting into the ballpark and seeing the ball game, but this does not mean that one will see the ball game as soon as he has the ten dollars. He still has to go to the place where the ball game is being played. Likewise, having faith is a necessary prerequisite for sonship and thus heirship, but we still have to go to the place where this sonship is bestowed, which is baptism.

**“Husbands love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.” (Eph 5:25-26)**

This passage shows that baptism is part of the very foundation of the Church’s experience of salvation. The only “washing of water” in Christian experience is baptism. Notice that all the saving actions in this passage are the actions of Lord Jesus Christ and not any human agent. Lord Jesus Christ loved the Church; He gave Himself for the Church; He sanctified the Church; He cleansed the Church; He presented the Church to Himself in glorious holiness. The saving activity that happens in baptism is not the work of the baptizer or the one baptized, but the work of Lord Jesus Christ Himself through the Holy Spirit, “He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you” (**Jn 16:14**). H.H. Pope Shenouda III said, “Those who deny the saving efficacy of baptism deny God’s work.”

The ministry of the word is very important for “How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?” (**Rom 10:14**). Therefore, “washing of water by the word” means that cleansing is achieved in baptismal water as a result of preaching the word of the gospel. It can also refer to the word of promise spoken by God rather than man, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved” (**Mk 16:16**)

**“In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”  
(Col 2:11-12)**

In many ways the content of this passage echoes that of **Rom 6:3-6**. The most explicit parallel is the concept of being buried with the Lord in baptism. Thus Colossians, Like Romans, affirms that baptism is a burial with Lord Jesus Christ. Because of the similarity with Romans we can readily infer that this means baptism is a burial with Lord Jesus Christ into His death. What is the significance of this? What is the result of it? We might conclude that it results in the forgiveness of sins, since burial into Lord Jesus Christ’s death would bring us into saving contact with His justifying blood. Verse 13 specifically relates forgiveness to this event when it refers to God’s having forgiven us all our trespasses. This understanding of baptism as the time of forgiveness certainly agrees with passages such as **Acts 2:38 and Acts 22:16**.

Verse 11 says we have been circumcised in a non-physical sense “without hands”, that is, we have experienced a **spiritual** circumcision. This is called “putting off the body of the sins of the flesh”. It is similar to physical circumcision, which is the removal of a piece of the physical body, but in spiritual circumcision “the body of the sins of the flesh” refers to our old way of life or our old sinful nature, not the physical body as such or any part of it. In baptism this old sinful aspect of our being is circumcised away; it dies and is disposed of. Herein lies the identification with **Rom 6**, where dying with Lord Jesus to sin means “that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with” (**Rom 6:6**). The “old man” and the “body of sin” in Romans are the same as “the body of the sins of the flesh” in Colossians. In baptism, by the power of the death of Lord Jesus Christ with which we are thus united, this old man is put to death and put off (removed) in a spiritual act analogous to physical circumcision, then left buried in the waters of baptism. When **Col 2:12** says this takes place “in baptism,” it is affirming what the whole New Testament teaches, namely, that baptism is an act of salvation.

→ This verse bring to mind the following Old Testament passages:

- “Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer” (**Deut 10:16**)
- “And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul that you may live” (**Deut 30:6**)
- “Circumcise yourself to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your hearts” (**Jer 4:4**)

**“Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.” (Titus 3:5)**

The main theme of this passage is salvation. What exactly was that point in time when this salvation occurred? None other than the event called the washing. God saved us, says St. Paul, through the washing that brings regeneration and renewing. In this passage, baptism is connected to salvation by a very strong term, “He saved us... through the washing.” This passage also emphasizes the specific work of the Holy Spirit, who is the source of the power that works the regeneration or renewing that takes place in baptism, a point already seen in connection with **Jn 3:5, Acts 2:38, and 1Cor 12:13**. Therefore, baptism is not to be considered as a mere human work but rather a divine work of grace. Nothing is more consistent with salvation by grace than salvation in baptism (especially in case of infant baptism).

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\* This lecture is adapted from ‘*Baptism A Biblical Study*’ by Jack Cottrell.