

The idea of Christian baptism is as old as John the Baptist who came preaching, teaching and baptizing in preparation for the coming of Jesus and His ministry. Following the death and resurrection of Jesus He ascended into heaven and left the church a mission to accomplish.

Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth."¹⁹ Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.²⁰ Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Matthew 28:17-20 NLT

For the next few weeks you are going to hear about this mission and what it means to us individually and as a church.

The act of water baptism (being immersed in water in response to receiving salvation) is a very important first step in the Christian life. In Matthew 3:13-17, we see the Lord Jesus Himself coming to His cousin John to be baptized, in order to "fulfill all righteousness." He then went on to establish baptism as an eternal ordinance for His church, calling every believer to follow in His footsteps (See Matthew 28:19.) In our modernized, "comfort zone Christianity," we do, sad to say, tend to take God's commandments far too lightly. As Chuck Colson points out:

"Most Westerners take baptism for granted, but for many in the world the act requires immense courage. In countries like Nepal it once meant imprisonment. For Soviet or Chinese or Eastern bloc believers, it was like signing their own death warrant."¹

A wedding ring is an outward sign that a person is married. A military uniform is an outward sign that a person is involved in that particular branch of service. Similarly, water baptism is a symbol designed by God to identify a person as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

However, I use the word "symbol" here with caution. To say that it is "just a symbol" takes away from the depth and beauty of water baptism. Baptism is a symbol, but it is so much more than that.

Today for a few moments I want to tell you three stories from the Bible about baptism.

Philip and the Ethiopian: This man received instruction

As for Philip, an angel of the Lord said to him, "Go south down the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza."²⁷ So he started out, and he met the treasurer of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under the Kandake, the queen of Ethiopia. The eunuch had gone to Jerusalem to worship,²⁸ and he was now returning. Seated in his carriage, he was reading aloud from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

²⁹ *The Holy Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and walk along beside the carriage.”* ³⁰ *Philip ran over and heard the man reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?”*

³¹ *The man replied, “How can I, unless someone instructs me?” And he urged Philip to come up into the carriage and sit with him.*

The people being baptized today have received instruction. They are declaring their faith in Christ to the world because they have accepted Christ.

³² *The passage of Scripture he had been reading was this:*

*“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter.
And as a lamb is silent before the shearers,
he did not open his mouth.*

³³ *He was humiliated and received no justice.
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.”^[c]*

³⁴ *The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, was the prophet talking about himself or someone else?”* ³⁵ *So beginning with this same Scripture, Philip told him the Good News about Jesus.*

³⁶ *As they rode along, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “Look! There’s some water! Why can’t I be baptized?”* ³⁸ *He ordered the carriage to stop, and they went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. Acts 8:26-38 NLT*

It is instruction about Christ that leads a man or a woman a boy or a girl to accept Him.

The Apostle Paul: This man received restoration

We now know him as Paul but in the early days of his life he was known as Saul. He was a young Jewish man zealous to persecute the first followers of Christ. After his death the church began to grow and it was a threat to the Jewish community. Armed with authority of the state and the Jewish hierarchy he went around persecuting and even having Christians killed.

The Bible says that

Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord’s followers.^[a] So he went to the high priest.² He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains.

³ As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?”

⁵ “Who are you, lord?” Saul asked.

And the voice replied, “I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! ⁶ Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

⁷ The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone’s voice but saw no one! ⁸ Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes he was blind. So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus. ⁹ He remained there blind for three days and did not eat or drink.

¹⁰ Now there was a believer^[b] in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, calling, “Ananias!” “Yes, Lord!” he replied.

¹¹ The Lord said, “Go over to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you get there, ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying to me right now. ¹² I have shown him a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and laying hands on him so he can see again.”

¹³ “But Lord,” exclaimed Ananias, “I’ve heard many people talk about the terrible things this man has done to the believers^[c] in Jerusalem! ¹⁴ And he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest everyone who calls upon your name.”

¹⁵ But the Lord said, “Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. ¹⁶ And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name’s sake.”

So Ananias went and found Saul. He laid his hands on him and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” ¹⁸ Instantly something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. ¹⁹ Afterward he ate some food and regained his strength. Acts 9:17-19 NLT

The story of Paul is one of a life restored to its full potential.

Jailer and his family: These people believed as a family

Persecution was not unusual in the early church just like it is not unusual today around the world. Paul and Silas were traveling around doing ministry and they found themselves sitting in a jail cell because of their faith.

Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening. ²⁶ Suddenly, there was a massive earthquake, and the prison was shaken to its foundations. All the doors immediately flew open, and the chains of every prisoner fell off! ²⁷ The jailer woke up to see the prison doors wide open. He assumed the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword to kill himself. ²⁸ But Paul shouted to him, "Stop! Don't kill yourself! We are all here!"

²⁹ The jailer called for lights and ran to the dungeon and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

³¹ They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with everyone in your household." ³² And they shared the word of the Lord with him and with all who lived in his household. ³³ Even at that hour of the night, the jailer cared for them and washed their wounds. Then he and everyone in his household were immediately baptized. ³⁴ He brought them into his house and set a meal before them, and he and his entire household rejoiced because they all believed in God. Acts 16:25-34 NLT

This weekend we are baptizing a number of children and even some parents with their children. What a wonderful and tremendous thing it is.

No matter what we face in this life there is a sweetness to the life of Christfollower that transcends all of our circumstances. One of my favorite stories is from China where the church is vibrant and growing but underground and out of sight of the communist rulers.

At the Lausanne Conference on evangelism several years ago, an evangelist from China was brought to the platform to address evangelists from around the world. He had been in arrested and kept in a filthy prison camp. His job was to spend all day every day cleaning out one of the camp cesspools that had been drained. It was full of human filth and stench, but he would stand on a ladder and scrub the walls. When asked how he stood it each day, he told of singing this song over and over and enjoying the presence of God.

I come to the garden alone
While the dew is still on the roses
And the voice I hear falling on my ear
The son of God discloses

And He walks with me
And He talks with me
And He tells me I am His own
And the joy we share as we tarry there
None other has ever known

He speaks and the sound of His voice
Is so sweet that the birds hush their singing
And the melody that He gave to me
Within my heart is ringing

