

[INTRODUCTION & BAPTISM STORY]

After a major downpour filled all the potholes in the streets and alleys of Christchurch, a young father watched his two little boys playing in a puddle in their front yard, through the kitchen window.

The older of the two, a five-year old, grabbed his younger brother by the back of his head and shoved his face into a water hole. As the boy recovered, and stood laughing and dripping, their father ran to the yard in a panic. “Why on earth did you do that to your little brother?!” he asked as he grasped the oldest boy in shock. “We were just playing ‘church’ Daddy” he said. And I was baptizing him in the name of the Father, the Son, and *in the hole he goes*.

It’s a fun story, but I wonder if we really understand baptism? Or if perhaps in our understanding we can sometimes be a little bit like Children. Sometimes with some of the things we practice as Christians, but we might not understand why we do it, or what it represents.

Throughout the Bible we have these powerful images of water as this symbolic cleansing thing.

We have the waves of the red sea parting to let God’s people pass through, before they come crashing down on Pharaoh and his army as they pursue them. And we have the story of Noah and his family who was described as having walked faithfully with God in a time when the earth was filled with evil and violence. It was God who brought him and his family alone through the flood that devastated the earth.

But what about Baptism?

From the outside it might look a bit strange, you know? To the person on the street we have this odd habit of dunking each other in water. What’s up with that? Where did it come from? Why do we do it?

I’d like to present that it’s a symbolic thing we do as a kind of one-time spiritual “Laundromat”.

The idea being that we go in with filthy spiritual clothes, and come out with new clothing that Jesus gives us by the Holy Spirit. Now those new clothes are ours to keep, but we have live in them, and grow into them.

To begin our journey of exploration, let’s first step back in time and place, to imagine ourselves on a tour of Jerusalem during the time of the apostles.

Imagine that you’re standing before the city of Jerusalem 2000 years ago. You’re there at the time of the Jewish festival the “Feast of Weeks”, the “Feast of 50 days”, or as you may know it in Greek, the festival of Pentecost. And the city is *heaving*.

As you pass through the city walls you see that it's a hive of activity. Jews from throughout all the lands of the tribes of Israel have travelled great distances to be here, and they've all come to worship the Lord and offer sacrifices at the temple of the Lord. A group of travellers tell you they've passed along the mountains of Samaria to be here, and you overhear a young family speaking about their home in the fertile hills of Judea. You look up into distance and see a stream of smoke rising from the great temple in the distance, fifty-tonne stones the likes of which you have never been seen before make up its walls.

Suddenly, you jostle against a band of Roman soldiers as they pass you in hurry. King Herod knows that the city is packed with people and that might ignite into rebellion at any moment, so he's worked to have the nearby fortress of Mark Antony filled with Roman troops, ready to pour out into the streets and squash any uprising at a moment's notice.

Over seven-thousand priests and nine-thousand Levites live here, and the further you move into the city the more and more it seems filled with noise. You pass through markets filled with the sounds and smells of livestock ready for sacrifice at the temple. But you notice that some of the Jews that have travelled here seem to have brought their own, and as you continue onwards toward the temple, you turn your attention to them and look a little closer.

Many of the people you see are covered in varying degrees of dirt and dust. Some have been travelling on the backs of their animals for some time, and you can tell from the smell. Some others, those who are poorer, have sweat beading into their eyes and dirt stuck to the bottom of sandals. But there was no way they could travel up to the temple covered in the dirt of their travels, Jews had to be clean to approach the temple. It looked like some of these people had bathed in the clear waters of the Shi-loah Pool at David's City, but this didn't make them ready to approach the temple either, Jewish law said that they would have to purify themselves in a ritual bath, called a mikveh.

And there were baths for this everywhere. The city of Jerusalem had over 200 alone, 50 of which were near the Temple mount beneath its southern wall. They were so positioned, that at festival times like this when there could be thousands of pilgrims in need of ritual cleansing, many would be able to find the baths along the same roads that they would take, on their way to the temple mount.

The use of the mikveh, this ritual bath, this cleansing, was about the *symbolic* immersion of the soul, and it's still practiced today.

As it is today, the mikveh bath had to be filled with what was known as water that was "*living*". They'd be either filled with still rainwater, or if the water came from another source, it would need to be *still connected* to that source; it had to be "*alive*". - We're going to return to this later.

This whole process of purification was kind of like a spiritual laundromat.

You'd go in with all the dirt that you'd accumulated on your travels, all of the gunk that had been built up in life, and you'd be bathed, baptised, cleaned. You'd come out *literally* with clean clothes. And all of this would be done under one understanding, that before you could approach God, you had to be clean.

The problem was that that cleanliness wouldn't last. You'd do this over and over again. Every time you came to temple you had to be baptised again, because you had to be cleaned again before you went anywhere near to where God lived. If you wanted to approach God, you needed to visit the spiritual Laundromat first.

On the surface it looks like there are a lot of similarities between what was going on in the Mikveh and what we do in Christian Baptism. But there are some real key, and important differences.

First of all, if you were Baptised in a Mikveh you'd be doing it naked. - I think you got off easy today Jacob. But perhaps most importantly is that we only do it *once*, and that's for a number of reasons.

First, we do it because Jesus did. We follow his example.

His baptism was a voluntary act of obedience. It was something that he wanted to do before God out of his own free will. And when he did, something happened - the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit alighted on him and the Father said "This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased".

There were a couple of things that happened here, but for today we're going to focus on one: that this was a moment of personal identification.

For us it's much the same. When we undergo baptism we're following in Jesus footsteps in an act of worship, of self-dedication, and of identity with Jesus as our personal saviour, and of our identity as God's children together as his people. Our baptism is the baptism of believers who are committed to living as Jesus disciples. For this reason because we have chosen to put Jesus first in our lives, we come to be baptized in his name. The awesome thing about being baptised in Jesus name is that it's good for all eternity. As believers, like Noah, we've been saved through the waters, through faith and the love and grace of what God has done for us in Christ. When Jesus died for us, the price he paid for our sin was so great that it only needed to be paid once.

Baptism can be seen as a sacred symbol that shows our union with Christ in the power of his death and resurrection. That just as he died and rose again, so we too, in the symbolic falling into water, and the rising out of it, desire to be joined to Jesus in his death and his resurrection. [UNPACK]

Remember the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. [UNPACK] Jesus said He could offer her *living*

water. That she'd drink of it once and never thirst again...

John 4:10: Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

...the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

[UNPACK]

- Wash once. Never wash again.
- When we accept Jesus as our personal saviour, he is the Living water that washes away our sins once and for all.
- In Jesus we are represented by Him before God, so we can freely approach him at all times in any place.
- In Titus 3:5 we read that... ⁵ he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit
- He's establishing a complete break with the past and a giving us new clothes, a new way of living, while also looking forward to our eventual eternal clothing in our resurrection bodies.

Let's return to Jerusalem at the time of the festival of Pentecost and read our Bible passage for today, Acts 2:36-39. Now this was at the time when the believers had gathered together, and the Holy Spirit came upon them in tongues of flame and each spoke in other languages and of tongues that weren't known to them. A crowd of Jews and other people gathered who had seen and heard all this, and now inspired and convicted by what they had heard and witnessed, Peter said to them in verse 36:

³⁶ "...Let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.

³⁷ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles,

"Brothers, what shall we do?"

³⁸ Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." ...

And in verse 41: ⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

- Peter was likely saying these words from nearby the steps of the temple. Below him were dozens of mikveh, therefore the response from the people to be baptised would be immediate.
- The putting off those old spiritual clothes and put on new ones made in Christ's image.

We have to ask, after Baptism, what does mean for us? What does life look like?

To answer this let's look at Colossians 3:9-12.

⁹Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. ¹¹Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

¹²Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

[DISCUSS]

Paul says we have taken off the old self and put on the new self.

This is a way of describing repentance and coming to God. This also describes the experience of baptism. We come to be baptised in one set of clothes, and after immersion, we get changed into new clothing which symbolizes a new start in life. But that new spiritual clothing a bit different from our old spiritual clothing.

I want to share with a story that illustrates this well from an old teacher:

When I was a young teenager the custom was for parents to buy clothes at the start of the school year that their children would grow into. Some boys showed no visible sign of possessing hands until December, when fingers eventually managed to come out from the end of their oversized blazer sleeves.

Others grew so fast that by the end of the year there was a 10 centimetre gap between the bottom of their trouser legs and the top of their shoes. In a similar way, having put on the new way of life by faith in Christ, *it takes time to grow into it.*

In Colossians 3:9-12 Paul inspires believers to reject their old instincts and put their old selfish nature to death. This Daily renewal, consciously and regularly putting off the old ways and putting on the new, can be a bit uncomfortable at times. - Usually growth in our character takes a long time. There are some things that can be changed in an instant, but often deep and lasting change takes time. As we live in our new clothes we become more like Christ slowly, step by step, and sometimes it's painful.

It takes effort and deliberate choices to begin to change on the inside. - We have the HS to help us.

This journey can be like cultivating a garden of life. If you leave a garden unattended the more vigorous plants overwhelm others, the weeds quickly spread, and very quickly you have a forest outside your back

door. Without making the active decision to put off our sinful nature and put on the Godly character of Christ, without consciously checking and weeding our characters, it can be easy to revert to our old ways.

[DISCUSS]

God calls us to put these things off us, that we might be more like Him. And it's for our good, and for that of others.

In this, the experience of baptism sets a pattern for our daily lives. The change of clothes that happens symbolises a change on the inside that happens to us as we desire and seek to follow Jesus.

- From that moment we look forward to the ultimate change of clothes, when we shall finally receive our resurrection bodies and live eternally in the love, worship, and glory of God.
- Once we have been baptized, we can look back to the experience to find inspiration for our daily choices, as we continue to take off the character of our old way of living and learn to grow into the clothing of our new character in Christ.

[DISCUSS]

- Illustration of condemnation opposed to conviction.
- Sometimes the Spirit will prompt you, and we may be aware that we've muddied those clothes.
- Others may even point out our stains.
- Sometimes in that conviction we can roll around in the mud of our sin for too long.

To answer this, Jesus is there the whole time saying "I have clean clothes here for you when you're ready."

- "If you love me please stop living in a way that gets dirt on them. When you get dirt of them you start to stink."

Who here knows that when you sin you start to stink? And when you stink it's embarrassing, you try to hide it, cover it up, but God knows us, Jesus might respond "You know I've been here the whole time right?"

- It's much easier than trying to live with muddied clothes, to turn, come before Jesus and take those new spiritual clothes. To say Jesus, I know you love me, I know I've been made new through what you've done. I commit myself to you, and to living in your ways.

[CONCLUDING REMARKS]