

BaptistWay: Brought from Death to Life

October 2, 2015

- *The BaptistWay lesson for Oct. 18 focuses on Romans 6:1-23.*

This passage includes a memorable verse, often quoted in sermons and Bible study lessons: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). While there is much to be gained by simply meditating on this one statement, as is always the case with Scripture, context is important. So before discussing the final verse in the passage, let us pay attention to what comes before.

Much of this chapter involves baptism. Paul states, “All of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death,” which means “just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (vv. 3-4). In short, the Christian church always has considered baptism an important act.

Buried with Christ in baptism

All denominations practice baptism and understand it as an action that brings people into the family of God. Baptists believe nothing less, even extending the death/life symbolism to the shape of the practice itself. We immerse baptismal candidates to offer the image and experience of death. Conversely, emerging from the water conveys the sense the candidate has been saved, washed and made new in the gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, the minister often will paraphrase this section of Romans while performing a baptism: “Buried with Christ in death, ... raised to walk in newness of life.”

Despite Baptists’ strong claims that baptism is symbolic and does not offer salvific benefits on its own, it is important to recognize symbols have deep

relationships with the things they symbolize. As Paul writes, “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his” (v. 5). In other words, even if baptism itself does not bring us from death to life, it nonetheless signifies our participation in Christ’s death, burial and resurrection. We die with him so we may live with him.

One commentator has noted that when baptism is understood appropriately, there is a “mystical relationship between Christ and believers.” Another way to say it is baptism is a “we thing.” Rather than thinking of baptism as a private or purely individualistic event, we should see it as something that identifies the community of the Messiah, those who have been brought together as the ancestors of Abraham discussed in chapter 4. Like the people of Israel emerging from the waters of the sea, baptism is a communal act that marks the people of God, who must live faithfully in imitation of Jesus.

Joined to Christ’s resurrection

The epistle’s “life” motif continues in this passage. With an emphasis on being joined to Christ’s resurrection in the practice of baptism, life certainly stands in the center. This is so much the case the resurrection promised in this passage is not an entirely future one. That is, it is not merely about life in the age to come. Instead, Paul argues being linked to Christ means in the here and now “we too may walk a new life” (v. 4). This resurrection and new life that emerge from Christ are present, transforming all of us into the likeness of Christ and bringing us “from death to life” (v. 11). Just as we now do not sin, we now enjoy the benefits and blessings of this new life.

The life provided by Christ also is a free one. In other words, we are free from the effects of sin. This liberation is something to celebrate. Freedom, though, is more than release from all authority or control. This passage is

clear that people are either slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness (v. 16). As Bob Dylan once wrote: "You're gonna have to serve somebody. It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody." This means we certainly are free from sin, but we also are free for service to God in the way leading to life (v. 22).

Origen, a second-century theologian, noted Paul personifies sin as a king in the last verse of the chapter. This personification also might clarify the opening question of whether more sin will equal more grace. Sin and Grace become figures to whom one might display loyalty, so service to one would imply a lack of allegiance to the other. This is why one cannot sin in order to bring more grace; serving Sin means not serving Grace. "You're gonna have to serve somebody," but you can only serve one.

Unearned grace

Romans 6:23, then, sums up this passage, providing us with profound literary depth. John Chrysostom, a fourth-century preacher and leader in the Eastern Church, observed Paul's comparison actually breaks down. We do not receive compensation in each option. No, when we follow sin, we receive wages, or pay, and those lead to death. Following God does not produce wages or compensation. Instead, one receives life of the everlasting sort, but only as a gift, not wages (v. 23). This failed parallel structure serves to remind us the wages and the gift are not equal. One is earned, while the other is freely given through Jesus Christ with no obligation on God's part.