

Colossians 2:11-15: Sufficient salvation shown in Baptism

OUTLINE

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INTRODUCTION

The waters of baptism are a lens through which we can see certain things clearly. It is a lens which helps us see something past, something present and something future. Through the baptismal waters we look back to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Baptism would be a meaningless action if Christ had not in fact died and resurrected. The waters of judgement, like at the flood and the drowning of Pharaoh's armies at the Red Sea rolled over Christ. As the breaking of the bread calls to mind His body broken and offered for us, so the immersion under water and emersion from it speak of Christ's judgement in death and resurrection to life. The judgement He suffered for our sins and His vindication in being resurrected.

Baptism is a lens into the present experience of the one being baptised. It is an outward showing of a real participation in Christ's death as our death, and His resurrection as ours. It speaks of our having been acquitted by His death and being brought to life by the power of His Spirit. It is an outward physical showing of an inward present Spiritual reality. And baptism also points forward to the future. We will die and our bodies will perish, but when Jesus comes again our bodies will fully participate in Christ's resurrection power and we will be resurrected like Him. Our baptism is not only witness to the past of Christ's death and resurrection, nor is it only witness to our present possession of the benefits of what He has done for us, but it is also a promise of what will one day be ours. Baptism is a clear lens because it tells the story of what Christ has done, it is a window into what He is doing, and a promise of what He will do.

However, the waters of baptism have been muddied by error and ignorance. We can see in the history of the church that sacramentalism has taken our focus away from the work of Christ's death and resurrection as the basis for our salvation and turned the waters of baptism into a saviour. Another question that has muddied the waters is the question of baby baptism versus believer's baptism, and the relationship of circumcision to baptism. In the portion before us, Col. 2:11-15 we hope to remind ourselves of the work of Christ by which we are saved and to clarify the relationship between circumcision and baptism.

Our text comes to us from the book of Colossians. Paul is writing about 2 years before his death from prison (Col. 4:3). He is writing to a church that is being undermined by false teaching. We are not sure of the exact nature of the false teaching but we can see from Paul's statements in this letter that it would have included the exaltation of angels and a very Jewish emphasis on the need to keep certain aspects of the Mosaic law such as the Saturday Sabbath, new moons, the Passover as well as circumcision. It seems that the false teaching was telling the Colossians that Christ was insufficient to protect them from the evil

powers and to save them from sin. It seems as if the Colossians were being pointed to calling on angels for protection, and to the keeping of various Jewish laws for purity. Whatever the form of manmade religion Paul's response is clear Christ is the image of the invisible God and in His death upon the cross He has sufficiently dealt with all of our greatest enemies so that we do not need any man made religion to further enhance our standing in Christ. Being found in Christ Paul reminds the believer that Christ has overcome our three great enemies: death, debt and the devil. In passing he makes reference to baptism and circumcision. We will look firstly at the 3 enemies and how Christ has defeated them, and then we will visit the baptism/circumcision issue.

3 enemies conquered

Various religions promise the removal of certain problems. Some promise the alleviation of loneliness, others promise peace of mind, some promise health and wealth, but these are really only inconveniences not enemies that make for our eternal undoing; it is Christ alone who defeats our greatest enemies. The first of our great enemies is in ourselves. Paul describes us as being dead. V13, 'And you who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with Him....' We can see that we most certainly are not dead so what does Paul mean here by dead? Paul is referring to our being dead in spirit and dead to God. We are sinners who have an inward bent away from God and towards sin. We are incapable of being holy as He is holy and fulfilling what is required of us. On our own resources we cannot find God, we cannot give ourselves new life, we cannot offer anything good enough to remove our sins, we cannot free ourselves from our enslavement to sin. We are vulnerable to the devil's temptations and have no power to overcome him. Before we become Christians we are like zombies we only want to eat brains and other people. If you put a home cooked meal in front of a zombie he will eat you not the meal. Likewise when Christ and the gospel is set before us in our sin, we are so blind and dead that we reject that which would give us life. But this is where Paul is informing us of God's grace and the good news of His sovereign working to save us. V13 tells us that God raised us from the dead. George Whitfield uses the illustration of Christ raising Lazarus to make this same point:

'Come, ye dead, Christless, unconverted sinners, come and see the place where they laid the body of the deceased Lazarus; behold him laid out, bound hand and foot with grave-clothes, locked up and stinking in a dark cave, with a great stone placed on top of it. View him again and again; go nearer to him; be not afraid; smell him. Ah! How he stinketh. Stop there now, pause a while; and whilst thou art gazing upon the corpse of Lazarus, give me leave to tell thee with great plainness, but greater love, that this dead, bound entombed, stinking carcass, is but a faint representation of thy spirit which thou bearest about with thee, sepulchred in flesh and blood, is as literally dead to God, and as truly dead in trespasses and sins, as the body of Lazarus was in the cave.

Was he bound hand and foot with grave-clothes? So art thou bound hand and foot with thy corruptions; and as a stone was laid on the sepulchre, so is there a stone of unbelief upon thy stupid heart. Perhaps thou hast lain in this state, not only four days, but many years, stinking in God's nostrils. And, what is still more effecting thou art as unable to raise thyself out of this loathsome, dead state, to a life of righteousness and true holiness, as ever

Lazarus was to raise himself from the cave in which he lay so long. Thou mayest try the power of your own boasted free-will, and the force and energy of moral persuasion and rational arguments (which, without all doubt, have their proper place in religion); but all thy efforts, exerted with never so much vigour, will prove quite fruitless and abortive, till that same Jesus, who said, 'Take away the stone'; and cried, 'Lazarus, come forth' also quicken you.'

We heard the word of the Gospel and God gave us new hearts to believe, new eyes to see and new ears to hear and we awoke from death and clung to Christ in faith, and so were justified.

Next we are told of how God removed the enemy of our debt, 'having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside nailing it to the cross.' Here is another enemy that we had no power to overcome and God had to do it for us. The amount of debt we had against God in sin would have been absolutely impossible for us to pay. Any offering we would make to God would be inadequate and tainted by the offerer. The only way our sins could be wiped out is if God paid the debt Himself and this He did. We are told that the debt of our sins was nailed to the cross and paid for there. The words 'record of debt' was an IOU in the first century. God took our IOU and He provided Christ to stand in our stead and pay it by His death on the cross. We owed God our lives Christ give His so that we could live. All our debts are paid by Christ, all the legal demands fulfilled. The idea of nailing it to the cross was probably taken from the practice of nailing a sign of the criminal's crimes above his head telling why he is being punished. You will remember that Pilate had a sign put over Christ which read 'Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews' this was His so called crime. Paul is telling us that God took our crimes and He added them all to Jesus cross and He died the criminal's death to pay for them.

The third enemy is the devil, the demons the rulers and authorities. V15 reads, He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in Him.' Remember the Colossians were probably being pointed to Jewish folk lore for protection from the evil powers. This is much like tribal cultures do when they wear charms and make spells for protection. Paul is telling the Colossians and us that the evil powers were defeated by Christ, and weapons they had against us, primarily accusing us for our sin, was removed, they were disarmed. The devil who is the accuser of the brethren has had his weapons removed. The picture is of Christ as a conquering general who has defeated the enemy, He has disarmed their armies and has led them chained around the neck attached to His chariot as He marches them and displays them in His home city. Any domain he had, any ability to accuse or right to attack has been taken from him as far as Christians are concerned.

Paul's message to the Colossians is clear the salvation you have in Christ is sufficient and has delivered you from your greatest enemies, do not follow false teachers who are promising you freedom or protection you already have it all in Christ.

Baptism and circumcision

Having allowed Paul to remind us of the 3 enemies conquered we now want to revisit the relationship between baptism and circumcision. We can see clearly in v11-12 that there is some correspondence between them, 'In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.' Now our paedobaptist brothers and sisters, who hold to covenant baptism teach that baptism replaces circumcision as the NT seal of the covenant people of God. Just as Abraham's seed were circumcised and marked off from the surrounding nations and into the various promises by circumcision, so in the NT the children/seed of believers should likewise be sealed as part of the covenant. Just as the Lord's Supper has replaced Passover so baptism has replaced circumcision.

It is my contention that this biblical sounding case does not fly in the NT. There are at least two reasons from the verses in front of us and others besides. Firstly, as we examine the verses before us we will see that Paul does link circumcision with our baptism, but we will see that there is not a one for one replacement, it is more nuanced than that. Firstly, notice that the NT believer is circumcised. However, the circumcision that we receive is not said to be a baptism, but rather a circumcision made without hands. Baptism cannot be called and is nowhere called a 'circumcision without hands.' In other words, an inward, invisible, God wrought circumcision has been enacted upon every believer. In other words, the New birth, regeneration, the circumcision of the heart. The significance of this in the context is telling. The Colossians were under pressure to be circumcised by the Jewish heresy in Colosse, but notice Paul does not say, 'you have been baptised' but instead 'you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands.' He indicates to us that the NT equivalent of the OT seal of circumcision is not baptism but rather regeneration. It was this act of regeneration by which God raised us from the dead. It was at this point that Paul tells us we had put off the 'body of flesh'. This does not mean that we leave our bodies, but rather that all that we were when we were in Adam and not in Christ, all that we were when we were dead in sin and slaves to it, we are no more. We have not received our resurrection bodies but we are no longer that dead sinner who had no power to obey. Something has changed that sets us free from sin to pursue progress in holiness.

Our paedobaptist brethren would point out that in the OT circumcision was a sign of Abraham's faith and also spoke of circumcision of the heart. They argue that there is a direct equivalence between circumcision and baptism as outward sign and inward reality. We must appreciate this way of thinking but there is more to say. The sign of circumcision defined the covenant community. All who were circumcised were in the covenant of Abraham, all who were not weren't. All physical descendants of Abraham were circumcised and added by birth to the covenant.

Circumcision represented the cutting away of the old life, and so it pointed to faith, and the need for a circumcised heart. Although one could be unregenerate and still gain a legal

entitlement to the land of Israel, the sign of circumcision urged all Israelites to the faith of Abraham, Rom. 4:12.

Circumcision as it was applied to the male member pointed back to the sin we inherit from our first parents through procreation, but it also points forward to a child who would be born to Abraham's line who would undo the works of the devil.

Circumcision brought Abraham's descendants under the demands of the law. It brought with it the threat of the curse of being cut off, of death. Circumcision is a picture of judgement so that if anyone does keep the conditions of the covenant they must be punished by death. In technical terms circumcision was a self-maledictory oath.

We view the external aspects of circumcision which enabled an unregenerate person access to temple worship, the right to marry an Israelite, as well as entitle them to inherit land in Israel, as being stripped away. The sign of circumcision has layers but it cannot be equated with baptism in terms of its outward and inward significance. In the OT one was adopted in Israel by virtue of Abrahamic descent, in the NT one only has the right to become a child of God and be marked as so by faith. Baptism is the New Covenant sign of adoption.

Added to this we would insist that the NT ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper are not established on the basis of theological inference but because they are instituted by Christ Himself. The Lord's Supper is instituted by Christ Himself at the last supper, and baptism at the great commission. We follow the regulative principle here. We do not merely infer these visible Church defining acts, but we take them from Christ. Because we have moved from the Old Covenant to the New, and we have set up for us new institutions that define the people of God, we must necessarily allow Christ to set the parameters for how we ought to do this, not by theological inference. Theological inference is legitimate in many instances but in the case of New Covenant ordinances we must go by direct instructions applying the regulative principle not theological inference. The order for baptism is clear, Matt. 28:18-20 clearly outlines that we are to make disciples, who are baptised and taught from all nations. Disciples is a word that describes a believer, an obeyer, a student not an infant.

Before we make our second point I need to highlight something that many find confusing. You will notice in these two verses that Paul is pointing back to a single moment, a moment that is described as our circumcision without hands, as when the body of flesh was put off, as when we were buried and raised by faith. Many have mistakenly thought that Paul is teaching that baptism is what saves us, that the waters of baptism are a sacrament that affects salvation in and of themselves. In order to understand this we need to realise that in the minds of the authors of scripture when they thought back to the time they were saved they did not think in terms of sinner's prayers, or altar calls, or decision cards, but rather they would look back to the time of their baptism. For it was at their baptism that they openly confessed Christ as their saviour and committed themselves to Him as their disciples. If had to ask Paul when he was saved, he would answer, 'I was baptised on' So then as we look at Paul's statements notice that he is putting regeneration, faith and baptism all in the same basket, but let us be clear, Paul is not teaching that baptism saves. No we see this clearly when Paul emphasizes that we are 'raised with Him through faith'. Our faith does not look to our baptism, it does not put its confidence in a priest but our faith looks to Christ as our only hope for salvation.

This then is our second point, that baptism is accompanied by faith, this is not something that we practice on babies but those who have a sufficient understanding of the gospel to trust in Christ. Paul points to our inner circumcision which is shown outwardly by our baptism as happening when we believed not when we were born of Christian parents. OT circumcision was always meant to be a sign of inward regeneration, now that the age of the Spirit has come, that OT way of administering the sign which included the non-regenerate is done away with. In the OT regeneration and faith were part of the meaning of circumcision, now that Christ has come and all OT shadows and types pointing forward to His person and work are fulfilled, we no longer apply the sign to those who are not believers.

Baptism and circumcision are related but are not a one for one replacement. Baptism is an outward sign of an inward heart circumcision. We see that NT circumcision is without hands and cannot be baptism, and is accompanied by faith and so is not practiced on children. When these get baptised today this is what they are saying.

Firstly, I have been born again and am circumcised in heart by God Himself.

Secondly, my old self, all who I was in Adam has been put to death and I am clothed with Christ and walk in the newness of life with a new ability to be holy.

Thirdly, I am identified with Christ's death that paid my sin debt in full.

Fourthly, I am resurrected with Christ enjoying eternal life.

Fifthly, I have been set free from the devil's domain and dwell in the kingdom of God's Son, no weapon of satan formed against me can prosper because he has been disarmed.