

~Other Speakers A-F: Richard E. Bieber:

You remember the time Jesus was speaking to a crowd of people in a house when someone squeezed through the crowd and said, "Your mother and your brothers are outside. They want to talk to you." One of those brothers outside was doubtless James.

At the time of this incident, James was not a believer. In fact he was angry at the sudden change in his brother. For years Jesus had lived a perfectly normal life in Nazareth. He worked in their little shop making doors and windows and cabinets, went to the synagogue on Sabbath. Then one day, Jesus took off for the Jordan River, where the prophet John was preaching. He got baptized, and disappeared into the wilderness for over a month.

When Jesus came back to Nazareth, he was a different man. He was going around teaching in synagogues, healing people, gathering disciples. James, along with the whole family, was alarmed. What's got into him? Has he lost his mind? People are talking. "Hey James, what makes your brother Jesus, think he's a prophet?" The family kept trying to persuade Jesus to come home and settle down. But he ignored them.

"Your mother and your brothers are outside. They want to talk to you."

"Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother."

What James and the rest of the family did not realize was that when their brother, Jesus, went down into the water in the Jordan that day, he died. The man who came up out of the water was a different man. This baptism was actually Jesus' death and resurrection, long before he ever got to the cross. Every sermon he preached, every healing he performed, was performed in the power of that death and resurrection.

Jesus' old life was back there under the water, and the Father who raised him out of the waters of death, anointed him with the supernatural life of the Holy Spirit. Now he is indwelt, and ruled entirely by the Father's will. He's the Anointed One, the Messiah. "I do nothing out of myself. The Father, who dwells in me, he does the work, he gives me every word I speak."

So how come Jesus' baptism marked such a radical change in his life, while our baptism, whether we were baptized as little babies or as adults, has had almost no impact on the way we live?

Oh, we hear a lot of talk these days in our mainline churches about baptism. "All the baptized people of God," they say. In fact, the whole concept of baptism is quite popular. Like, "God grabbed me at my baptism and made me his for eternity!" You mean, I don't need to cooperate? I'm some kind of robot?

Or "baptism" as spiritual life insurance: "Make sure to get baby Johnny done in case he should get sick and die - so he doesn't end up in Limbo." "Even if it means nothing to you. Please have little Suzie baptized. It will mean so much to Gramma!"

Whether you were baptized when you were three weeks old, or whether you were baptized in Lake Superior when you were 25, your baptism is not complete until you take care of your side of it - until you abandon yourself to God, and die under those waters like Jesus did, and come up under the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:3-4

- newness of life!

- a different life!

Baptism is a death and resurrection that we choose to enter.

I abandon myself to God in those waters, whether it's 10 drops or 10,000 gallons. I rise to be anointed by the power of the Spirit. There has to be a moment in my life when I actually do that - even if I was baptized 50 years

ago - a time when I complete the thing. I turn my life over, I die to myself, so that God can raise me to new life.

Most of us are still living on the wrong side of baptism; we're living as if we'd never been baptized. God is still waiting for us to do what Jesus did, what the Ethiopian man did; to die under those waters so that the Father can raise us by his Spirit to a radically new life.

This Ethiopian man went to a lot of trouble in his search for God. He was rich, a high-ranking official in the government of Ethiopia. And he was smart, with brains enough and motivation to learn the Hebrew language in his search for God - because he was convinced that the Jews had the answers he was looking for. And he was right.

This Ethiopian took time away from his official duties to travel all the way up to Jerusalem and learn about God. Meanwhile, God was watching over this man, just as God is watching over each of us.

Now he's on his way home in his chariot, reading Isaiah, Chapter 53. He is still incomplete, still not satisfied, still searching. Philip, a Jewish man of much lower rank in this world, is directed across his path. Philip runs up to the chariot:

"Do you understand what you're reading?"

"How can I unless someone guides me? Come on up and help me."

Isaiah 53, written centuries before, is the gospel of the cross in prophecy form. Philip explains who Jesus is and what Jesus has done, and how this Ethiopian man can have new life.

"Look, here is water. Why can't I be baptized?" We are told that they both went down into the water. In that water the Ethiopian went further down into death with his Lord Jesus. He came up a new man, and went on his way rejoicing. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled."

But let's suppose that the Ethiopian man came up out of the water unchanged. The baptism didn't seem to take. Let's suppose he returns to Ethiopia and remembers his baptism as a mere ritual. Nothing happened. He's still unfulfilled.

One morning as he's praying to God he cries out, "Oh God where is this new life that you promised?" And the answer comes back, "It's still waiting for you."

"Why didn't it come to me when Philip baptized me?" And God answers, "How could I give you new life until you give me your old life? You can't rise with Jesus to a new life until you die with Jesus to your old life."

So the Ethiopian man immediately offers up his life - abandons himself - goes down into those waters with his heart and spirit. Now his baptism is complete. He rises with Jesus into the life of the Spirit. And every day for the rest of his life he renews the process - dies to himself, rises to the will of God, denies himself, takes up his cross, and follows Jesus with power.

Our baptism, no matter how properly it was done, is only as good as the death we died there. Jesus died to himself in those waters. The Ethiopian died to himself in those waters. We have to do the same.

What does it mean to die to ourselves? It means first of all, that you join yourself by faith to Jesus' death.

"I am crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?"

Secondly, to die to yourself means that you deliberately think of your ego as buried with Jesus under that water.

My need to be somebody is under the water.

My need to vindicate myself is under the water.

My need to justify myself---dead.

I come up out of the water like Jesus came up, like the Ethiopian came up, alive to God. And now God's Holy Spirit begins to move in me with power. I am a different man, a different woman, because now the Lord sits on the throne of my heart, guides me, empowers me, floods me with a love for God and people which is not my own, and convicts me when I go off the track.

My friends, who want me to return to the old way, are upset. They think I'm "losing it," just as Jesus' family thought he was beside himself. But that's okay. I'm alive, and so are my sisters and brothers in the Body of Christ.

Together we've been raised from death to the high ground of life in the Spirit. We're starting to minister, to serve. The power of God's kingdom is pouring through us for the healing and blessing of others. And as long as we keep renewing the covenant every day, dying to ourselves and rising with the Lord Jesus to life in his Spirit, God's life keeps pouring through us.

So let's go back once more to that moment when we were put under the water in the name of the Lord Jesus. Let's turn it from a ritual into a true covenant with God. God has already taken care of his side of the covenant.

"All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

But we need to attend to our side of the covenant. God will take us at our word. If we offer ourselves now he will receive us. He will bury us with his Son, and he will raise us up by the power of his Spirit, into resurrection life. And each of us can step forth from this moment, a new man, a new woman, a servant of the living God, free and strong, to do the Father's will.