

“What must I do to be saved?” (Part Two)

Reflection 18 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

It's truly unfortunate that in all the twisted debate over baptism, more people do not see that baptism is this marvelous gift, offered in freedom and offered not because God needs it (even to save us) but because every human soul needs it. It corresponds to the deepest needs every human being has.

You see, baptism is God's offer, God's gift of salvation, God's gift of forgiveness, God's gift of grace, God's gift of eternal innocence, even to those (in Acts 2) whose hands are still wet with the blood of the Messiah. It's a rebirth, a starting over, a fundamental turning point in one's life, the transforming moment, when one takes on one's mature identity. It's a reference point I can always go back to. It's fundamentally important to what goes on inside me. It's my identification with the dying and rising of Jesus. It's my ego death when I move from a relatively limited way of experiencing myself to a new and expanded way that transcends my ego and its narrow, partial way of seeing the world. Old personality structures “die.” Unsuccessful ways of being in this world “die.” My ego dies so that a larger self-definition becomes available and larger, more expansive life becomes possible, so that that I might come to a larger and kinder understanding of God and life and other people and even myself.

Baptism's designed to be the archetype of my life, the pattern stamped deeply on my consciousness, a putting off, a burial of old life, a cleansing, a return to the innocence, a putting on, a spiritual resurrection. It's the physical embodiment for everything my life is about. So, remember and never forget that God does not call us to baptism arbitrarily or simply as a matter of exerting his authority. He calls us to baptism because deep in our souls we all need it. Deep in our bodies we all need it. You. Me. Everyone.

We all know that we have done things that are wrong and that there is no real way to take them back. We all have blood on our hands. We all have refused others the forgiveness we know we need ourselves. We all have seen the tattered and bleeding lives of others and have passed by on the other side. And baptism is God's way to say: Experience the salvation I offer you. Know the forgiveness. Feel the cleanness. Remember the feeling as a child when you woke up and morning smiled. Sense again the Spirit of the living God. Nothing else ever imagined – other than immersion in water – so embodies life's central and most primal truths, death to the old self, death to the old ways, the unsuccessful ways of being in this world, cleanness, forgiveness, innocence, and spiritual rebirth or resurrection. In a word, salvation! And everyone on earth needs it, from the desolate hills of Afghanistan to the apparently respectable suburbs of America.

But what I also want us to see is maybe something you've not quite seen before, something central to understanding the salvation of our God. I'd caught glimpses of it before but only now in more recent years and in my ongoing quest to encounter the presence of God do I see the

importance of embodying these spiritual truths. To be human is to have a body. Right? Obvious, right? But when we turn theological we forget this over and over. Yes, we are soul. We are spirit. Though we're not really sure what any of that means. But we are also body – and that we do know. We do feel that. And in our walk of faith we are meant to take our bodies seriously, to cherish them, respect them, celebrate them, honor them.

And when we participate in the great rituals of faith we enter into them body and soul. The bread and the cup in Communion are not just symbols or emblems; they are a participation in the body and blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16). And when we come to baptism, we bodily, down on cellular level, experience salvation, the forgiveness and presence of God. In baptism we embody life's deepest truths, and we invite God, we call on God to enter us body and soul and to fill us, to heal us, to save us. And we feel the forgiveness of God. Deep in our bodies. We feel God's Spirit. Inside us. We feel the pleasure of God and the presence of God. And if we have learned to encounter the presence of God, we will experience in our baptism a washing over and over in the loving warmth of his presence. And this, for sure, is to experience salvation.

So this is the truth, and this truth is salvation: Every human being, sooner or later, has to experience a turning point, a radical rebirth from above, a transforming moment, a rite of passage in which they break from old ways of doing things, in which they pass through a kind of death experience from which they rise to new life, and then are incorporated into a mature community of faith, now charged with supernatural energy and feeling reborn, rejuvenated, sometimes euphoric, transformed, consecrated, and connected to God, the universe and others, increasingly conscious of God, realizing that every breath they take is God's.

This then is the great gift: if you've not already experienced it, to come to your transforming moment when you break from old ways of doing things, when you pass through a kind of death experience from which you rise to new life, putting God first in the morning, remembering God often through the day, for short bursts, remembering that every breath you take is God's, mindfully sensing the presence of God in the food you eat, the work you do, the people you meet, and the struggles you face. This is your own soul's deepest need, but it's also your own body's deepest need: to body and soul break with the old ways of living and thinking, to know all this – the forgiveness and presence of God – in your body, and then to undergo your own ego death, and your own rebirth to a larger and kinder understanding of life and God and other people and yourself. And when this happens you will know the salvation of our God.

– Dale Pauls