

Sunday June 27, 2010
TOB Baptism Celebration
CAN PEOPLE CHANGE?

1. The core question when it comes to baptism is -- ***Can people change? Really?*** I say that because despair seems to be the dominant narrative of life; “I guess that’s just the way it ***has*** to be.”

-And cynicism is the form of despair that applies to people. There’s a phenomena in the world you’ve probably heard of called ***Jailhouse Religion***. It’s when a person has been convicted of a crime—sometimes a violent one. They start attending religious meetings, praying, reading their Bibles, talking about Jesus or God. They would say something like, “I’m different! I’ve been born again! I’m sorry for my sin—and now I’m going to live for God instead of hurting others!”

-If you talk to prison guards and police—and, especially victims—they hear this and usually roll their eyes, and say, “Yeah! Right!” And there’s a reason for that. When people are caught and facing punishment, it’s ***in their interests*** to appear to be changed. After all, within the restraints of a prison, what other options are there? Might as well do something that will influence the parole board. And ***that could be true***. Or, maybe, God reached out to them when they were at rock bottom and rescued them.

-Baptism is our statement that ***we*** believe it can be different; that people can, in fact, change. When people climb into a tank, a tub, a pool—or walk into a stream or a lake, it is an act of ***faith***—that God will keep His promise and, with their cooperation, ***change*** them. Change the way they think. Change the way their live. Change their understanding of their past. Change their status from ***unforgiven***—to forgiven. Change them for all eternity.

2. What I would like you to do this morning is to imagine yourself at the water’s edge. Now, this is a hot tub—but just imagine that it’s a lake, river—or stream. If you see yourself there, it’s right there—at the water’s edge—where God’s people, throughout history, have found themselves. I want to look at some of the snapshots in the earliest documents of people who followed God.

-The earliest picture is that of a group of people asking -- can God stop the advancement of death?

It was the Israelites. They’d been released from slavery in Egypt by God’s power. Now they’re trapped. The most powerful army in the world is coming at them—with the mountains on one side, the sea on the other.

Death is certain. But then God opened a way through the sea for his people—which, of course, they took. And when death—in the form of the Egyptian army—tried to follow, God simply allowed the sea to go back to its original boundaries. And the advancement of death stopped immediately. You could say, ***death died*** in the middle of the sea! And the nation that was formed that day—still exists.

3. Another snapshot. This time the one standing at the edge of the river—the Jordan River—is an Aramaean Prime Minister and military commander named Naaman. He has tremendous prestige and wealth and power. But he’s a dead man walking, because he has leprosy—and he was dying one piece at a time. The question is--can God stop the advancement of disease?

-A little Jewish servant girl, captured by him in one of his military campaigns, served his wife—and told her about a prophet in her country who could heal him. Well, when he found out about that, he loaded up his camels with money and clothes and paid this guy, Elisha, a visit. But he was disappointed. He expected Elisha to come out, wave his hands, call on God—and do magic. Elisha just sent him a message to go and bathe seven times in the Jordan.

-Well, he pulled a tantrum—said, “I’ve got better rivers than this in my **own** country!” But some of his servants said, “Why don’t you at **least** give it a try?” So he did. And he came up **clean!** He made it clear to Elisha that **this** was a turning point; that this God who healed him would be the God he worshipped all his days!

4. Another snapshot at the water’s edge. It’s the nation of Israel again—and they were standing at the edge of this same river asking the question, DOES GOD KEEP HIS PROMISES?

-Their parents had been there 40 years before, led by Moses—and they **didn’t** believe that God would keep his promise to give them the land. And they had heard from their parents the rumors of giant fruit—protected by giant people and giant walls—and the dread of being kidnapped or slaughtered. And they turned back—and wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. **40 years!**

-And the question was--would God go with them...or not? Well, as they stepped **into** the river--God made a way through the river. And to mark Lord’s intervention in case of future panic attacks, they pulled stones from the middle of the river—and made a monument on the shore.

5. Well, move ahead about 1400 years, and this God would kick off the next phase of making things right in the world—right on the banks of that same river—the Jordan River—maybe not all that far from the stone monument. John, the one who was making a way for the Messiah was baptizing people there—telling them, **Repent!** That is, “Change your mind! Think in totally new ways about the way you’ve been living, about God, about your future, about life and death and what matters and what doesn’t!” And as a way of marking that repentance, John baptized people. It symbolized a fresh start. A washing away of sins.

-And into the river, one day, stepped Jesus. God had shown up at the river once again. John said, “What are **You** doing here asking to be baptized by **me?** I’m the sinner; you have no sin—you ought to be baptizing **me!**” But by being baptized, Jesus was looking forward. He was looking forward to the time when He would take on my sin and yours—and die for the whole mess. He was looking forward to people who might refuse baptism and say, “Jesus was never baptized, so why should I be

baptized.” And that day, at Jesus’ baptism, there was this snapshot of the Son—in the water; the Father who spoke from Heaven and said, “This is my Son in whom I’m well-pleased!” and the Spirit who would light on Jesus—and give him power as an ordinary man, though God, to do amazing things.

-And the question was...is...”Will God invade history—or will the whole mess just continue to disintegrate into a giant meltdown? Well, it was clear through Jesus that God *wasn’t* going to just let things go; that His plan was to make all things new through His Son, Jesus.

-Right before Jesus ascended once again to the Father, He told his followers what to do with people who would find themselves with their toes in the water—wondering whether to move forward...or not:

“I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20 NLT)

-And you need to know that’s *exactly* why we’re doing what we’re doing to day. That’s why people would come up and get soaking wet in front of a group of people. And that’s why there will be cheering and shouting. We believe people can change. We’ve been changed. We’re not as changed as we *want* to be—but that’s okay! It’s good.

- a. See, baptism is, at the core, an act of faith. The Bible tells people to be baptized right away. Why? Why not wait to see if people are really serious or not? It’s because it’s the best symbol of God’s grace and forgiveness. God meets us where we are—and offers us life, hope, forgiveness—and a new identity—*just as we are. No matter how we feel.*

-Religion does the opposite. It points you to the treadmill of *do*. And, with religion, moral improvement, helping others, showing compassion becomes selfish in nature. It becomes about *you* proving yourself--earning your way to Heaven or to God or to some position of status. God takes us as we are, forgives and redeems us—then says, “We’re good! Our relationship is taken care of—you don’t have to earn a thing; I’ve put my Spirit in you—so go make a difference out of love or Me and love for others! I don’t operate on the brownie point system!”

-And, friends—*baptism is our first act of following Jesus*. When we step into the water—simply out of love and respect for Jesus who told us to—it’s a powerful moment. It’s where we drive the stake. It’s where we say, “Okay, God—if I’m going to go public on this thing—well, you’re going to have to help me or I’ll drop the ball!” **AND HE DOES! BECAUSE, SEE, PEOPLE CAN CHANGE!**

- b. Know how they change? The Spirit of God. The same One who met Jesus that day at the Jordan; the same One who empowered Him to heal the sick, cast out

demons, raise the dead—now meets us as, in this act of baptism, we **identify** with Him and claim His name! This is not behavior modification—it's **true change**. The Spirit comes—lives in us, and changes us from the inside out. If you doubt me—read the history books. Paul, who hated and murdered people who followed Jesus got was transformed—and laid his life on the line for those same people—and for Jesus.

-John Newton, a man who ripped people from their families and tribes in Africa—and sold them as slaves—later was transformed and helped stop the slave trade. He wrote the song, **Amazing Grace** about his experience.

-The **Son of Sam** killer—Sam Berkowitz—the most-feared serial killer ever in NYC—was transformed and now, from his prison cell, tells about Jesus, transformer of lives. It's pretty powerful when a serial murderer says, "If He changed me...he can change **anybody!**"

6. I'm just going to be very straightforward with you this morning. Today we have five courageous people who are ready to be baptized. And they're scared—but they're chomping at the bit. I believe there are some of you today—even though you haven't brought your stuff—who need to join them. You've obeyed Jesus in this way—and today—it's time.

-You need to know that the common denominator between them and the others in history who've stepped forward is...**Fear!**

*With the Israelites: Will God save us from death?

*With Naaman: Will God heal my life?

*With the Jewish people who stood once again at the Jordan, after 40 years of wandering and asked, "Will God keep His promises."

*Even with Jesus, I'm guessing the thought at least crossed his mind, "What will people think?"

-We are people who find ourselves on the threshold of trusting God when we can't see, our toes in the water, wondering, "Will God show up?"

- a. Some of you need to take a stand to stop the advance of death in your life. You're sitting on the fence—and so death just keeps marching forward.

-Some of you need to stop the advancement of disease—whether it's your ego, your temper, your need to be right—whatever—but it's something that is taking you down, ruining your life, one piece at a time.

-Some of you need to just cut the strings of all the stuff you've been dragging behind you—that are wearing you out. And today—you need to just choose to move in a new direction that is empowered by the Spirit—the One who brings change.

- b. Jesus calls us to be baptized, because we need to mark the places in our lives where we step out of the ordinary; we step out of the shadows of **maybe I will,**

maybe I won't—and get off the fence and step into new life—in faith. Is it scary, going public? Yep! But I can guarantee you—it won't get any easier than it is today. And if the Spirit of God is speaking to you—He's doing that for a reason. And you need to obey.

- c. The simple message of Jesus is, ***I am real; I can forgive you and give you life and make you new. So, BELIEVE!***
Go ahead, put your weight on Me and what I've done.
REPENT! Change your mind.
Think in new ways about life - about what matters and what doesn't!
And BE BAPTIZED! I'll take care of the rest!