

# **Baptism: A Biblical Theology Survey**

## **Part One: The Images of Baptism**

### **Various texts**

*Pastor Dale Evans: June 11, 2017 (pm)*

### **Introduction**

We are celebrating the central event of all history and one's proclamation of solidarity of that event this evening. Pastor Russ asked if I would give a Biblical theology of Baptism as an introduction to our celebration this evening. As I thought of this task, it seemed at bit large to accomplish in one sermonette. So I have permission to break it into two or three parts, the latter have yet to be prepared or scheduled.

Let us start with a couple of definitions. I am certain that the title of tonight's presentation prompts at least one question; exactly what is "Biblical Theology?" Well it is not a description of a theology that has its basis in the Bible as opposed to a philosophical or rational theology. That is true of Biblical theology indeed but not what its name implies. It is a way of reading the Bible that takes seriously the way that the Biblical authors read and used the Biblical materials written and the events of redemptive history that occurred before them. It attempts to see the Bible's storyline, its use of symbolism and our current position in redemptive history as the best way to understand both the big picture of what the Bible is about and the individual texts that we encounter when we read, interpret and apply the Bible today. A subset of this is to lean upon the order and structure of the Bible to gain access into God's design. A "canonical-biblical theology" might look just a smidge different than a purely "redemptive-historical-biblical theology" but they are different only in emphasis not in substance.

So we are talking about an understanding of baptism that seeks to understand this idea as presented in the Bible by the Bible's authors as they are writing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to explain God's plans and purposes. Therefore for tonight I want us to look at some of the images associated with the idea of baptism.

Probably to begin, I have to give some defense of the idea of God's revealing his work and character in the use of both image and metaphor. Images are visual pictorial representations of complex concepts. Each image may add and build to the idea that is discussed and is intended to help our finite minds to more completely grasp and understand the idea. Two common images used are those of a tree and that of a garden. Let us briefly look at the use of these images to introduce the idea tonight.

The concept of tree is first introduced in Genesis chapter 2:9. We read there:

*And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*

The idea of tree serves many images that are elaborated on in the text but one of the continued ideas involves God's relationship with man. It is played out in the making of the lampstand for the tabernacle/temple. Sometime later read Exodus 25:31-33. And in Galatians 3:13, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 21 and states that Jesus particular means of death was to accomplish a relational transaction, that of taking our curse when he says:

*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"*

And the Bible closes with a return to the tree image as we read in Revelation 22:2:

*also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.*

The idea of tree is actually expanded in the idea of garden or paradise. If we go back to Genesis 2 we find our tree image is embedded in the larger image of garden, a place where God communes with his people. Lets go back to Genesis 2:8 and add 3:8.

*And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. <sup>9</sup> And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.*

The garden motif as the place of God's presence and blessing is found in Isaiah in both 51:1-3 and in 58:8-12. Those are valuable passages to read. And again it finds its closure in Revelation where New Jerusalem is described with garden images again as well. We read in Revelation 22:1-2:

*Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb <sup>2</sup> through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.*

Another common way to use symbolism is through metaphor. Metaphor is a verbal way to think of something by way of comparison. Either directly through a phrase “this is like that” or just by describing things also helps us understand a concept more completely. Common metaphors used in the Bible are that of marriage and kingdom. Marriage is illustrated beginning with Genesis 2:18, and is carried through Hosea 2:2 and Malachi 2:14 and then into the New Testament in Matthew 19:6, Ephesians 5:21, and finishes in Revelation 19:6-8. Lets just read Revelation 19:6-8:

*Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,  
“Hallelujah!  
For the Lord our God  
the Almighty reigns.  
7 Let us rejoice and exult  
and give him the glory,  
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,  
and his Bride has made herself ready;  
8 it was granted her to clothe herself  
with fine linen, bright and pure”—  
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.*

Another frequent metaphor is that of kingdom. We see God himself referenced as king in Exodus 15:18. The idea of God’s kingdom being one of order and blessing is seen in several Psalms (especially 103:19, 145:11) and in many prophetic references (especially Isaiah 52:7). In the New Testament it is one of the motifs used in Jesus’ own preaching as found in Mark 1:15. Several weeks back we saw in Acts 1:6, the disciples’ questions regarding the kingdom and again the Bible closes with kingdom references in Revelation 11:15

## **The Old Testament Images of Baptism**

With respect to baptism we must come to grips with the meaning-laden symbol of water. Water in the Bible is used a number of ways and many of them impact how we ought to think about baptism.

The first idea is that of rescue either out of or through water. It begins with the idea of order being established from water in creation and judgment occurring in flood. The New Testament then uses this to cause us to see ahead to a more complete and final judgment and ordering. Let us read these passages in sequence:

Genesis 1:1,2

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. 2 The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of*

*the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.*

Genesis 6:17,18

*For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die. <sup>18</sup> But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you.*

II Peter 3:5-7

*For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, <sup>6</sup> and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. <sup>7</sup> But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.*

But the Israelites would have also seen rescue from water as important. Moses personally was rescued in water and the Israelites came through water at the Exodus and entered the promised land through water as well. Again let us read these texts in sequence:

Exodus 2:1-3,10

*Now a man from the house of Levi went and took as his wife a Levite woman. <sup>2</sup> The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months. <sup>3</sup> When she could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and placed it among the reeds by the river bank. <sup>10</sup> When the child grew older, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, "Because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."*

Exodus 14:15-18

*The Lord said to Moses, "Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward. <sup>16</sup> Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground. <sup>17</sup> And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. <sup>18</sup> And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen."*

Joshua 3:14-17

*So when the people set out from their tents to pass over the Jordan with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, <sup>15</sup> and as soon as those bearing the ark had come as far as the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water (now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest), <sup>16</sup> the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap very far away, at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, and those flowing down toward the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off. And the people passed over opposite Jericho. <sup>17</sup> Now the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firmly on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, and all Israel was passing over on dry ground until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan.*

So we see the image of rescue from water is an important, recurring motif in the unfolding of the storyline of the Egyptians. They were to rehearse these stories and were imbedded in memorials like the Passover as visible reminders of God's deliverance.

But water was also used in sense of washing and cleansing, both actual and ceremonially to make a person or object clean for use before God. This cleansing often created a "new" identity for the object or person. We could read Genesis 18:4, Job 9:28, Psalm 51:2, Isaiah 1:16 for further illustrations. Let's return to Exodus 19:2-11 that we read this morning in light of this cleansing and new identity:

*There Israel encamped before the mountain, <sup>3</sup> while Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: <sup>4</sup> 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. <sup>5</sup> Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; <sup>6</sup> and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel."*

*<sup>7</sup> So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. <sup>8</sup> All the people answered together and said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do." And Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord. <sup>9</sup> And the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever."*

*When Moses told the words of the people to the Lord, <sup>10</sup> the Lord said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments <sup>11</sup> and be ready for the*

*third day. For on the third day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.*

And finishes with Revelation 7:9,13-14 where we read:

*<sup>9</sup> After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,  
<sup>13</sup> Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" <sup>14</sup> I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."*

The Old Testament also involves water as a symbol of empowerment and can be seen in passages like Isaiah 44:3, Ezekiel 39:29 and Joel 2:28.

## **The New Testament Images of Baptism**

So when we come to the New Testament we are nearly immediately confronted with this idea of the use of water in an event referred to as baptism.

Baptism is presented without much introduction or explanation, so was likely understood clearly by the first observers and then readers of these events. It would have invoked those ideas we have just read about.

John was baptizing in the Jordan River (remember all of our symbols for water) that was to identify people with the coming of God (Messiah); that symbolized their repentance and cleansing from sin and prepared/empowered them for his arrival. And even John understood his baptism as symbolic of something greater that was yet to come. It was a symbol for something built upon symbols itself. Let us read several of these John the Baptizer references:

Matthew 3:1-6

*In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, <sup>2</sup> "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." <sup>3</sup> For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,  
"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'"  
<sup>4</sup> Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup> Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were*

*going out to him,<sup>6</sup> and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.*

And as elaborated by Luke in 3:3:

*<sup>3</sup> And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

And by John in 1:22-27:

*So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"<sup>23</sup> He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."*

*<sup>24</sup> (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.)<sup>25</sup> They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"<sup>26</sup> John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know,<sup>27</sup> even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."*

Other images of this idea of baptism involve the idea of enclosure, being fully immersed and its "surroundedness." We see this when Jesus is discussing his death he describes it as a baptism. This prepares us to see baptism as the reverse symbol then as well. First in Mark we see Jesus using this metaphor to teach his disciples then Peter uses this and gives his Old Testament analogy to bring full circle to this idea of death and cleansing. Let us read these texts:

Mark 10:35-45

*And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."<sup>36</sup> And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?"<sup>37</sup> And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."<sup>38</sup> Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"<sup>39</sup> And they said to him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized,<sup>40</sup> but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."<sup>41</sup> And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John.<sup>42</sup> And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.<sup>43</sup> But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,<sup>44</sup> and whoever would be*

*first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup> For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

#### I Peter 3:18-22

*For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, <sup>19</sup> in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, <sup>20</sup> because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. <sup>21</sup> Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, <sup>22</sup> who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.*

The apostle Paul then brings all of this to a conclusion in texts like Colossians 2:12 and Romans 6:4. He points out the symbolism of the event is to remind us of the realities that are symbolized. These realities are what truly have transformed and remade us. Our new creation and deliverance, new identities and cleansing are all involved in this glorious picture. And then this picture should encourage and challenge us to continue to live out the reality that has been made possible. Let us read these two passages from Paul, Colossians 2:6-15 and Romans 6:1-4:

#### Colossians 2:6-15

*Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, <sup>7</sup> rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. <sup>8</sup> See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. <sup>9</sup> For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, <sup>10</sup> and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. <sup>11</sup> 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, <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, <sup>14</sup> by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. <sup>15</sup> He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.*



Romans 6:1-4

*What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? <sup>2</sup> By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? <sup>3</sup> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*

## **Conclusion**

We do not approach these events like baptism as mere liturgy. That is “things we do just because.” They are meaningful and communicating symbols. Baptism challenges each of us to proclaim our identity with Christ in his work, to trust in the absolute removal of guilt and sin accomplished by His death and burial. It pictures our rescue, cleansing and deliverance from sin and death. It symbolizes our identity with Jesus and his work and even his sufferings. It challenges us now to live in light of the resurrection life He possesses and now gives to all who believe. It reminds all of us that we are identified by our faith in Christ and have new life and love in and through one another.

The one baptized is testifying that God’s work has been done for them and they trust both now and pledge to trust forever. We should be reminded of the same for us and then we should look together and say to one another, we are His, let us each encourage one another to live in newness of life because of our identity in Him, Jesus Christ our Lord!