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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

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Baptism

Selected Scriptures

Prayer: *Father, we do again, we thank you for your church, we thank you for the grace that you have bestowed upon us. What a blessing it is to be able to have a baptism service today, and we just thank you for baptism itself. And Father, today we're going to examine baptism and again, I just -- I pray that your Spirit would guide us, that your book would lead us and that we would be understanding what you have for us. I pray that you would open up your word and again, that it may be of permanent value and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, as we've said, today is baptism Sunday, it's going to be our picnic as well, and once a year we get together for fellowship and food and provide an opportunity for folks to get baptized. We meet at Spears pond, and as I think most of you don't know how to get there, if you don't, you can follow somebody, because a pond is also a great place for a baptism and, you know, if you've never been baptized, there really are three questions that you need to have answered before you consider taking this step. The first

question is: Just what is baptism? The second is: What is the point of baptism? And the third is: Why should I get baptized? I want to reprise my baptism message of last year just to answer those questions.

First question: What is baptism? Well, the word "baptize" is just a transliteration of the Greek word "baptizo" which means to immerse something in liquid. If the Greeks were going to dye a piece of cloth, they would baptize it by immersing it in a vat filled with dye. So the word "baptize" means merely to immerse something in liquid. What is the point of immersing someone in liquid, that is, in water? Well, the actual ritual of baptism consists in being plunged beneath the surface of the water and then immediately being brought back up out of the water. It's a powerful symbolic act that demonstrates three different aspects of the believer's new life in Christ. In this act, there is death, there is burial, and there is resurrection, and it's all summed up in one single act.

So first let's look at this idea of death. God says in Romans 6 that *the wages of sin is death*. In *Ezekiel 18*, it says: *The soul that sins, it shall die*. That's a spiritual pronouncement of fact that's more certain, more set and more determined than any physical pronouncement you might think of. When we sin, we die. That may

be a hard thing to convince people of, because the judgment of sin isn't immediate, folks tend to think that it's nonexistent. If we go back to the Garden of Eden, we have this scene, God tells Adam in the Garden of Eden *Genesis 2:16*, it says: "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." God says you eat this fruit and you will die. Adam and Eve both ate. Guess what? They didn't immediately drop dead. Now, they had instantly changed from being the flawless creatures they were who had shared perfection itself with their creator, they had now become flawed, fallen creatures, no longer perfect, no longer suited for fellowship with their creator and there was certain immediate but non lethal effects. I mean, they instantly knew that they were naked. They were filled with fear. They were filled with guilt. But there seemed to be no immediate physical effect. Well, they didn't realize it but from the moment that that fruit touched their lips, they began the process of dying, and it happened to take hundreds of years to complete. Now for us it takes considerably less time, but I think every one of us know that we are all in the process of dying. It's the separation of cause and effect that allows people this fantasy of thinking that somehow our sin is not going to find us out. You know, if the moment you sinned you died, there'd be no sin because there'd be no people. And because God withholds his judgment and he gives us

time and opportunity to repent, we frequently blur the connection from sin to death. This was not the case for Jesus. He knew precisely that the wages of sin is death because it was our sin that led to his death. *John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."* And make no mistake about it, we are, all of us, on our way to perishing because all of us have inherited Adam and Eve's predilection for law breaking.

Now, folks think that God gave us the law, these ten commandments as kind of a set of guidelines, a way to order our lives. They are not. They are a set of non negotiable demands that the King has placed upon his subjects. You see, God is the king and we are his subjects, and violating any of these commands in any way is a capital offense for which every one of us has earned the death penalty. *Romans 3:19 says: Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.*

Most folks don't consciously think of themselves as accountable to God, and certainly most folks don't think of themselves as guilty of a capital offense. That's because all of us think of death as just a natural part of living, but it was never, never supposed to be that way. There was Adam's rebellion that introduced us to sin and brought death into our world. *Romans 5:12 says: Sin came into*

the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned. You know, death may seem natural because we accept it as a part of our existence, but it's not. And because of Adam, we are all born under this death sentence and it is the distractions of living that make us forget that we are all in the process of dying.

I used to visit a friend in a nursing home and it was an incredibly depressing place. Any of you who have been to a nursing home, you'd know what this is like. They bring all the folks out into this kind of a large room and they're all there and most of them are in wheelchairs, they're all in that advanced age and a lot of them are just staring straight ahead, talking to themselves, just out there. Some are playing cards, some are playing bingo, but you get this sense when you're in a place like that that every one of them are there, they're just waiting their turn to die. And it's their turn today; it will be our turn tomorrow. See, eventually every one of us will have to come face to face with the fact that every one of us is facing that same death penalty for our sins, and the fact that we're able to put such a distance between the sin in our lives and the death penalty that the sin demands, it only serves to hide the obvious and that is that we are born and we live under the sentence of death. But you know, God hates that. God sent his Son into the world to rescue us from the curse of death so

that *"Whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."* Jesus came to perfectly fulfill what the ten commandments demanded, and after having done that, he stood in our place being filled with our guilt for our sin. We did the sinning and he did the dying so we wouldn't have to die eternally. And death is the very first thing that baptism is all about. You see, baptism first symbolically represents death. Secondly, it represents burial. But here's the good news about this particular death and burial in baptism. This is a death that you choose and also it is the door to life. You know, Jesus said this in *Matthew 10:39*, he said: *"Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."* You see, baptism represents your willingness to lose your old life for Christ's sake and Christ partnering with you in a brand new life. And when you go under the water, you are not representing just one burial, you're representing two. See, in baptism you do not go under that water alone. I mean, you are there but also there with you being symbolically buried in that water with you is Christ. *Romans 6:3* says this: *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, 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.* So we are dead and buried with Christ as we go under the water.

And so first we have death to our old life. Secondly, we have burial, we are buried with Christ in our sins; and then thirdly we have resurrection, *"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."* See, we are raised and released as we come back up. In Christ we are now dead to sin. That sounds awful theological to some. What does that mean when we say we are now dead to sin? You know, I lust, I envy, I lie, I gossip, I steal, then I got baptized with Christ and it all goes away. Is that how it works? Well, the answer to that question put that way is: No. Baptism doesn't do that at all. You see, baptism doesn't confer new life. It is God alone who can do that. Baptism simply demonstrates that new life has already taken place. You know, Paul tells us in Ephesians 2 that we were all by nature dead in our trespasses and sins, that no matter how hard we tried, we still lusted and envied and lied and all these other things that God's law had forbidden. God says we had hearts that were dead set against the will of God. Well, baptism is a symbolic way of demonstrating that that person who has a heart that was once dead set against the will of God, that person has died. He or she is the one being buried with Christ under the waters of baptism. Now, some folks mistakenly think that it's the waters of baptism that are designed to cleanse us from sin. They don't have the power to do that. The only power to do that lies in

the blood of Jesus Christ. You see, baptism doesn't cleanse us from sin, it is instead a sign that that cleansing has already taken place. Baptism is actually a celebration and a demonstration of a successful heart transplant that's been undertaken by God himself. That event God makes perfectly clear in *Ezekiel 36*, you've heard me quote the scripture countless times, but what you might not realize is its connection to baptism. Listen to what God says in *Ezekiel 36:25*, it says: *I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.* See, when God speaks about burying the old life in baptism and coming back out of the water celebrating this newness of life in Christ, he's talking about something far more profound than just getting our acts together and cleaning ourselves up. He's literally speaking about a new way of living and having re-created a brand new life to live, of having an ice cold heart of stone surgically removed and a living, breathing heart of flesh surgically implanted. God says: *I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.* Now, for all of us, that is a brand new way of walking. You know, God's law said to us you

must do this, you must not do that, and we felt bound and imprisoned by that law. I mean, not only could we not do it, we had no desire to do it in the first place. We were what you call prisoners of the law.

A while back I had an opportunity to see -- to see how that works up close and personal. I had an opportunity to counsel a couple who was not from our church who were planning to get married. I didn't marry them but they were -- one of them was a non-believer, friends of mine asked if I would just sit down with them and talk to them about marriage itself, give them some counsel about what it was like to be married and married life. Actually the bride to be was someone who had been away from the for church many, many years. As I said, the groom was up front about the fact that he wasn't a Christian. And so I saw it as an opportunity to present the gospel. So I agreed and I met with them about four or five times, and each time I met, I had the opportunity to explain what difference the gospel would make in somebody's life. And you know, the last time we met, the prospective groom, he just blurted out how -- how tired he was of the emptiness of all the relationships that he had. He told me how he's watched how the marriages of all of his friends just disintegrate to these empty shells of what they were supposed to be, he sees his friends all biting and devouring each other, and he told me how empty the thoughts and the

conversations of even his best friends were. He said he feels locked into a pattern where everything is just cynically taken for granted and nothing means anything to anyone. He said no one even knows or cares to know if there's even something better out there. He said -- he said, "I hate where I am." So I told him flat out, I said, "You need the gospel of Jesus Christ. You need to make him Lord of your life and trust him with all the rest." He couldn't do it at that point. Here's where the prisoner part becomes self-evident. You see, he knows, he knows exactly where he is, and he hates where he is. And yet he also knows that he lacks the will to change where he is. He knows what the right thing is, he knows how you're supposed to do the right thing, he just doesn't have the ability to want to do the right thing enough to do it. He's a prisoner of the law. Paul said this in *Romans 7:14*, he said: *For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*

See, as long as we live, that law, that law has the power to demand what we cannot supply. And in baptism, the plunging under the water is a living picture of what it means to die to that power that the law has. See, we're talking about dying to one way of living and being re-created to live in a new one, and when we say we are dead to sin, we mean that the power sin used to have over us

has been ended and it's been ended by a death. Now, once a person has died, he has been freed from any power that the law has over him. You know, if you remember back to the collapse of Libya, one of the horrifying scenarios there was people walking around parading the body of Muammar Gaddafi, and what folks were doing was that they were demonstrating their hatred of Gaddafi by showing off his bloody corpse, but you know, display it was really all they could do. I mean, you could beat a corpse, you could desecrate it, you could threaten it, you could -- you could torture it, but it's only symbolic because for all practical purposes, nothing can touch a dead man. In one sense he's absolutely free. The only problem is he's dead.

But what if you had the very same freedom? What if the law could no longer touch you because it saw you as a dead man but you're still very much alive? Well, that's what baptism represents. *Romans 7:4* says this, it says: *Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.* You know, imagine you worked for an incredibly perfectionistic boss who did everything perfectly and he demanded that you also do everything perfectly as well and you ask him, "Is this ever going to get better?" He says, "Not until the day you die." Well, in baptism you symbolize that the

day you placed your faith in Christ is the day you died. You died to the law and its demands of perfection. You died to the law because Jesus Christ stood in your place to receive your punishment and now you are dead to its demands. You have been buried with Christ under the water and now you are resurrected with him as well. *Romans 6:4* says: *"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."*

You know again, this -- this may just sound too spiritual to some. Let me make this as practical as I can. I raise the question about dying to sin this way. I said you know, I lust, I envy, I lie, I gossip, I steal, I get baptized with Christ and it all just goes away. Actually what happens is this: I become born again first, then God's Holy Spirit begins to live inside me. *Romans 8:9* says: *You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if -- and that's a gigantic "if" -- if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.* So when I am born again, I become a new temple where God's Holy Spirit takes up residence. And as he takes up residence, he now begins to change my sinful desires. They literally begin to slowly go away. Baptism represents the dying of the old man with those old sinful desires. It means that not only can the law no

longer legally touch you because you've died with Christ but you also now find that your very desires are brand new. They are not the desires you had all along. These are desires that now begin to line up with God's desires, and you start to do what the law used to require you to do but you do it now for the sheer pleasure of doing it. You know, worship and giving and singing and praying, those were all things that I could do quite nicely without, thank you. For many of you that was the case as well. But now in my life, that's unthinkable. And we now do those things not because we have to but because we want to. You know, the difference now is that our heart of stone has been replaced with a heart of flesh and we freely do now what the law used to require us to do. Jonathan Leeman sums this up nicely. He says -- he describes the freedom a heart transplant provides. He says this, he says: "Biblical freedom is this remarkable state in which we want what God wants. How does this happen? How are we set free to want what God wants? At one time God's righteous law imprisoned us, but now we are free to be "slaves of righteousness" and Jesus and Paul want to call that "freedom." How is that possible? It is possible because of the new covenant. The Spirit gives us new hearts. He creates new desires in us so that we desire to love God and love our neighbor which is to fulfill the law."

Now I'm 64 years old, for 40 of those years I have been this new

creature in Christ. For my first 24 years, I too was a prisoner of the law, and I hated my life. There's only one thing I hated worse than my life was the thought of God. If someone had ever stopped me back then and described for me what my future life would be all about including what my likes and my dislikes would be, I simply would not have believed him. I mean, if somebody would have told me at age 24 that in the second half of my life I'd be going to church, I'd be studying scripture and praying for the pleasure of it, for the pleasure of worshiping God, I would have burst out laughing. In fact, I'm sure I would have laughed in their face. See, the newness of life in Christ means a new set of appetites that God is placing inside you.

But let me make a distinction. You know, if someone had said to me as a grow older, I would feel the need for God or religion or a church, I might have as a forty- or fifty-year-old man, paid some attention to that. You know, I might have seen some positive benefit for my kids, maybe for my family to, you know, just to do the God thing, and perhaps I would have been willing to hear that. Now, I might have even done the religious thing for its obvious benefits. And make no mistake about it, religion, any religion has its benefits. See, here's the key. *Romans 3:10* tells us: *No one, no one seeks for God.* But on a Saturday or Sunday morning there are hundreds of thousands of churches and synagogues and temples

and mosques that are just filled with apparently seeking God. If it's not God they're seeking, what are they seeking? Well, they're seeking the benefits of seeking God rather than seeking God himself. I say that because God says *no one seeks for God*. No one seeks him on their own. And all religions offer a sense of security, a sense of belonging, a social structure, an identity structure that can make them very seem all attractive. There's a benefit there that can really have nothing to do with actually seeking God. I used to try to make this distinction to people. I'd say, are you seeking God or are you seeking G-O-D, the actual God that God is speaking about who say nobody seeks me? Which one is it? You know, there's a benefit there that has nothing to do with seeking God. Lots of contemporary westerners now choose religion like they make any other life-style choice, on the basis of a perceived benefit. You know, I was thinking about becoming a Buddhist but that Dharma thing is just too unrealistic. I thought about the Kabbalah, but it's a little too mystical, so I decided to try kundalini yoga because I want to try to lose some weight. You know, I'm not saying that to poke fun. I'm not saying that to mock. I'm saying that is a present reality today. That's how many Westerners choose their religion. Bottom line is, God has nothing to do with it. Had God not intervened in my life, had he not done a spiritual heart transplant, I too would have had that same kind of insight. What I never would have believed is someone telling me

that I would be worshiping God not for the benefits but for the sheer pleasure of it. If someone had told me even later in life that the joy and the deep satisfaction of a relationship with Jesus Christ would far surpass anything I had ever imagined, I would have dismissed it as a rantings of a madman. But that's what newness of life in Christ is all about. God comes into us, starts living within us, his Spirit innervates us, gives us life, we start loving what Christ loved, we start hating what he hates, we start valuing what he values because the Spirit of Christ is inside us. He tells us in *Ezekiel 36*: *And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.* Now all of this is symbolically captured by the simple act of baptism. You know, we are dead in our sins, buried with Christ under the water, then raised with Christ as we come back out of the water.

So to review, first question: What is baptism? Baptism is simply plunging something under water or liquid. What is the point of baptism? Well, it's a symbolic picture of our death, our burial and our resurrection in Christ. It is not a cleansing from sin but rather a picture of the cleansing that's already been taken place by the blood of Jesus Christ. And finally question three: Why should we get baptized? Well, the simplest answer is because God says so. God tells us to. Peter's first sermon made that crystally clear. It was on the very first day of Pentecost, you

might remember the gift of tongues had descended on the assembled believers and everyone spoke in a language that everyone could understand. Peter spoke, and his words were extremely powerful. This is what he said in Acts 2:22, he said: *"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know -- this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it."* You see, apparently Peter never got the memo that you're not supposed to be so blunt, you're not supposed to make people feel so guilty by telling them exactly where they stand, you're not supposed to really accuse them directly of murder. Peter never got that memo, he just opened up and he let the people have it. He went on to say in Acts 2:36, he said: *Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"* And again it's important to note here that Peter did not say in response to that question, he did not say, "Smile, God loves you." He didn't say, "God loves you and has a perfect plan for your life." What he said was very simple and a lot more bold, in verse 38, he said this: *And Peter*

said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Now, there's a reason why Peter said that. You see, shortly before that day, shortly before Jesus was ascended into heaven, he himself gave a final parting message to Peter and the rest of the disciples, and this is what Jesus said in Matthew 28, he said: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." So Peter in his first sermon was just doing exactly what Jesus had commanded him to do, and God clearly was pleased with Peter's approach. Acts 2:41 says: So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. You know, baptism marked the birth of the local church. Two thousand years later we are repeating the very same process.

And that leads me to my question this morning. Here's my big question. My question is: Why are you here? Why are you here? You see, if you are a member of the kingdom of God and God the Holy Spirit is living inside you, then he is uniquely conforming you into the image of Jesus Christ, he is shaping and molding the very appetites that you have, and that includes the appetite that caused

you to want to be here this morning. Now, we've said many, many times there's a million other places you could be except here. So why are you here? Well, is it not because God has placed within you a desire to meet with other believers, a desire to share and worship in the word of God, a desire to become a chosen called out group of fallen sinners that God has elected to pour his blood, his grace, and his mercy into order to display his glory? That's what the body of Christ is. That is the church. That's all part of the newness of life that's represented when we come up out of the water in baptism. The ceremony of baptism affirms the death, the burial and the resurrection of Jesus Christ and my resurrection along with him. Again, *Romans 6:4: 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.*

Now, understand something very important about what's going on here. That newness of life is always displayed within the context of the local body of Christ, the church. You see, baptism is often times our first opportunity to publicly affirm what God has done in our lives, while at the same time affirming the church's role as an alternative reality to the world that we live in. Did you ever think about that? I mean, you have the world out there which is the reality. This is the alternative reality, that's the real

one. This is the kingdom that's everlasting. Out there is the kingdom that's failing. See, baptism proves that you can't just be a lone ranger Christian because nobody baptizes themselves. God designed baptism to be a physical declaration that you are lining yourself up with God's people in God's body. He says we're to be in the world but not of the world, and baptism represents our entry into the kingdom of God while we are here on earth, and as such, it is a public declaration. Baptism is never a private affair. Now, even if it's done surreptitiously as it's done in persecuting countries, it still takes place before witnesses and it still tells the world I am publicly declaring my allegiance to Jesus Christ and his church.

Jonathan Leeman sees baptism in athletic terms, and he says, "What baptism really is about is publicly acknowledging which team you are on." And you know, lots of times the ones who are coming forward for baptism are young men and women, boys and girls who may see it just as plain or maybe even more plainly in terms of athletics. See, the important point is this: Conversion, conversion and baptism are two very, very different things. And at conversion by God's grace personally and privately, what happens is we change teams. We place our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. We leave the kingdom of darkness, we enter the kingdom of light, all things become new. *2 Corinthians 5:17: Therefore,*

if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. That's conversion. Baptism takes place afterwards. And sometimes it's a matter of hours. I mean, the Ethiopian eunuch was baptized right away. The three thousand Peter preached to were all baptized. Sometimes, sometimes it's a matter of years, but the idea is the act of getting baptized always takes place after, after we've switched teams. Spiritually speaking, baptism says: Now that I've already switched teams, I'm going to publicly switch jerseys. Now I used this the last time, I talked about the LeBron James story. Those of you who don't know him, he's a very good professional basketball player, perhaps the best there ever was. He decided after many, many years at one particular team that he was going to leave that team and join another, and so you have this top level athlete switching teams. He switched from Cleveland to Miami. And how did they demonstrate, how did they show the reality of what was taking place there? Well, they showed LeBron James having left Cleveland, he's now in Miami and he's walking around with his brand new Miami Heat jersey. Split screen to Cleveland, and the disgruntled, enraged Cleveland fans are at a huge bonfire. What are they burning? They're burning LeBron James jerseys. See, LeBron had very clearly and very publicly switched teams and traded jerseys. Mr. Leeman puts it this way when it comes to what baptism represents, this is what he says, he says: "Whether people's decisions to swap

allegiances comes gradually or quickly, a point comes when they must decide to change their team: 'You've been playing for the red team. You've been thinking about switching to the blue team. What's it going to be, red or blue?' Well, conversion occurs at the moment that decision is made." Baptism is different. Leeman goes to say this: "Baptism, then is putting on the new jersey." You switched teams; you're going to change jerseys. He says, "It's when we publicly identify ourselves, by the church's representative authority, with Christ's death and resurrection. All the thinking and journeying come to a head right there. Through the church, Jesus asks whether we will die to ourselves and our own rule, be buried with Him, and trust that he will raise us up with Him according to a new power and rule."

Now today, some of our people are going to publicly enter the water, go under the water and rise up out of it having obeyed their Lord. By God's grace and by his mercy they have been led from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. They have already switched teams. And by God's grace through baptism, we are going to have the pleasure this afternoon of watching them switch jerseys. Let's pray.

Father God, I want to just thank you for the gift of baptism. I thank you for the opportunity to publicly identify ourselves with

your kingdom and with your local body. I want to pray right now, Lord, if there's anyone sitting in this room today, if they are not baptized, if your Holy Spirit is speaking to them, if your Holy Spirit is pulling them in the direction of getting this done, having this step of obedience be completed, Lord, I pray that you would just continue to prick their heart. I pray as we go this afternoon to our picnic that they would be willing to sit down, willing to discuss what baptism is and willing even to undergo the waters of baptism. Father, I pray that you would be honored and you would be glorified by what takes place this afternoon as we watch those switch jerseys. Pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.