

Baptism: Death (& Life!) by Drowning

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Our bodies are 70% water. And nothing is more basic to keeping us alive than the drinking of water. But water can also kill you. Some time before I learned how to swim, I remember being on vacation at a Central Florida lake with my family. Tiptoeing deeper and deeper into the lake, I suddenly found the sandy bottom to drop off. In an instant I started to sink — wordlessly, hopelessly. Just then, strong arms grabbed me from behind and drew me up into the air. It turns out that my father had been watching and following me all along.

This killing power of water was used in some Ancient Near Eastern courts. In a water-ordeal, defendants were sometimes required to throw themselves into a river. If they were guilty, (so it was thought) their god would let them drown. If they were innocent, their god would save them; not only that, he would give them the estate of their accuser. When God declared the guilty human race worthy of death-by-drowning, he spared eight individuals, Noah & his family. He protected them in the ark (Genesis 6-9). And on the far side of that drowning judgment, God gave them the earth as their new estate, sealing his promise with a rainbow. Centuries later, Peter would say of Noah's water-ordeal: "corresponding to that, baptism now saves you — not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God from a good conscience — through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21).

Jesus symbolically underwent our water ordeal when he submitted to John's baptism "unto repentance" (Matthew 3:1-17). He literally underwent it when he submitted to the cross and the hurricane of God's fury against our sin. All of Psalm 69 was fulfilled by Jesus, not just the part that says: "they gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst vinegar to drink" (Psalm 69:21). He also fulfilled the prayer: "May I be delivered from my foes and from the deep waters ... May your salvation, O God, set me securely on high" (Psalm 69:14,29).

What God pictures for us in baptism is the fact that his own Son has undergone a water-ordeal for us: when Jesus slipped into the deep waters of death and judgment (see Psalm 69:14), the strong arms of his Father raised him up (see Psalm 69:29), restored him to life, and gave him the name that is above every name: Redeemer King. Through the "baptism" of his death (see Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50), He was proven innocent, made heir of all of Satan's former dominion, and given the Holy Spirit as seal of the Father's promise. We, by contrast, were guilty and should have been allowed to sink — wordlessly, hopelessly — away from the Father's presence forever. Instead, we have been united to Christ in such a way that his death is ours, and so also are his vindication, his resurrection, his ascension, his eternal Kingdom, and his seal of the Holy Spirit. United to him in baptism, we are rescued from those same deep waters, raised to eternal life, and given his new name (Revelation 3:12).