

“What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?”

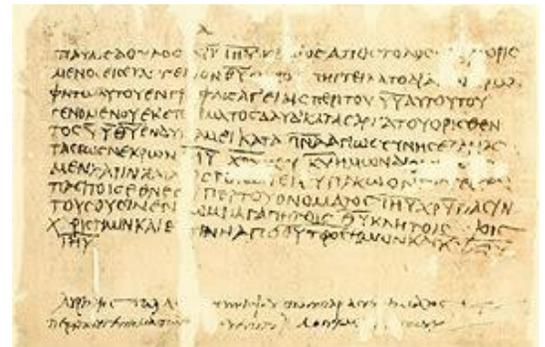
Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

The Apostle Paul knew what he was doing with these words. He was no dummy. Saul of Tarsus was a trained scholar of the Torah, taught by a famous teacher in a city that was included in the ranks of other great cities of the ancient world, like Athens, or Alexandria, Egypt. Paul layered meaning upon meaning with his words. There is far more going on with these words than we know; and as they say, words matter.

Though we read these words in English, we might better understand what is going on with them in Greek, which makes all the difference in the world (which is interesting in ways we don't usually consider.) You see, in the ancient Rome of Paul's day, it was customary to speak Greek, not Latin. At the time of the writing of Paul's letter to Rome, most of the population was bilingual, contemporary Christian literature was normally written in Greek, and Greek was a common (if not the usual) language



of Roman Christians and a kind of lingua franca. In fact, Greek continued to be used in Rome and in Roman rites for several more centuries. The transition from Greek to Latin happened gradually, with Greek's usage progressively disappearing by the end of the fourth century. But the lasting hallmarks of Greek grammar and rhetoric had already permeated the Latin language.

That the Roman Empire was clearly multi-ethnic was one of its greatest strengths, pulling together resources from more than just diehard devotees to the Emperor.

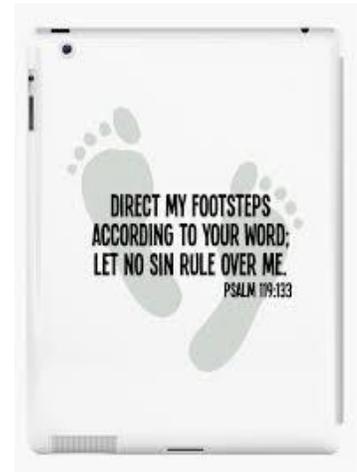
That Paul was a Jew, fluent in Greek as well as Aramaic (and likely Latin), makes his letters Hellenistic gems. His skill as an author, and particularly his use of rhetoric, makes for dramatic verses deeper than first appearances might indicate. The use of rhetoric is well placed in our passage for today.

Paul begins by asking, with some hint of irony, if ‘we should sin in order that grace may abound?’ Clearly, he’s toying with us here. He uses this question as a kind of ju-jitsu, with the force of its impact used against itself.

That God abounds in grace and forgiveness is a cornerstone of Paul’s conviction; and if forgiveness occurs after our doing something wrong, then why wouldn’t ‘sinning’ be a smart strategy to evoke God’s remedial blessing?

An old story puts this notion in its rightful place. When a mother’s youngest son was in preschool, he accidentally spilled a container of chocolate milk on the floor. He was devastated by his mistake. So as she mopped the floor, she reassured him that everything was going to be OK. “Look!” She said, “everything is going to be just fine!” Her son turned to her and said, brightly, “Hey! Maybe I should spill things on the floor more often!” She had overdone her motherly kindness. Then she sternly told him never to try that again!

Just because God in Christ has the power to make things right (as a loving Mom!), is not in itself an invitation to do wrong.



This first exercise in rhetoric is just the beginning. Paul does it again, without our being aware of it.

I’ve divided up the rest of our scripture reading this morning into three paragraphs in order to better see the movement of what he’s doing in this letter. Paul uses the image of baptism to be a vehicle to help us understand our journey of life with God.

What he does is very simple but incredibly profound (and I’m not the one who discovered this, but rather the British scholar N.T. Wright.) Paul overlays the story of the Exodus, the foundational narrative of the Hebrew people, with the meaning of our individual baptisms. Just

as the Hebrew people were saved through the waters of the Red Sea, so it is also what takes place with Christ's followers in baptism.

Just as the Hebrew children left behind their old ways of captivity in Egypt as they journeyed through the desert, so is it that through baptism we 'die to sin' and live new lives of freedom in Christ.

And as the Hebrew children were given a new Law at the end of their journey by Moses (the 10 Commandments), and with it 'a new inheritance', i.e.; the Promised Land, so are new believers given a new guide and a new promise in life through grace so that we may be alive to God in Christ Jesus.

This is how Paul sets up his chapters 6, 7 & 8, as we have the letter now.

What all this means is bigger for us than we know. And again, Paul's use of language is helpful and illustrative.

Paul had an understanding of baptism perhaps more 'Reformed' than 'Baptist.' What I mean by this is that even though Paul focuses on the importance of baptism in his argument, in none of his letters does he go back to recount how it was that he was baptized.

We have to go back to the Book of Acts to see how it was in those days right after his being 'blinded by the light' on the Road to Damascus that Paul stayed with Ananias, who he was instructed to seek out, and Ananias baptized him then and there (Acts 9:18). So baptism is for Paul more than just a one-time thing done long ago; it is a rite of initiation and an ongoing reminder of what God was doing with him, day by day.

The fact is that we don't look at these words in exactly the same way as Paul. We don't hear this passage very often and have to carefully parse it out to figure out how it might apply to us, if at all.

In fact, these words have for generations been customarily used at the opening of a funeral (when its known that the deceased was indeed baptized.) The statement serves as a proclamation that what we cannot accomplish for ourselves, God has done for the dearly departed, through Christ Jesus. ("Buried by baptism into death, we are raised to new life in



Christ.”) These are powerful words indeed; that through the portal of death, God’s promise of new life is accomplished in us far beyond our own ability.

This is an amazing claim, but I don’t believe Paul intended these words to refer about only what will happen to us in our death. I definitely believe that Paul intended these words to have meaning for the lives we now live. Being ‘dead to sin and alive to all that is good’ should have some impact on our living, shouldn’t it?

He uses a verb -to walk in newness of life- in reference to how this works. Something happens, something changes, something is different. This is more than a ‘change of heart’ and more than what happens to us after we die.

Paul suggests that it is what we ‘die to’ in life is how we then go on to live, aware that life is always greater than death.

In another congregation I once served, I remember having a conversation with an older woman who shared with me a very personal story about dying and rising to new life in a way I hadn’t ever considered before. She put it this way, more or less: 'I used to be terribly frightened to be alone by myself. When my husband went out of town on business, I either went with him or took the children and stayed with a neighbor. But the night that my eight-year-old child died of leukemia, I stopped being afraid.'

"Forgive me," I said, "but I don't get the connection."

"You see," she explained, "once you've died, there is nothing left to fear, is there? When she died, I did too."

Is this talk of baptismal dying and rising too obtuse? Some years ago, Methodist Bishop Will Willimon posed the question to a group of people gathered at a Methodist Conference assembly in Mississippi. He phrased the question this way: "Has anyone here had to die in order to be a Christian?"

First came a lengthy silence, then they began to testify.

"I thought that I couldn't live in a world where people of different races could live together. When segregation ended, I thought I would die. But I didn't. When the first Black family became members of our church, I could hardly believe it. But times change, and we

do too. The family is part of our core leadership now, part of who we need to become as we grow together in Christ. Something old had to die in us for something new to be born."

When the Apostle Paul spoke of what happened to him on the Damascus Road, he never knew whether to call it being born or dying. In a way, it felt like both at the same time.

Whatever it was, it had something to do with letting go.

So the question, in part, for all of us today is this: If you had already died, how would you then live? If something in you has died, through divorce, death of a spouse or child, or a great loss of whatever sort, what have you lived into?

With faith in a risen Lord who overcame death and was audacious enough to turn around the life of Saul of Tarsus, we are assured that somehow God in Christ will find a way to walk with us, even in the darkest times.

Walking with Jesus, step by step, we are assured that life is greater than death; hope is greater than fear, joy is greater than sadness, and that God's goodness remains with us through thick and thin, forever, in Jesus' name. Amen.

