

4th Report (July 30 – August 5)

This Sunday my schedule was changed at the last minute to attend a gospel meeting. I have generally shunned gospel meetings in Malawi because they are not very profitable. Generally, there are five to ten local preachers prepared to preach at the meeting. Since I am the only English speaking person, they generally don't offer a translator. So I sit for four to five hours listening to preachers I can't understand. Even if a translator is sitting next to me, the speaker never pauses for the translation so it is difficult to follow the lesson. But the real problem is the amount of time I am allowed to preach. They want me to come, but often only offer a few minutes to preach. Once I drove over three hours to preach a fifteen minute lesson. Other times, I spend two days at a meeting and preach two 45 minute lessons. When we compare this to the five to six hours I teach in the villages on the weekdays, or the two to three hours I preach on a Sunday, gospel meetings haven't been very productive.

It was a 2.5 hour drive and when we arrived, the local preachers were already speaking. With the loudness of the PA system and how rapidly they were speaking, I was getting very little from them. We listened to three different preachers, then took a break. The final session would be three lessons. The first speaker was given 20 minutes to preach, I was given 50, and the final preacher would do the Lord's supper and giving, which generally takes about an hour. The lesson I preached was very well received, and in this case, I believe much good was done. I met many preachers who had heard of me, giving me the opportunity to strengthen my relationship with them.

The preacher training classes resumed on Tuesday. I taught the book of Acts, and church history. It was interesting to teach them back to back and see how the church developed under the directions of the Holy Spirit and how man changed it after the death of the apostles, leading to the falling away. The one thing I had never really thought about before was the affect of the persecutions on the early church. When a wave of persecution came, the truly godly and righteous Christians would choose death, while the weak would compromise and continue to live. Thus the church was greatly weakened by the persecutions that saw most of the apostles killed.

Saturday we went to the church we had planned to go the previous Sunday, before it was replaced with the gospel meeting. We always ask the elders what they think their flock needs to hear. They asked me to describe the difference between the one church Jesus said "*I will build,*" (Mt. 16:18) and the many new churches we have today. Since I had just finished Acts, I described how the apostles and prophets in the first century were given God's blueprints (Eph. 3:9-11), and through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit started the exact same church everywhere they went. Any church that sought to be different was rebuked and warned they would be severed from Christ and fall from grace (Gal. 1:6-9; 5:3-4). Any change to the doctrines on worship, salvation, or purity was condemned. Paul told Timothy to command that brethren to teach no other doctrine (1Tim. 1:3). Later, Jesus warned the church at Ephesus, He would be forced to remove their lamp stand (fellowship with Him) if they did not repent and do their first works (Rev. 2:7). These are the clear descriptions of the church Jesus built. In addition, any plant, not planted by the Father would be rooted up (Mt. 15:7-13), anyone who went beyond the teachings of Christ no longer had God (2Jn. 9-11), and only when we abide in His word are we truly His disciples (Jn 8:31-32). Thus any church that changed anything in the Scriptures would fall under the same condemnation. This lesson is always well received by the brethren, because it is so practical and relevant today.

They also requested I preach on baptism as there were some questions regarding its purpose and whether it was truly necessary for salvation. I explained that everything that was important about baptism is clearly revealed in the gospel Paul preached: "*I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, ... For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures*" (1Cor. 15:1-4). God created baptism so a sinner could gain access to these three things. With baptism we enter into fellowship with Jesus. Just as we commune with Jesus during the Lord's supper, we also participate in His death, burial and resurrection through baptism. In baptism we are buried with Him, die with Him and are raised with Him (Rom. 6:3-6; Col 2:12-13).

*as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were **baptized into His death**? 4 Therefore we were **buried***

with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. 5 For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, 6 knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him. (Rom. 6:3-6).

buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. 13 And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses (Col 2:12-13)

Baptism is an amazing gift of grace! Far greater than the gift of cleansing given to Naaman when he dipped seven times in the Jordan (1Kings 5:10-14). As the Ethiopian Eunuch did (Acts 8:38-39), when we go down into the water and are buried, we are buried with Him, crucified with Him and die with Him. While under the water, as we die with Him, and the blood shed in His death is used and all our sins are forgiven. As we are coming up out of the water, we have been made alive together with Him and raised to walk in a new life. In baptism we have joined in the likeness of His death and in the likeness of His resurrection. Since these things are only connected to baptism, it was baptism Paul was referring to in Ephesians:

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ... For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Eph. 2:4-7; 8-10)

It is in baptism that “by grace we have been saved through faith.” The power God placed in this simple burial under the water is an amazing gift of grace, mercy, and power. It is “the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5) and “the washing of water by the word” (Eph 5:26).

To allow man access to the death, burial and resurrection of His son through a burial in water is a greater gift than the one given to Naaman. There is nothing else in the Scripture that does all this. After we believe (Mk. 16:16), repent (Acts 2:38), and confess (Rom. 10:9-10), we go down into the water to obey the gospel. Just as Naaman before us, only water can bring cleansing.

To further cement the importance of baptism, the Holy Spirit used Moses, Abraham and Noah. The covenant of circumcision was given to Abraham to bring his children into a covenant with God. Anyone who was not circumcised “shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant” (Gen. 17:14). God took this concept and applied it to baptism: “you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism, (Col. 2:11-12). Baptism is the circumcision of Christ, bringing us into the covenant and promise God made with Abraham: “as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ... And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Gal. 3:27-29).

As the children of Israel were fleeing Pharaoh, they came to the shore of the Red Sea, but were still under his dominion (still his slaves) and in grave danger. They cried out to God for deliverance and God opened the Red Sea. When they came out of the sea, they were forever freed from his dominion. The Holy Spirit called this a baptism. “all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1Cor. 10:1-2). Thus just as baptism into Moses in the Red Sea freed them, baptism into Christ frees us from the dominion of sin. For, when “we were buried with Him through baptism into death,” “our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin.” (Rom 6:3-4; 6-8)

The Holy Spirit also used the ark Noah prepared, “in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water,” as the type or figure that revealed an important spiritual reality. Just as they were saved through water in the ark, “there is also an antitype which now saves us — baptism” (1Pet. 3:20-21). Baptism saves us from spiritual death in the same way the ark saved them from physical death.

Every command Jesus and His apostles gave about baptism is based on these spiritual realities. Disciples are made and salvation is given through baptism (Mt 28:18-20; Mk 16:15-16). Peter commanded them to repent and be baptized for the remission of sins and those who received his word were baptized (Acts 2:38; 40-41). Paul was told to arise and be baptized and wash away his sins (Acts 22:16). As Philip preached Jesus to the

Eunuch, the moment he saw water, he asked if there was anything hindering him from being baptized. To emphasize its importance, as soon as he was baptized the Holy Spirit took Philip away (Acts 8:35-39), because there was nothing left for him to do. Peter also commanded Cornelius to be baptized (Acts 10:47-48).

Although this is not everything God revealed about baptism, it should be enough to convince any honest heart that God placed it into the gospel and it gives us access to Jesus death, burial, and resurrection. The controversies over baptism come from men not the Scripture.

After the lesson, I always ask if there are any questions. The chief's of the villages often come to hear the lesson as a sign of respect to the visitor, even though they are not members of the church of Christ. One of the chief's in this village had come and asked the first question. He told me that he had been sprinkled for baptism in South Africa many years ago and he wondered if he needed to be baptized again. I took him to Acts 19 where Paul taught the twelve men who had been baptized into John's baptism that there was a much greater baptism. They were all baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Since baptism into the Lord Jesus is a burial, and those who are sprinkled are not buried, a burial was still necessary. Since he did not go down into the water and come up out of the water as the Eunuch, he still needed to do so. He then made it known he wanted to be baptized as soon as class was over. It was so exciting to see someone hear the truth and want to make the necessary changes.

These are the moments when all the sacrifices we make slip away and we are glad to be here.