

A few years ago, the mayor of Oak Lawn, a suburb in Chicago, got tired of people rolling through stop signs, or ignoring them completely in his community. So, to get people's attention, he placed a smaller sign under the "Stop Sign" that had a certain phrase. Soon, people passing through Oak Lawn saw traffic signs that read ". . . **STOP and smell the roses . . . STOP . . . right there pilgrim , . . STOP . . . billion dollar fine . . . and STOP . . . in the naaaame of love.**"

I think it's a brilliant idea. Unfortunately, the Illinois Department of Transportation disagreed. They ordered the mayor of Oak Lawn to take down the smaller signs, or they would withhold funds for future road projects. The mayor took the signs down, but he commented, ***"I think government needs to take itself less seriously."***

I can't imagine John the Baptist choosing such an approach in communicating his message out in the wilderness of Judea—***"REPENT . . . in the naaaame of love."*** Yet here is the surprising thing. John was wildly successful. People poured out of the big city of Jerusalem to the wilderness not only to hear John preach, but also to be baptized by him as a sign that they had indeed repented of their sins. ***The word "repent" in the New Testament is composed of two Greek words: "meta," which means to change or transform, and "noia," which means mind.*** So John is preaching, ***"Repent. Transform your mind by aligning it with the mind of God."***

Let me give you an example of a man whose life serves as an incredible example of God's power to transform a person's mind. Richard Wurmbrand was born in Bucharest, Romania, in 1909. Wurmbrand was a wealthy businessman and a playboy. He spent his time when he wasn't working going to local bars and cabaret shows. He says of his lifestyle back then, "I did not care what happened as long as my appetite for fresh sensation was fed." He also didn't care how many women he lied to or cheated on, including his wife.

But then Wurmbrand contracted tuberculosis and was confined in the hospital for a long recuperation. During this lonely and scary time, he began to read the Bible. **He was drawn to the character of Jesus.** When he compared his lifestyle and character to Jesus', he suddenly felt inadequate and ashamed. He wanted very badly to be a different, better man. He wanted to align his mind with the mind of God. ***When he was released from the hospital, Richard Wurmbrand entered seminary and became a Lutheran pastor.***

In the 1940s when the Soviet Union took over Romania, the Communists were desperate to either shut down the churches or control them. When Richard Wurmbrand spoke out against Communist control of the churches, he was arrested and thrown into prison twice. He was also tortured so brutally that doctors said it was a miracle he survived.

The amazing thing about Wurmbrand's story is how he remained a faithful, joyful witness for God, even in prison. In fact, he led other prisoners and prison guards into committing their lives to Jesus. **When he was finally released from prison, Richard Wurmbrand began an organization named Voice of the Martyrs that provides support for persecuted churches and Christians around the world.** Maybe you've heard of them. They are a powerful witness for Christ.

That is the power of repentance, the power of transforming your mind by taking on the mind of God. And that brings me back to our Bible story. John is baptizing crowds of people in the Jordan River, people who are ready to repent and change their lives. And then Jesus stepped into the water of the Jordan and suddenly John put on the brakes! Our Bible passage reads, "But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" That phrase, "tried to deter him," literally means "to utterly prohibit." John might as well have been saying, ***"STOP and smell the roses, STOP right there, pilgrim, STOP billion dollar fine, and STOP in the naaaame of love."*** He recognized that Jesus was already holy and without sin; his mind was already perfectly aligned with the holiness of God. He didn't need to repent.

Let me stop right there and ask you a question: what if Jesus had listened to John instead of God? What if John said, "Stop!" and Jesus said, "You're right, it doesn't make sense for me to get baptized. Forget about it"? **What difference does it make that Jesus underwent this baptism by John? It made a world of difference.**

First of all, when Jesus said, “Yes” to baptism, he accepted his future role as our Savior. Even though Jesus was holy and without sin, in baptism he accepted that he would one day take the weight of our sins on his shoulders. ***He would take our place in the battle with our ultimate enemy, DEATH.*** Jesus’ baptism was a practice run for his crucifixion and his death. Baptism is serious business.

Back in the 1930s, actor Johnny Weissmuller originated the role of Tarzan, the man who grew up among the apes and swung through the jungle trees, beating his chest and filling the jungle with his signature Tarzan yell.

But before Johnny starred in all those Tarzan movies and TV shows, he was a 5-time Olympic gold medalist for the U.S. Swim Team. **But he shouldn’t have been.** All his adult life, he harbored a secret that haunted him. All his adult life, he worried that he would lose his gold medals and be exposed as a fraud.

You see, Johnny Weissmuller was born in Romania. Sometime after his birth, he and his parents immigrated to the U.S., and his mother gave birth to his younger brother, Pete. At that time, people who were born outside the U.S. were not allowed to compete on the U.S. Olympic teams. But Johnny was an outstanding swimmer. ***His mother convinced Johnny and Pete to switch identities.*** The family claimed that Pete was the older brother and had been born in Romania, and that Johnny was the younger brother born in the U.S. Before the use of computerized records and fax machines, it was easier to falsify records like this.

Because Pete took Johnny’s place as the older brother, Johnny was allowed to join the U.S. Olympic Swim Team. His success as an Olympic athlete led to his long and successful career as an actor in the Tarzan movies and shows. ***You could say he owed his success in life to the fact that his brother switched places with him.***

If we are followers of Jesus, then we too owe our lives to the fact that Christ switched places with us.

In his torture, crucifixion and death, Jesus willingly paid the penalty for our sins. By accepting our baptism of repentance, Jesus was also accepting his future role as our Savior.

The second thing we gain from this story is when Jesus said: “Yes” to baptism, HE GAVE US ACCESS TO THE FULLNESS OF GOD. Notice what happened in verses 16-17 when Jesus was Baptized. “At that moment heaven was opened, and (Jesus) saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and resting on him. And a voice from heaven said, *‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’*”

When Jesus was baptized, the heavens opened. This is the moment when Jesus begins his ministry with an anointing of power from the Holy Spirit and the approval of God the Father. When we are baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we are also receiving the gift of the fullness of God. ***We receive a new identity as belonging to God the Father, a new mission to live as Jesus’ presence in the world, and new power through the Holy Spirit to accomplish our mission.***

There is a bridge in the city of Alcantara, Spain, that is one of the oldest bridges in the world that is still in use. The Alcantara bridge was completed in 106 A.D., almost 2,000 years ago. It’s 630 feet long. It’s sustained some damage over the years, but it’s still standing. One of the most interesting things about the Alcantara bridge is that the bridge’s builders installed a marble plaque in the foundation of the bridge with these words engraved on it: ***“I have built a bridge that will last forever.” Almost 2,000 years ago, these builders were so sure of their building skills that they engraved that message into marble on the bridge: “I have built a bridge that will last forever.”***

No one really knows how long the Alcantara Bridge will stand. ***But Jesus gave his life to be a bridge between us and the fullness of God, the fullness of fellowship with God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.*** And he lives eternally and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, advocating for us. **In his life and death, he became the true bridge that will last forever between us and receiving the fullness of God.**

Pastor Ben Helmer tells of a 55-year-old man who began attending an Episcopal church. Not long afterwards, the man asked, “What do I have to do to be baptized?” His baptism marked a decisive change in this man’s life, both inwardly and outwardly. He had spent his life as a professional counselor, but he shared that it was only after his baptism that he found the wholeness, the fullness of peace and assurance, that he had tried to help his clients find.

His baptism also served as a moment of equipping him for ministry. He became a volunteer in the church food pantry and spent Christmas day serving meals at a local health clinic. In his baptism, he had received the approval of God, the presence of Jesus, and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, and he was determined to spend the rest of his life serving his community in gratitude for his transformed life.

And the final insight we get from this passage is when Jesus said “Yes” to baptism—HE WELCOMED US INTO A NEW SPIRITUAL FAMILY. There is no such thing as a private baptism. Baptism always happens in community, with other followers of Jesus who commit to praying for, encouraging, and supporting the newly baptized members. And baptism doesn’t just join us with other believers in our local church. ***In baptism, we become one with believers all over the world. We become ONE with ALL who have accepted Jesus as their Savior and Lord. When you are baptized, you belong to a spiritual family that stretches across time and space, from every nation and language and culture.***

The Apostle Paul is a man whose life was completely transformed by the power of Jesus. He went from being a violent persecutor of Christians to being the greatest evangelist of the Christian faith. In his letter to the church at Ephesus, he wanted to address some of the issues that were dividing the believers there. He needed them to understand that Jesus knocked down the dividing walls between us and made us all one with each other. In fact, he referred to believers as “one body.” In Ephesians 4: 3-6, he writes, ***“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”*** When Jesus said “Yes” to baptism, he was creating a new spiritual family that stretches across time and space, and he welcomes all those who are baptized in his name to join this family of faith and love and power, until the day we are all worshiping side-by-side in the kingdom of heaven.

Pastor Mark E. Diehl tells of a church that celebrated the baptism of two children in their morning worship. As the families gathered around the baptismal font, one mother asked a man standing up to witness his granddaughter’s baptism if he would hold her baby for a moment while she got a bottle out of the diaper bag. As other family members of the baptismal candidates gathered, someone asked the man about his little grandbaby. The man explained that this wasn’t his grandchild, he was just holding the baby for the woman nearby.

The next day that grandfather made an appointment to speak with his pastor. When he got there, he told the story of holding someone else’s baby and having to explain that it wasn’t his grandchild. And then he began thinking of the meaning of baptism. The grandfather continued, ***“I said that the other child did not belong to me. That isn’t true. Every child in this church belongs to my family. So he said, “Years ago, I made arrangements in my will to support my immediate family. Now I want to make arrangements in my will to support all the children of this church. Can you help me do that?”*** NOW THAT IS A MIND, A LIFE, THAT HAS BEEN TRANSFORMED BY “BAPTISM.”

Jesus didn’t have to step into the Jordan River that day. He didn’t need a baptism of repentance. **But in saying “Yes” to our baptism, Jesus was accepting his role as our Savior.** He was taking on our sins and our death so we would never die. He was opening heaven for us so that we would have full access to God the Father and the Holy Spirit. And he was creating a new spiritual family to encourage and support us. When you remember your baptism OR the Baptism of others, **remember that Jesus said “Yes” to our baptism as a way of showing his sacrificial, never-ending love for us. And YES, he was showing each of us that we have complete Access to GOD.**

Amen.