

From Death to Life

“Natalie, do you confess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour?”

I looked up. It’s been said by some that baptism is merely ceremonial, a ritual which doesn’t compare with the practical importance of living as a Christian. But I believed otherwise.

Ever since Ji Gong outed me to my parents, the subject had weighed heavily. I’d been a Christian for roughly a year by then, but it hadn’t even occurred to me to consider being baptised because of how hard things were with my family. Yet in a fit of perverse mockery, he brought it up himself, urging my parents to take me and threatening me with a twenty-four-hour penance if I were to go through with it.

Knowing that demons tend to overreact and tip their hand, I took this as an inkling of how important baptism probably was.

Then in 2005, one of my lecturers took me home to meet her parents. She knew that my mother was giving me a hard time and wanted them to pray for me.

Her father took one look at me and asked, “Have you been baptised?” When I said no, he nodded. Then he told me that I needed to be. The dear old man had perceived I wasn’t, and that the enemy still had spiritual hooks in me which only baptism would remove.

But Ji Gong’s threat had put a stumbling block in my way that I didn’t know how to bypass. So for over six years, I remained unbaptised (though I did get baptised in the Holy Spirit much sooner than that).¹

¹ Water and Holy Spirit baptism are two distinct events, though they can take place concurrently. See Acts 8:14–17, Acts 10:44–48.

2 *Beyond the Bagua*

On arriving in New Zealand, however, I began to grow spiritually in a way I never had before. And one morning, after praying with Sandra through a comprehensive renunciation of my spiritual background and family sins, I decided not to wait any longer. There was a swimming pool in the backyard and no malevolent spirit shaking his fist or dangling my family over my head anymore—as the Ethiopian eunuch put it, “What hinders me from being baptised?”

Of course, we were nowhere near a desert. But how big a difference could that make?

I peered out at the grey sky, then the unheated open-air pool. And shivered inwardly. *Oh. Right.*

It was not a hospitable time of year, and my feet have an uncomfortable tendency to turn to ice. But I knew I’d been postponing this for a long time. Too long.

In the end, I decided that freezing was preferable to delay. Plus I’d just confessed my past as a Taoist and prayed through a severing of ties with it. There wasn’t going to be a better time in terms of my spiritual readiness.

So here I was, standing gingerly in the water, doing my best to ignore the cold and concentrate on Sandra’s words.

At her first question, I lifted my eyes.

The clouds hadn’t parted. They were still curdled and unsympathetic, as they had been all day. There was no lull in their melancholy, no sudden break of light. But somehow, there was an expectant stillness in the air... one that sang in harmony with my mood.

At last—to be surrounded by the waters of oblivion, with my life and identity teetering on the edge of redefinition—to answer that question freely in an honest expression of public commitment—

I didn’t hesitate. My answer rang out, clear and determined, into the waiting silence.

“Yes!”

“Do you agree to follow Him, to love, worship and obey Him all the days of your life?”

As if there could be any other answer.

“Yes!”

“Then on the basis of your confession, I baptise you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit!”

I was dipped backwards and plunged momentarily into a swirl of blackness, bubbles and liquid confusion.

Coming back up, I remember several things.

I remember being glad I’d done it. I’d finally been baptised, and nothing disastrous had happened to interrupt or prevent it.

I remember wading across the pool to the ladder.

I remember David waiting anxiously by, towel in hand, for me to climb out and get changed.

And I remember feeling disappointed that I didn’t feel any different, that no miracle or outward sign had taken place to show that something special had just occurred. I’d heard of unusual things happening at some baptisms—tattoos vanishing, people speaking in tongues; a lecturer in college once told me that when she came up from the water, she immediately felt herself surrounded by God’s love, as if wrapped in a bubble. The sensation was so strong she could barely say a word to the people around her. She could only look at them, moved to the core of her soul, and stammer.

So part of me was hoping I’d experience something cool.

Well, what counts is that you know what baptism means, I consoled myself. Even if nothing looks or feels different, you are. You’re not the same person who went down into the water, and that’s the truth. You’re a new person.

Armed for resignation, I pulled myself up on the rungs and stepped out, streaming.

Then my foot touched the ground, and a burst of warmth suffused my body. As if a light switch had been turned on.

I stopped. For a moment, I was too surprised to move. But it was unmistakable.

There I was, dripping wet, standing in the middle of an exposed backyard on a raw autumn day, and I felt nothing close

to what I should've been feeling. Not a tingle, pinprick or draught.

Warmth—spontaneous, steady and strong—was radiating from within my body, concentrated especially in my feet. That was the most unusual part, because as I said, my feet are normally very sensitive to cold.

But in that moment, I felt untouchable. Impervious to the elements. Swathed in a force field of quickening.

David held out the towel, and I looked at him. "I feel warm," I said. "I don't think I need that."

I walked around, waiting to see if the feeling would pass. If it would fade once the effects of emotional suggestion gave way to calm, analytical probing.

I even jumped up and down and waved my feet around, trying to shake it. David, nervous that I was testing the Lord, told me not to do that. But I ignored him.

The warmth remained. It was constant and unyielding. Amazingly, I couldn't get cold, or even a little cooler, even though I tried. It felt like a completely natural part of me, yet I knew it wasn't of me.

"I've passed from death into life," I murmured out loud. Then I turned excitedly to David and Sandra. "That's what happened with the baptism! I've passed from death into life!"

I glanced back at the pool and recalled its sharp caress when I waded in. How stinging ripples had formed around every movement I made. How utterly normal the chill had felt to my skin. But Colossians 2:12–13 says we're buried with Him in baptism, and raised with Him "through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead."

Having identified by faith with Jesus' mortality, we become partakers of His immortality. And the moment I exited those tomb-cold waters, I experienced precisely that—an all-encompassing shield of life. Renewal. Vitality.

Is this what it'll be like? I wondered. In the resurrection, we're supposed to never get sick or grow old or be vulnerable to pain and injury again. But is this how it's going to feel, all the time?

Because if my experience that day was any indication, reader, you'll love it. Your body is bathed in perfect warmth, as if everything in and around you is working just as it should be. It never fluctuates or drops—in fact, the warmth asserts itself *against* your environment, as if you had a built-in thermostat—and it never becomes hot. You just feel good. Comfortable. Secure. Wherever you go, whatever you do.

Goldilocks couldn't have picked a more perfect temperature. It was—just—right.

And now I knew for myself that baptism was no token formality. It's a sacrament that transcends mere symbolism and marks a real interment of our old selves, a clean and decisive break with the things of our past. In ritually identifying with the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are buried and raised too—first spiritually, into the liberty and full citizenship of God's kingdom; then physically, through bodily transformation at the end of the age when He returns.

Of course, you don't need to be baptised to be saved. But you are freed by it in the deepest way, and in doing so, **enter fully into the new identity God has given you as His child.** There is no viable substitute. Just as legal adoption changes your family status once and for all, baptism redefines your spiritual affiliation in the most fundamental, absolute sense.

That's why Ji Gong kicked up such a fuss about it all those years ago. My lecturer's father was right—as long as I didn't pass through the water, the ties that held me to my former identity as an idol worshipper wouldn't be completely severed. There'd still be room for the enemy to hinder my walk in ways he otherwise wouldn't have been able to. So he manipulated my parents to turn them completely against the idea and threatened me with something he knew I'd never agree to, in order to stall me.

Thank God he couldn't stall forever. When I was finally baptised, I got a palpable glimpse of what it meant. And I like to imagine that the powers of hell were standing by, howling, while I irrevocably escaped their ownership.

I also like to think the fact I didn't let the cold stop me—that being baptised was more important to me than my own physical comfort—was precisely why I had the post-baptismal experience I did. God is gracious. And faithful. And kind. And incredibly, delightfully commensurate in His dealings with us.

On top of that, I went to church later and found, to my surprise, that it was easier to feel the love of God. And growing in my relationship with Him came that much more naturally afterwards.

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Once I changed and walked out of my room, the warmth faded gradually but inevitably, leaving me with a vivid memory and sense of regret. I wished it could last forever, but I knew it wouldn't. That quarter hour or so of supernatural incandescence was a witness that my baptism had been effective, a sign that a seed of resurrection life had been planted in me, waiting to burst out at His coming.

Now it was on to the business of actually living like a new creation.