

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Dead and Buried

Romans 6:1-14

"Dead and buried." That's what we sometimes say when we want to emphasize that a situation, a relationship, an idea, a movement, or a project is over. Finished. In the past. Done. Forgotten. Behind us. Dead and buried.

I think the buried part is what drives home the conclusiveness of it all. To be dead is decisive enough. But to be dead and buried, well that sounds and feels even more final. In my years of pastoral ministry, I've done lots of funerals. I've joined in the procession of cars heading to the cemetery. I've led the way as the pallbearers carry the casket from the hearse to the grave. I've stood at the grave, reading Scripture, leading prayers, and offering words of comfort and hope to the grieving family and friends. There's a particular poignancy involved in committing a loved one to the ground. Death's finality comes into even sharper focus. Dead and buried.

I had done the funeral service for a gentleman, and after some time had passed I called his wife to see how she had been doing in her grieving process. She talked about her first visit back to the cemetery. I could tell that returning to her husband's grave had been a significant experience in coming to grips with the reality of his passing. She spoke about how seeing everything underground made the reality of death sink in even further. Dead and buried.

"Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death. . ." (vv. 3-4). Dead and buried. The first part of that takes us to the center of the gospel and the heart of our faith. The death of Jesus is where a merciful God acts in reconciling love to set things right in our relationship with him and with one another. Paul, like the other writers in the New Testament, keeps bringing us back to the cross. But in today's text from Romans, Paul also makes the trip to the cemetery. Our dying with Christ includes our being buried with Christ.

Remember that at this point in his letter, Paul is reacting against the possibility that fellow believers will presume on God's grace. If anyone thinks, "Well, God is in the business of grace, and if more sinning means that God gets to do more of what God does best, then why be so concerned about good behavior?" "You've got to be kidding," says Paul. That's why he urges the believers in Rome to live a Christian life, in all its countercultural distinctiveness. After all, it's through Christ's death that they've been set free from the power of sin, so that the effects of that liberation can become visible in their attitudes and actions. In other words, the way that they live should demonstrate that they belong to God, who has rescued them from death and brought them into life.

Even though Paul has never made a face-to-face visit with this particular church, he has been told that the folks in the pews there in Rome just love cracking open their hymnals and singing, "O victory in Jesus, / my Savior, forever, / He sought me and bo't me / with His redeeming blood; / He loved me ere I knew Him, / and all my love is due Him, / He

plunged me to victory / beneath the cleansing flood.” So Paul tries to shape their behavior by drawing on their musical memory. “Speaking of plunging beneath the cleansing flood,” says Paul, “remember your baptism. Remember what baptism says about who Jesus is and about who you are. Remember what baptism says about what Jesus has done and what you should do.”

Baptism signifies that a person is joined to Christ. That’s why Paul keeps talking about dying *with Christ*, being buried *with Christ*, being raised *with Christ*. The death, burial, and resurrection of Christ aren’t centuries-old events just preserved for our information, but proclaimed for our transformation. And how big is this transformation, this change? It’s as big as going from being “in and with” Adam, whose disobedience created the problem, to being “in and with” Christ, whose obedience solved the problem. Baptism testifies to your move from eternal death to eternal life. It signifies that the grace of God has been at work in your life, creating and calling forth faith, faith that bonds you to Jesus, so that you experience in your own life what he accomplished for us.

One pastor tells about a decision made by the town of Le Lavandou on the French Riviera. Years ago, the town passed a law barring any more burials in the town cemetery. It was full. The law says, “It is forbidden without a cemetery plot to die on the territory of the commune.” As you might expect, the law didn’t stop people from dying. Those who died without a plot were temporarily housed in friends’ vaults.¹

Here at Grace Baptist Church, we still have plenty of room for further burials. Though there’s no church cemetery, there is a baptistery. And anyone who steps into the waters of that baptistery is announcing that they want to be co-crucified, co-buried, and co-resurrected with Jesus. It’s all there in the motions and movements. You heard it and saw it earlier in our service. I place the candidate underwater, their eyes closed and their arms crossed over their chest like a corpse. “Buried with Christ in his death,” I declare.

I was baptized in a river near the home where I grew up. One of the things I most vividly remember was that murky water swallowing me up as the pastor lowered me beneath the surface. That moment of complete submersion has stuck with me, partly because it’s such an odd and unusual, and in some ways frightening, act of worship. But more importantly because God can use it to remind me of the kind of dying that’s involved in identifying yourself with Jesus and with the community of his followers.

Several years ago, when our brother in Christ, Bill Adams, stood before the congregation and shared his testimony as part of his service of ordination to deacon ministry, he talked about his baptism. He said that he was in line to be baptized. After the boy in front of him got baptized, he came out of the water saying, “Don’t go in there. The preacher tried to drown me.” On behalf of all pastors, I can say with confidence that drowning you is not our intention. Note that Hannah is now out of the water, back in the pew, safe and sound with her family again. Both she and I survived the waters of baptism.

And yet at the same time, I can also say that in the deepest spiritual sense, every baptism I have ever conducted has also been a funeral. Dying with Christ. Being buried with Christ. Rodney Reeves tells about the time he, his wife, and their six-year-old daughter Emma were driving past a cemetery, and Emma asked, “Who lives there?” Rodney replied, “That’s where dead people live.” From there he and his wife tried to carefully explain some of the basics about death, funerals, caskets, dead bodies, and the hope of Christ. A few minutes later, after the conversation had turned to another subject, Emma interrupted, “Then why does our church have a cross on it? Dead people don’t live there too, do they?” The more

Rodney Reeves reflected on what Emma asked, the more he could see that there was some truth in what she was saying. In one respect, the church is where dead people live.²

We have been buried with Christ. We are dead in Christ. To human eyes, death often means defeat. But in the story of Jesus, what looks like defeat is actually victory, for in the death and burial of Jesus, God has broken the power of sin and death. Remember that though Paul talks plenty about our specific sinning, he talks most of all about sin and death as powers that held us in their grip. They colluded and conspired to separate us from God, and to lead us to destruction. But thanks be to God, who in Jesus Christ has triumphed over Satan, sin, and death. Sin itself is now in shackles. Death itself is now dead and buried. And by confessing your faith in Christ and entering the watery grave of baptism, you declare that you're claiming your freedom. You want to claim for yourself the benefits of what Christ has done.

"We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (v. 4). Death, yes. Burial, yes. And resurrection, yes. At the final resurrection, we'll take full possession of our new life in Christ. But even now, the power of his resurrection has been released into the lives of those who believe. Even now, we are being changed.

In the 1983 film *Tender Mercies*, Robert Duvall plays a once-famous but now washed-up country music singer-songwriter named Mac Sledge. Mac is stringing together dead-end jobs and battling the bottle. He's befriended by a young widow named Rosa Lee and her little boy, Sonny. Late in the movie, Mac and Sonny get baptized at the local church. As they're driving home in a pickup truck the following conversation ensues:

Sonny: "Well, we've done it, Mac. We're baptized." Mac: "Yeah, we are." Sonny: "Everybody said I was going to feel like a changed person. I guess I do feel a little different. But I don't feel a whole lot different. Do you?" Mac: "Not yet." Sonny: "You don't look any different." (Sonny sits up to look at himself in the rearview mirror.) "Do you think I look any different?" Mac: "Not yet."³

No one comes out of the waters of baptism completely transformed. When it comes to our union with Christ, there's an "already." Sin and death have been defeated. Finished. In the past. Done. Behind us. Dead and buried. But there's also a "not yet." There's still work to be done, in you and on you. Your baptism certificate didn't say you've been given complete holiness up front. It said you've been given the Holy Spirit as the down payment on what's still to come. Even if the Lord has already "plunged [you] to victory beneath the cleansing flood," you're still supposed to be growing into that victory, day by day. Every day, there needs to be a funeral for all the unrighteousness in your life. Every day, there needs to be a graveside service for all the attitudes, actions, habits, addictions, obsessions, perversions, and patterns of behavior that want to destroy you and separate you from the God whose gift to us is "eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (6:23).

In baptism, we have a picture of God's gift, offered and received. Baptism is the gospel in miniature. Baptism makes visible the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. And day by day, your life makes your baptism visible as you claim the benefits of what Christ has done for you, and grow in righteousness and holiness. "In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (v. 11).

¹ From the *Chicago Tribune* (September 22, 2000).

² Rodney Reeves, *Spirituality According to Paul: Imitating the Apostle of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011) 21-22.

³ Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ* (Colorado Springs: David. C. Cook, 2016) 27-28.