

## “An example that you should follow in His steps”

1 Peter 2:21-25, Rom. 6:1-14

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**Introduction:** One of the typical fears expressed regarding the step of baptism is that “I’m not worthy” or “I don’t think I can live up to the Christian life!” But these excuses actually betray a serious misunderstanding about Christ’s invitation. In the first place, He said very specifically that those who are well don’t need a doctor – He didn’t come for them, but for those who are ill, because He didn’t come to call the righteous (those who seem to have it all together), but sinners (those who understand they’ve fallen short, messed up, can’t fix themselves) – and the call is to repentance. Baptism is such a powerful symbol of repentance: I turn away from the old life that has controlled my direction, purpose, and self-concept – I’m buried with Jesus, baptized into His death; and I embrace the new life that I’m invited to live *in Christ* – I’m raised up to walk in the power He offers for living according to a different set of values: the cross! There is a lot to learn here! This is precisely why Paul says we are baptized *into Christ’s death* so that we can be raised to the *new life in Christ* ... this is **the example** we’ve just witnessed! Eva, Sarah, Steven, and Arnold, we are excited for you and praying for you!

Because so many people “**never get it**” – i.e., they spend their lives trying to figure out how to make it work, trying harder to make it work, looking for solutions beyond the gospel to try to fix themselves, to feel right about themselves, to try to overcome bad habits or trauma or whatever other brokenness has come to their life – when the answer is actually right there in the cross, waiting for us to focus on the cross as our center of gravity, and on Jesus Himself as the One who is truly adorable, but we don’t automatically know how to let Him reign as King! So the “Christian life” can be quite frustrating, even disheartening at first, because there’s so much fleshliness in us to be overcome, so much idolatry yet to be torn down, hurts to be healed, clutter to be cleaned up. Our gray matter is very soft when we’re children, so it can get damaged and wounded (from dysfunctional family issues, broken homes, unresolved conflicts, unhealthy social influences, etc.). So the minds of children and teens can be stained with trauma, corruption, false hopes, unhealthy addictions, etc. Wiping the slate clean and starting over was what Nicodemus found so unbelievable – it sounded like being born all over again! And Jesus indeed described it as a spiritual rebirth! In fact, we cannot wipe the “hard disk” clean, but Christian commitment does involve a total reorientation and reprogramming of our mind and heart. The Christian life was always intended to be a journey, a pilgrimage on which we learn obedience and reorientation **through what we suffer** (Heb. 5:8), and we have so much to unlearn and reformat along the way. So let’s examine carefully Paul’s and Peter’s varied ways of expressing what this “new life” is about, so we can grasp the deeper things of God and see the challenge before us.

Paul says we’re baptized *into Christ’s death* so that we can be raised to the *new life in Christ*. Yet Peter emphasizes that as Jesus suffered – by our hands and for our sakes – He was leaving us an **example to follow** so that we might walk in His footsteps. Peter and Paul seem to have different

ways of conceiving what happened, but they are not opposing views – they’re totally complementary! So let’s look carefully at what each one says about what Jesus did and what it means for us. But first, the historical context of Peter’s letter is very important, because he was writing to churches that were facing persecution (today many churches around the world are remembering the persecuted church). It’s also helpful to pay attention to the structure of the letter – the immediate literary context shows how he was addressing the question of the holiness we are called to in Christ. The call to follow Christ’s example occurs in the context of His suffering, so we must understand that we will not be exempt from afflictions.

Both Peter and Paul insist Jesus was without sin (1 Pe. 2:22; 2 Cor. 5:21), and that His example was matchless (1 Pe. 1:23; Php. 2:8). Peter says Jesus “bore” our sins (v. 24) – we should then ask “how” He bore them (in the first place, they weren’t “virtual” sins He was bearing, but real ones that were painful and humiliating): He bore them with patience, perseverance, a generous spirit, mercy, and forgiveness that truly represented His Father’s heart. Paul, on the other hand, speaks of Jesus “erasing” our sins with His forgiveness (Col. 2:13-14), just as John the Baptist spoke of them as being removed, taken away. Redemption is about forgiveness (Col. 1:14), which in the Old Testament implied some kind of payment, so in the New Testament Jesus’ life is spoken of as a “ransom”. In the early Medieval period, church fathers began to think of this ransom as a payment made to the devil so that we could be freed. In the late Medieval period there was a strong reaction against this concept, but the next solution was perhaps worse: that the payment was actually made to the Father to restore His honor. This idea would be further reinforced during the Reformation when the payment was understood as satisfying God’s law and His wrath (expressions still in use today, though they do not reflect biblical teaching; cf. Gal. 6:7). A better understanding here is that Jesus was simply paying the awful consequences of humanity’s rebellion against God’s authority. God knew what it would lead to, He knew its implications – both for us and for Him. He knew that when He came personally to earth, we would manifest all our rejection and hatred in His face, which is exactly what was done to Jesus (all the wretchedness in our hearts); and God responded with all the love and forgiveness in His heart.

Both Peter and Paul then speak of our dying to sin and living unto righteousness (1 Pe. 2:24; Rom. 6:11-13) as our proper response to Christ’s call. In fact, this is the movement of faith by which the Christian life becomes a reality in us, but so many Christians never learn to die with Christ (Gal. 2:20); it’s not about self-hatred or self-deprecation; it only happens as we consciously submit to Jesus, calling on Him in desperation because we can’t get it right without Him, and then letting Him teach us day by day. Peter adds that Jesus’ wounds bring us healing (v. 24) – we need to research this! How can His wounds bring healing? In the Old Testament, there was a law called the *lex talionis*: “**eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth**” (Ex. 21, Lev. 24); its purpose was to restrict compensation for damages to the actual value of the loss, i.e., to put limits on revenge. But in Jesus’ wounds, unjustly inflicted, there was absolutely no reclamation of damages! No demand for vengeance, retribution, or compensation! No desire for retaliation – He just let us take it all out on Him. That’s why you and I can find emotional and spiritual healing for our wounds in Jesus: He takes in all the blows with His divine shock absorbers.

Peter and Paul together give us a composite picture of Christian discipleship that is deeply devoted to Jesus as our center of gravity, the Healer of our souls, the Shepherd and Overseer of every sheep that returns to the fold (that’s about repentance). And since Jesus could not be held down even by death, the invitation we receive from Him is not just to help you survive, but to help you get fully revived – with new life! It’s not just for you to “get by,” but for you to “get up” and be healed – wholeness! It’s not just to guarantee you a future home in heaven, but it’s for you to “**follow in His footsteps**” in the here and now – with “an earthly mission that keeps you in heavenly growth mode” for the rest of your life! Amen and hallelujah!