

As Paul describes this life-changing experience, words fail him. He uses a strange and uncomfortable phrase about baptism as death and rebirth. "Do you not know," he asks, "that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death?" (v:3). It's shocking when you consider the *way* Jesus died, but Paul goes on: "Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life" (v:4).

Paul's rather jarring declaration is no biblical anomaly: he uses death-and-rebirth imagery often. "You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3). "When you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God" (Colossians 12:2). "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:19-20).

Paul believes the death-and-rebirth baptism to be a blessing, not a curse. It is a blessing because, after the experience of spiritual death comes a resurrection, as followers of Christ walk with him "in newness of life." Sometimes, it does happen that there is nothing left to do in life but reboot; to shut everything down, in a spiritual sense, and start over again. It can be a fearsome step to take, but a step any of us can take in confidence, trusting in Christ's promise to pull us up out of those baptismal waters and revive us!

The English priest, John Donne, captured the essence of spiritual struggle in a famous sonnet. God, in this poem, is anything but gentle and mild. God is a fearsome adversary, and the believer struggles with God in a life-and-death contest:

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurp'd town to another due,
Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end;
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain,
But am betroth'd unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.¹

All those fancy words boil down to this: sometimes life *is* a struggle, and sometimes we end up opposing God. We know what is required in the Christian life. We've heard that sermon since we were small. We know God demands sacrifice and the surrender of our heart to Jesus. We know that to be a Christian is to live differently from the rest of the world, to love our enemies and seek good for those who challenge us. We know, as Paul says, we "must consider [our]selves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (v. 11). We also know that sin is not laid aside so easily.

There are times in life when there is nothing else to do; times when our proud talents are tied up in knots and we cannot extricate ourselves from the mess into which we've gotten ourselves. These are the times when, spiritually speaking, there is nothing left to do but reboot. There is no other choice. We have exhausted every other alternative. *Control, Alt, Delete*. Then our screen goes blank. The fan spins down and all is quiet for a moment. We take a deep breath as everything hangs on the fearsome decision we have just made. After a few seconds comes the reassuring whir of the fan spinning up again and our favorite desktop background appears as the computer restarts. The essential data is still there. All is not lost. Death in Christ and rebirth!

For some, life only seems to begin after they go through such a rebirth experience. As a young man, the French philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, was knocked unconscious by a dog. When he came to, Rousseau found himself free of all worldly concerns. He felt able, for the first time, to see the big picture. Later, Rousseau observed how ironic it was that he never truly came to his senses until after he'd been knocked senseless.

Or consider Count Leo Tolstoy, who at 36 was thrown from his horse while hunting. When he came round, a thought entered his mind that he just couldn't shake: "I am a writer," he told himself. Soon after, Tolstoy began writing, and eventually the great *War and Peace* came from his pen.

Harriet Tubman, once a slave, escaped to the North but returned repeatedly to lead other slaves to freedom. Tubman's life as a liberator began in her teenage years, when she stepped between her master and another slave he was savagely beating. Struck on the head, Tubman's fell to the ground with a skull fracture. She laid comatose for weeks but finally recovered. She would suffer epileptic fits for the rest of her life because of that injury. Yet that injury was also Tubman's liberation. "The blow that cracked Tubman's skull," a biographer wrote, "struck off her psychic chains. She had already died once; she had nothing to lose."²

Time for a Reboot

Sunday, June 21, 2026

Romans 6:1b-11

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

A reporter once asked the war novelist, James Jones, how it is that soldiers manage to keep on fighting amid the confusion and horror of battle, the dreaded “fog of war.” Jones replied, bluntly: “What you do is you decide that you are dead...Every soldier I knew, in the horrors of war, just decides, ‘I’m dead.’ That enables you to live. You go ahead and die, so you can be surprised when, at the end of the battle, you’re still alive.” Death and rebirth. It sounds paradoxical, to be sure; but that is the spiritual truth of it.

Facing a spiritual reboot, who is there to trust but Jesus, who went to his death on a cross and who was raised to new life to the glory of God? The mark of his followers is baptism, and the meaning of baptism is death and rebirth. By going under the water, believers “die” to their old sinful selves; emerging from the water signifies a spiritual “rebirth” and a new life dedicated to God. While baptism is a singular event, many Christian traditions view the death and rebirth it represents as a daily reality. Believers are called to continuously “put to death” selfish desires and live in alignment with the Holy Spirit.

That meaning is lost, unfortunately, on the infants we bring to the baptismal font. They are too young to understand. Truthfully, it may also be lost on many adults who get caught up in the cuteness of the occasion. We call it a baptismal font for a reason. Spiritually speaking, it’s like a fountain, a spring bubbling up from the earth. We may not see it clearly, but the essential meaning is still there: living water for God’s children. It runs under the desert sands of life, like some great, underground stream. It becomes suddenly real, bubbling up for us in those moments of crisis when there is nothing else to do but trust the risky promises of Jesus.

As the poet Stephen Vincent Benét writes: Life is not lost by dying! Life is lost / Minute by minute, day by dragging day / In all the thousand, small, uncaring ways.³ Do not lose your life in “the thousand, small, uncaring ways.” Lose it once and for all in Jesus Christ. Lose it in him and you will gain everything!

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, thank You that You not only died for my sins, but You died unto sin so that I might be empowered to live my life in spirit and truth. As I abide in you and you in me, I pray that I would not only hear this truth but act upon it and reckon my old sinful self to be dead to sin and my new life in Christ to be alive in God, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sources:

1. *Holy Sonnets*, XIV.

2. Garry Wills, *Certain Trumpets: The Call of Leaders*, (Simon & Schuster, 1994), 41.

3. “A Child is Born,” *We Stand United and Other Radio Scripts* (Rinehart & Company, 1942), 176.

In 1920, the young man was on top of the world, working his dream job as a cartoonist for *The Kansas City Star*. Then the editor fired him, claiming he “lacked imagination.” Fascinated by a new artistic form, animated films, the young man set up a little company in Kansas City that he christened Laugh-O-Gram Studios. Three years later, the company failed, and he moved to California, and started out in animation work again. Movie theaters clamored for short cartoons they could show before the main feature, so the man developed a cartoon character, “Oswald the Lucky Rabbit,” that became an overnight success. It seemed to be his big break. Then his distributor, in a shrewd legal maneuver, essentially stole the copyright for the Oswald character and poached most of the animators working on the project. The man, no longer so young, started over yet again. He developed a new cartoon character he called “Mickey Mouse.” The rest is history. Walt Disney would never have become the world’s most famous animator if he hadn’t learned, through hard experience, the fine art of rebooting his career.

“Reboot” is a strange word with its own back story. To “boot” a computer means to start it up. The origin comes from that colorful, old expression “pull yourself up by the bootstraps,” meaning to start something up from nothing. To *reboot* is to shut everything down, then start it up again. Pulling yourself up by the bootstraps is, of course, absurd. Try crouching down and slipping a finger through each of the leather bootstraps just above your heel. You yank hard, both boots at the same time, and you pull yourself up into the air! It’s the sort of thing that only works in cartoons.

Sometimes a reboot is your only choice. When the computer freezes, hit control-alt-delete to turn the computer off, then back on, and hope for the best. But what do you do when it’s not your computer that needs a reboot, but your life? How do you clear out the bugs in your personal programming so God the Creator can breathe new life into you again?

Romans, chapter 6, introduces God’s “control-alt-delete” combination. Like a great operating system designer, God provides a reset routine that is an effective way to start over again when all else fails. It’s called baptism. For some people, the rebirth comes in being baptized as adults when they come to Christ for the very first time. But for a great many other Christians baptized as infants, it is the *remembrance* of baptism that is effective for rebirth: the taking up of promises made *for* us, long ago by our parents and renewing them. It is all about making those baptismal promises our own.