

Baptism

Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit

Slaves of righteousness. Freedom

As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee.

Confession before Baptism

Dear in Christ

I am very happy that you have told me that you very much want to be baptized. God willing, and count clearing, you will be **baptized Nov 18, Wed, at about noon**. That is when T. will arrive. He is teaching a class that morning. **I will be there about 11:00**, and I will request that you all are laid in for that time. On the docket will be: confession, then the baptism service. I will explain all below. I have written a bunch of these letters, and honestly thought I had already sent you something. I apologize for my secretary, who is incompetent. I cannot fire him, because he is family.

I think that there are two main categories of things to know when preparing for baptism. One is very simple: what is going to happen? What must I do? I will call that "earthly things".

The second is more important and is ongoing all of our life: thinking spiritually about baptism and about life. The simple stuff takes care of itself. I will explain it a little later, and perhaps keep you in suspense, because I think we should always talk about spiritual things before earthly things.

I need to get something to you quickly, so I will say what I can from my head right now, and cobble together some other things I wrote, not necessarily in a particular order. I want to get this in the mail today.

Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit

Jesus said to us:

"... Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and *of* the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. (6) That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."
(John 3:5-6)

You must have the *right reason* to be baptized in order to receive all of its benefits. We are born the first time of our mother, and we are born as fallen human beings, slaves to sin. God created mankind to know Him perfectly, and be united to Him forever. This became impossible after Adam and Eve sinned. After their sin, the scripture tells us delicately:

"And the eyes of both were opened, and they perceived that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons to go round them." (Genesis 3:8)

Nakedness here is a metaphor for their weakness and sin. They recognized that they had done something wrong, and had no way to fix it. Their will (the power to do what we wish to do) had been weakened. They were weak, and incapable of being righteous, just as a man in a fever cannot get out of bed and work, no matter how much he desires to.

Their knowledge was weakened. They no longer felt the intimate presence of God with them. That is why they hid themselves in the garden, after their sin:

"And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the afternoon; and both Adam and his wife hid themselves from the face of the Lord God in the midst of the trees of the garden. (10) And the Lord God called Adam and said to him, Adam, where art thou? (11) And he said to him, I heard thy voice as thou walkedst in the garden, and I feared because I was naked and I hid myself." (Genesis 3:9-11)

They were afraid and hid from God because that which is not holy cannot bear to be in the presence of holiness. Man cannot fix this. There is only one fix for this. This is the reason God became man. Jesus Christ took on our humanity - all of it - and he fixed it. He was like us and tempted like us in all things, except that He did not sin. He lived the perfect human life and in some way that we do not understand, made it possible for us to attain perfection -- not all at once as He did, but in stages, after we are reborn through baptism.

For your baptism to be most helpful to you, you must be of firm mind that you want to change. In all things, you must want to be a better man. You should want to learn spiritual things, and think spiritually. You should desire to change the way you think and the things you value, to be in line with the only way of life - God's sweet law. You will be capable of all of this, because the Holy apostle Paul tells us that after baptism, we are reborn as a new creature.

"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." (2 Corinthians 5:17)

This is the most important thing you must remember. You will have good times and bad times, but you will be capable of overcoming everything. If you read the Scripture, and especially the Gospels, regularly, and pray and fast as you are able, you will experience God in your heart. Nobody can take that away from you. Not even your sin or your mistakes can take that away from you, as long as you remember who you are. You are a Christian, and God abides in you, and if you sin, this internal knowledge will spur you to repentance, and all will be well.

Here is something I wrote earlier that I think applies here:

Another definition of Salvation: Freedom

At the beginning, I read the exorcism prayers over you. (this was done, in the catechumen service). We do not believe you are possessed, but you are under the influence of the demons. They are foul and tricky, and they never sleep. Since the time they rejected the love of God, they are filled with hate for us.

We are God's beloved, and He will eventually, when we are ready, show Himself completely to us, and we will know Him and be in Union with Him.

Even the Holy Angels cannot achieve this. The angels that love God rejoice for us, and aid us in many ways, as God commands them. They ******freely and easily****** follow His commands with pleasure. We poor ones do not follow His commands as freely and easily. Some commands we foolish ones do not follow either because of ignorance, or worse, stubbornness and laziness, and others we try to follow, but our will is weak, and still others, we follow, but only with great and sometimes exhausting effort.

In the Kingdom, we will *easily* do good, and never even struggle against bad, just like the good angels. This is the freedom Christ speaks of when He says "in that day, ye shall be free indeed"¹. (John 8:36 If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.)

Christianity is the gaining of this freedom. We are able to accomplish this task after baptism, after which we become "a new creature". God sets us free from the law of sin and death. We are responsible to cooperate with His grace, and struggle against sin.

It does not matter if some of your sins are too big for you. All God requires is struggle, and desire and He will give us all sufficient grace and everything needful.

This, btw, is our understanding of works. We are not saved by any works we do, and neither are we saved if we do not struggle to do works. Nobody who refuses to repent is saved. Repentance is to "change ones mind" and struggle against sin. For some sins, we will be completely victorious, even in this life. Other sins we may never fully conquer.

Disposition

The most important factor is our disposition. Do we struggle against sin? Do we promise, as the Psalmist David sings (and we sing in every day's evening Vesper service) , to not "make excuse with excuses in sins"?

This is a *process*. If you have "sticky" sins, beg God to help you have the desire and, of course, the strength, to fight them. Most of the time our sins are "sticky" is because we lack full desire to fight them, and also firm faith. Never excuse your sin. Fight! Fight! Fight! And you will be saved.

Back to the exorcism prayers. They are long and very strong prayers against all machinations of the Devil. Do not be proud and think that the Devil cannot fool you or hurt you. He is much more intelligent than you, and he never sleeps.

He is powerless against love and humility, and of course, faith grounded on these virtues. These are your only useful weapons against them.

One of my favorite chapters of all scripture is John 3. It has the encounter with Nicodemus. It would be good for you to read this, multiple times. I am sure I read it at least a dozen times a year.

We must be born again, of water and the spirit

The teaching of Jesus to Nicodemus has profound spiritual meaning. There is an external dogmatic meaning, which is important, but it is only the beginning.

The dogma taught is that **we must be born again, of water and the spirit** - that is baptized and chrismated.

Without being born again, a man, no matter how good he is, remains under the law of sin and death. He is incapable of becoming perfected. He is incapable of seeing God. Baptism makes him become a "new creature" (as the Apostle Paul teaches), and he is now "free regarding sin", as Paul also teaches. That is, he is ABLE to resist sin (he is free and no longer a slave to it). As he grows in his faith, much like a child grows and matures into the man

¹ John 8:36 If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

he was potentially at the moment of his birth, he is eventually able to eradicate sin and be completely filled with God and achieve union with Him.

Let's look at St Paul's teaching a little closer. There is deep dogma here and also deep spiritual meaning in his words. Please remember that **all dogma is spiritual and moral, and we must act according to its spiritual meaning**. Knowing dogma and not living according to it is as useful to a person as memorizing a page in the phone book.

"But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. (18) Being then **made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness**. (19) I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh: for as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness. (20) For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness. (21) What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things *is* death. (22) But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life." (Rom 6:17-22)

"That form of doctrine" is the entire teaching of the Gospel about salvation. It encompasses what to believe, and how to live. It was faithfully transmitted to people everywhere by the Apostles and many other servants of Christ, who heard Jesus' teachings or the faithful retransmission of them.

The word that many Bibles prissily translate at "servants" is actually "slave, ("doulas", Gr). Without baptism, we are slaves of sin. We cannot ever overcome it, although, of course, in the course of life, we may get better at some things.

It is important to take very literally Paul's words: "**ye became *slaves* of righteousness**".

This is a free will decision on our part, and an ongoing one our entire life. A Christian does not give himself the **option** to sin. Christianity is the voluntary turning over of our free will to our Master, God, and considering ourselves to be his slave. Our firm resolve to be His slave will save us from many sins. There will be, because of the weakness of our nature, sins because of the myriad of temptations that are sometimes too powerful for us, but ***let it never be that we sin because of indifference!***

St Paul's words remind me of many places in the Scripture when a righteous one made a firm promise, as much to himself as to another:

And it came to pass, when the LORD would take up Elijah into heaven by a whirlwind, that Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal. (2) And Elijah said unto Elisha, Tarry here, I pray thee; for the LORD hath sent me to Bethel. And Elisha said *unto him*,

*****As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. ***...**"

2(4)Kings 2:1-2

Elisha repeated this solemn, stubborn promise THREE times. At the end of his travels with Elijah, we saw him part the Jordan, cross over, and ascend into heaven in a fiery chariot, and he received a double measure of the Spirit that was upon Elijah according to his request. None of this would have happened if Elias had meekly obeyed Elijah and not followed him. There are many times in our life when we must have such resolve. We may be weak at dark moments, but the memory of our promise will carry us through.

Another example: Ruth was a pagan(!) daughter in law to Naomi, a Jewish widow. Naomi wished to go back to her homeland after the death of her husband and sons, and ordered her two daughter's in law to stay in their home and not follow her. Ruth's response:

"And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following thee; for *****whithersoever thou goest, I will go, and wheresoever thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.***** (17) And wherever thou diest, I will die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if I leave thee, for death only shall divide between me and thee. (18) And Naomi seeing that she was determined to go with her, ceased to speak to her any more." (Ruth 1:16-18)

Because of her firm resolve, in Israel, Ruth was loved by Boaz, and had the honor of being one of the progenitors of Christ. she is mentioned in St Matthews genealogy.

I will give one more example, and this is an especially powerful one, because after this incident, there was colossal failure. Peter, because of human fear, during the trial of Christ (on Thursday), denied Him three times, but because of his firm convictions, this sin did not destroy him, and he was reconciled to the Lord after the resurrection and became a great Apostle.

"Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? (68) Then Simon Peter answered him, *****Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life.***** (69) And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God. (John 6:67-69)

All of these incidents have the same spirit of Paul's words: **"ye became *slaves* of righteousness"**. Believe this, and be committed to it, all your life.

I wish to get back to the words of Jesus in His conversation to Nicodemus, which I diverted from to discuss the words of St Paul. A good friend of mine, Michael, whom you may have met, tells me that I am always going down rabbit trails. I cannot disagree with him, as the evidence, such as this letter is everywhere, but then, life is full of many trails, and is very complex. We must have a few basic convictions that we never depart from as we go from joy to sorrow, and all the other complex things what we call life.

Jesus rebuked Nicodemus, and we must take this rebuke as belonging to us also, and must heed its instruction. When Nicodemus showed his perplexity as Jesus dogmatic words:

"Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3)

Jesus told him:

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (7) Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. (8) The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." (John 3:6-8)

Everything is life must be lived *spiritually*****. Only in this is to be found true Christianity. If we struggle to live in this way, God will fill us with His knowledge, and we will learn what is good and evil, alive and dead, profitable and unprofitable. We will learn the true nature of all things. This discernment and wisdom is a skill that is gradually acquired. It is attained only because of God's grace, given in proportion to our efforts.

Confession before Baptism

Confession is one of our sacraments, taught by the Lord to His disciples. The main jist of it is that **we are fallen human beings, who need healing**. We cannot heal on our own, nor can we treat ourselves, because our wounds, from sin, are to complicated for us. Only God can heal, and we seek that healing in everything we do - our prayer, reading of scripture, services, the Eucharist, - and also confession. This is when we speak frankly about our sins, before the Lord and in the presence of the priest as a witness.

Before a baptism, it is our tradition that the one to be baptized has a "life confession". We know that all sins committed in our life are forgiven in baptism, but we want more than forgiveness - we want healing. This confession is more or less a summary of the things that we think are wrong with us, and that we seek healing for. The "absolution of sins" for this confession will occur in the baptism. We have a tradition of calling repentance a "second baptism", so I guess we can think of all other confessions after baptism as "second baptisms". Of course, we believe in one baptism, so you will never go down into the water again, but we seek healing all the time, so in this way, we consider all confessions to be like baptism, since baptism brings about healing.

Regarding confession, you should contemplate your sins. We must understand sin in order to confess it! Sin is a condition of fallen man, and also men who have become new creatures, but unfortunately, are weak in their will, and continually "fall short of the mark". This phrase is actually the working definition of sin. Sin is not just the things we do (or do not do) - it is our condition. We are called to perfection, and to achieve perfect purity, and knowledge and righteousness. Sin is anything that deviates from that purpose.

None of God's laws are externally imposed upon us. All of them are a reflection of Who God is, and we are called to act like He is, since we are His children. Sin is to not act (and of course, this may be only in our thoughts, or also in our physical actions) according to WHO GOD IS.

The vast majority of our sins are only in our thoughts, and priorities and attitudes. We must learn to, as the Psalmist says: "Feel compunction on your beds for what you say in your hearts."

It is important to feel deeply our sin, and to firmly desire to eradicate it. We may be very weak, and this will be forgiven us, if we have desire. God will always respond to our desire to change. He will never help us if we have no compunction concerning our sins.

The most pernicious sins are those deep in the heart - pride, lust, jealousy, anger against others, judgment of others, and other such things. Basically, the worst sins are those that contradict love, since God is love, and we are called to love as He loves.

Confession of sins is a skill that must be developed. We must feel deep compunction for our sins, but not despair over our lack of progress. I do not know how to tell you to attain this skill, except to struggle, and always believe in the mercy of God. Fasting, prayer, and the reading of scripture are critical to learn this skill. All of these things are USELESS without our effort to follow the commandments and to avoid sin. Our success in our efforts is contingent on our strength. We cannot provide this strength. God provides it. It is a mystery how the human soul can consider itself to be full of sins and yet, at the same time, be confident in the mercy of God. I only know that those who struggle against their sins will be victorious. Those who, as the Vespers psalm says: "Make excuse with excuses in sins" will not only remain in their sins, but will be as the tares in the parable, and be gathered up and burned.

Contemplate your thoughts and motivations. Write them down. Consider also your actions which come about

because of those thoughts. Reveal them to God, with me, a sinful priest as a witness, and God will heal you of all of them.

Earthly things about Baptism

Ok, here is what is going to happen. On the 3rd Wednesday, you can expect to have a short time for confession before the baptism begins. I described it, above.

You will be barefoot, in your regular clothes. There will be a change of clothes available. Usually you will change out of your regular clothes and into the ones provided.

I will bless the water, and then anoint your forehead, eyes, nostrils, ears, neck and back, and both side of your hands and the tops of your feet with blessed olive oil. We call it the "oil of gladness". It is one of the symbols of the Holy Spirit. It is not this anointing of oil that conveys the gift of the Holy spirit, but rather, something we do many times a year, to ask the mercy and help of God, with prayer and the use of tangible things (like water or oil). God can bless us and help us any way He wished, and we, in obedience to His commands, use tangible things to ask His help, always of course, coupled with prayer. Without prayer, there is no grace in anything, since prayer is to communicate with the only source of life and grace.

Right after this, you will get into the font, sitting down, and I will immerse you three times in the water, Saying "The servant of God James is baptized in the name of the Father (immersion) and the Son, (immersion) and the Holy spirit (third immersion). Then you will get dried off and change clothes.

I will then anoint you with "chrism" which is a special oil prepared with many spices and blessed by the Patriarch/(head bishop of our church). It conveys the gift of the Holy spirit, and is analogous to the laying on of hands which apostles did. A bishop still lays on hands (for instance, at ordination - I am not sure if any would only lay on hands in a baptism), but priests are given chrism by the bishop to do this. Everything is done under the bishop's authority.

All of this will take about 30 minutes, perhaps 45 minutes, and then comes the rest of your life. It should be different!

Scripture about Baptism

"Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? (4) Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. (5) For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also *in the likeness* of *his* resurrection: (6) Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with *him*, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. (7) For he that is dead is freed from sin." (Romans 6:3-7)

"For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. (27) For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. (28) There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. (29) And if ye *be* Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." (Galatians 3:26-29)

"Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. (9) For in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. (10) And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power: (11) In whom also ye are circumcised with the

circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: (12) Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with *him* through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead." (Colossians 2:8-12)

Priest Seraphim Holland 2015 [St Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, McKinney, Texas](#)

This article is at:

http://www.orthodox.net/full-voice/prison-ministry-letters_2015-11-07+baptism+except-a-man-be-born-of-water-and-of-the-spirit.doc

http://www.orthodox.net/full-voice/prison-ministry-letters_2015-11-07+baptism+except-a-man-be-born-of-water-and-of-the-spirit.pdf

http://www.orthodox.net/full-voice/prison-ministry-letters_2015-11-07+baptism+except-a-man-be-born-of-water-and-of-the-spirit.html

Blog posts & local parish news are posted to our email list. Go to here: <http://groups.google.com/group/saint-nicholas-orthodox-church> to join.

Use this for any edifying reason, but please give credit, and include the URL of the article. This content belongs to the author. We would love to hear from you with comments! (seraphim@orthodox.net)