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CROSSING THE RUBICON

At Baptism The Die Is Cast

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It was 49 B.C. The Roman Republic was at a crisis. In that Republic it was not kings and dictators that ruled the empire, it was the political elites, especially the Roman Senators. These powerful men, who had enriched themselves by corrupting public officials with bribes and threats in order to secure huge tracts of lands, which in a farming world was the measure of wealth, were being threatened by the growing popularity of an army general named Julius Caesar. For the past nine years (58 – 49 B.C.) Caesar had conducted an incredible military campaign to bring all of Gaul (modern-day France and Belgium), a former military threat on their northern border, into a controllable Roman province. He had become immensely popular with the common people, championing their interests against the hated elites who were robbing them blind. He was the original Robin Hood, taking from the rich to give to the poor.

But now Caesar had a big decision to make. The Senate had demanded that he disband his army and return to Rome. This would have defeated his goal of becoming Rome's ruler. But to cross the Rubicon River with his army would be an act of treason and result in Civil War. What would he do?

On January 10, 49 B.C. he is quoted by the historian Suetonius to have said, as he steps his horse into the Rubicon, 'alea lacta est' – meaning, "the die is cast." It was his way of saying, "my decision is made; I have past the point of no return." Once the dice are thrown, the gambler has only to see how they turn out.

Civil War came from Caesar's crossing the Rubicon. The rest, as they say, is history. He won that war and became the sole ruler – the dictator – of the Roman Empire. This ended the Roman Republic that had stood for centuries. Of course, this also resulted in hatred from the Senate, who led a successful assassination plot against him just five years later on the Ides of March (March 15th), 44 B.C. "Et tu Brute" ("you too Brutus?") was said by Julius Caesar as his best friend, Marcus Brutus, along with other assassins, stabbed him to death in revenge.

I have used Julius Caesar's words and bold action many times when asking others to obey the gospel. I never want to influence someone to be baptized without first explaining the seriousness of that commitment to Christ. To confess the name of the Lord is a vow, a sacred pledge of allegiance, equal to, and actually greater than, their marriage. Their baptism is called by Paul a "*crucifixion*" – an execution – that will alter their life forever (Rom. 6:1-7). Once made, the die is cast. They have come to a point of no return.

Think about what the commitment to be baptized means. When you enter the waters of baptism, you have entered the Rubicon. You have cast the dice. But what comes next is no gamble, as it was with Caesar. He had no idea what the future held as he marched his army to Rome. With him, it was kill or be killed. He had no guarantee of the outcome.

But not so with every believer who steps into the water a sinner and comes out a saint. As long as I march behind King Jesus I am assured of final victory, and the victor's crown that follows (Rev. 2:10). Oh, I might very well die in battle, but that is of no consequence. As a soldier of Christ, I do not fear the one who can kill the body, I only fear Him who can kill body and soul, and He happens to be the very Captain I now follow into battle (Matt. 10:28).

Just 79 years after Caesar crossed the Rubicon, the Lord of glory stepped into the Jordan. There, at His baptism, He began His ministry that changed the world forever. And, praise be to God, changed my life forever! From that day forward He has challenged every would-be disciple to think long and hard about his decision to follow Him.

He told one man who said, “*Lord, I will follow You wherever you go,*” to consider the fact that he would not know even the bed he would sleep in that night (Lk. 9:57-58). He told another, who asked only to first have time to bury his father, “*Let the dead bury their own dead*” (Lk. 9:59-60). He told a third volunteer, who only asked for time to tell his family goodbye, to put his hand to the plow and not look back (Lk. 9:61-62).

Sounds serious, right?

Keep reading Luke all the way to chapter 14. There you find it is even more serious than you ever imagined. He tells the great multitudes following Him, “*If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sister, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple!*” (Lk. 14:25-26). He then ratchets it up another notch by describing that martyr’s death, “*Whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple*” (14:27). He then launches into His famous “count the cost” examples, then ends by saying, “*whoever of you does not forsake ALL THAT HE HAS – cannot be My disciple*” (14:28-33).

In my gospel work overseas, especially in communist China, I have always taught Luke 9 and Luke 14, along with Romans 6, to everyone who asked to be baptized. Their physical life could be in jeopardy if discovered by the authorities, just as it was in the first through fourth centuries after the kingdom began. But my favorite “Crossing the Rubicon” challenge is found in 1 Peter 4. He begins that “die is cast” speech with this:

“Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.”

Then, he ends it with these stirring words that even Julius Caesar would appreciate:

“Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.”

Peter, who knew a thing or two about fear and shame, reminds every Christian of the die cast once he is baptized. From that moment on, spiritually speaking, it is a battle to the death. Like Caesar, he has crossed the Rubicon, and it is now kill or be killed. His war with Satan and the world has begun.

I write this with a prayer on my lips, hoping someone, perhaps you, will cast your dice, trusting Christ with the settled outcome. Believe me, baptism is no gamble at all.