

81 baptized in Lake Serene outdoor baptism service

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As the sun glowed golden on the shore of Lake Serene on Sept. 22, a crowd of hundreds cheered and worshipped God. To passersby, what may have initially sounded like a disruption to the still waters and the calm environment was, in reality, a celebration of the peace that surpasses all understanding.

That evening, more than 400 members from Temple Church, Hattiesburg, gathered for their annual outdoor baptism service. Ten years ago, Temple began offering this night to new and rededicating believers. But when their numbers outgrew the large tanks on their property or the local football stadium, the services moved to nearby Lake Serene. The beautiful scenery, the natural amphitheater, and the convenience of a clubhouse for participants to dry off and change after the service make the lake an ideal spot for an outdoor baptism. On average, Temple baptizes 40 people at this event each year.

This year, it was 81.

“Eighty-one individuals, ranging in age from 8 to 84, took steps of obedience in believer’s baptism,” said Drew Chapman, Next Steps and Outreach Pastor of Temple Church. “This year marks the largest increase we have ever seen and the most people we have baptized in a single service in Temple’s history.”

Chapman described the significance of the event for the church family. “There’s something powerful about seeing so many lives changed. Watching that many people take the step of baptism not only stirs memories of our own commitment to Christ, but

also inspires others to make the decision to follow Him. We had several incredible stories of God's grace and forgiveness. People shared about depression, anxiety, unforgiveness, and betrayal. One in particular is a 77-year-old man who was saved at 73. After 50 years of functional alcoholism and involvement in gambling, Mike's life changed when he listened to a sermon by Billy Graham. In 2021, he miraculously lost his desire for alcohol, seeing it as divine intervention. He also walked away from gambling. Now, he's committed to spreading the Word of God and sharing his testimony to bring others to Christ."

Senior Pastor David Whitten shared his excitement. "Just hearing the testimonies of how God is working in people's lives excites me most. We heard testimonies about people breaking free from alcoholism, depression, anger, fear, anxiety, and the shame of divorce, and then others who simply strive to obey what the Bible says and teaches about believer's baptism."

Whitten also shared what he believes led to such a significant response to the outdoor baptism service this year. "First, we set a goal. Once the goal was set, every staff member and ministry area rallied together to help meet that goal. I also preached on baptism two weeks ahead of the outdoor baptism date, so people had a clear next step to take. We talked about the outdoor baptism service weekly, sharing the numbers of people who had already signed up and encouraging others to join, letting them know they wouldn't be alone in taking that step.

"The benefit of hosting this in a public space like Lake Serene, instead of our church, is that it allows us to baptize a lot of people in a very organized and efficient way. Two, it's different. Being outdoors in a lake is kind of 'old school,' and some people wait all year for our outdoor baptism service. Three, it's a great testimony to those who happen to drive by or be on the water. Seeing 81 people in the water and some 400 to 500 more on the beach, cheering and worshipping

together, is hard to miss, and we always have some 'guests' who stop by to see what's going on."

To other churches praying for a big day of baptisms, Whitten encouraged them: "Be intentional in your preaching and planning, and be clear about the next steps you want people to take. Set a big goal and go after it! If you set a goal for 50 baptisms but only 25 sign up, that's not a failure. To the contrary, that's a huge win, because chances are, those 25 are way more than would have been baptized otherwise. The Bible is clear that baptism is both a command that Jesus gives and an example He wants us to follow, so don't be afraid to challenge people to obey and follow Him."