

Introduction

I remember the day I was baptized. It was quite a while back. I was 6 years old. What stands out most to me, unfortunately, is the sudden fear that I might drown and the way I started kicking my legs as a reflex to counteract that fear. But the most important aspect of that day is that I was identifying with Jesus. Having repented of my sins months before, I was being baptized to publicly proclaim him as my savior and my lord.

There was also a time when Jesus himself was baptized. It is an event we should never forget. We see why as we consider what Matthew tells about it in our text this morning.

[Read Text and Pray]

I. The Baptism of Jesus (13-16a)

A. “Then Jesus came.” Verse 13 sounds rather ordinary, rather nonchalant. It seems like a casual, calm, and relaxed transition. But if we follow Matthew’s style we will detect that this is actually a stunning shift whereby he is pointing to a formal and notable event. Back in chapter 2 and verse 1, Matthew announced the arrival of the magi with the word came. Magi from the east came to Jerusalem. Then in chapter 3 and verse 1, Matthew announces the appearance of John the Baptist the same way: “in those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea.” The intention here is to mark an official arrival that carries with it a great deal of significance. And so the use of the seemingly ordinary word came actually produces a remarkable progression. Magi CAME looking for the king of the Jews. John the Baptist CAME proclaiming the imminence of the Messiah. And then the crown of the progression appeared. “Then Jesus came.” It is a sort of fanfare by which Matthew announces that the king whose way was being prepared by John is now HERE. He has come. Messiah has at last stepped out of the shadows in to the spotlight.

B. He came from Galilee to the Jordan to John to be baptized by him. Matthew is connecting the arrival of Jesus in public fashion with his baptism.

It served to combine the formal introduction of Jesus as Messiah with a ceremonial ordinance of initiation.

Baptism functions in this way in the church as well. Baptism is that initiatory ceremony by which believers formally come and are introduced as publicly entering into the body of the church. If you are believing in Christ and you have not been baptized, you should submit yourself to this public ordinance of introduction.

C. We cannot speak of this important ordinance without underscoring the fact that what Jesus came to John for was not to have water sprinkled or poured on him but to have himself immersed in water.

Confusion about the mode of baptism abounds today. It is largely traceable to the fact that while most words in the Bible are translated from their original language, baptism has been transliterated. Rather than translating the word, translators simply brought the word as close as they could into the language they were translating to. In Greek the word here is baptizo. It means to immerse, to dip, to submerge. This word does appear in other contexts, and when it does it is translated. One example is Luke 16:24. In this verse a man asks that someone might dip (and there is the word baptizo) the tip of his finger in water and cool off his tongue. Another example is in John 13:26. Here Jesus dipped (again baptizo) a piece of bread before handing it to Judas. The word baptize always means to dip or submerge, and no other word is used for the ceremony of baptizing.

Church history confirms the method of immersion in baptizing. If you will indulge me, I want to read for you a summary of church history on baptism written by John MacArthur in his commentary on Matthew.

The Christian church knew no form of baptism but immersion until the Middle Ages, when the practice of sprinkling or pouring was introduced by the Roman Catholic Church—which itself had previously always baptized by immersion. The . . . Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) said, “In immersion the setting forth of the burial of Christ is more plainly expressed, in which this manner of baptizing is more commendable.” The Catholic church did not recognize other modes

until the Council of Ravenna, held in France in 1311. It was from the Catholic church that Lutheran and Reformed churches inherited the form of sprinkling or pouring. The Church of England did not begin the practice of sprinkling until 1645. The Eastern Orthodox church has never permitted any mode but immersion.

And so according to the meaning of the word and the subsequent testimony of history, Jesus came to John to be immersed in the water.

C. John's reluctance. Jesus came to be baptized, but John was reluctant to do so. Remember now the nature of the baptism for which John was calling. His message was to repent, to turn from sin, and to be baptized confessing sin. But what we know about Jesus is that he never sinned. We also know that John's parents Zachariah and Elizabeth were given enough prophetic information to recognize that John was the forerunner and Jesus was the Messiah. Elizabeth had exclaimed that Mary's child was the Lord back when both women were with child, and John the Baptist leaped in the womb of Elizabeth when the greeting of Mary's voice was heard. With all this information it is easy to see why would John resist baptizing Jesus. Jesus is the Messiah not him. He is the sinner, not Jesus. His baptism was for those who turned from their sin, but Jesus had no sin from which to turn. And on the other hand, John knew himself and he knew his sin. He did need to repent. He himself needed to be baptized. So he said, "I need to be baptized by you and you come to me?" John's baptizing Jesus made no sense to him. Why would a sinner baptize one without sin for repentance of sins he never committed? So he would have prevented him.

C. Jesus' insistence. John would have prevented him, but Jesus answered him, "Let it be so for now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. It may not make sense to you John, but bear with me. Trust me. Jesus is not objecting to John's concern. He is not disputing John's conviction that it is not seemly for a sinner to baptize for repentance one who has not sinned. No, Jesus grants John's misgivings, but he asks John to trust his greater judgment that it is in fact the right thing for them to do. It's right for John and it is right for Jesus, in the greater scheme of things that John proceed and do what Jesus asks. And

thus we come to the matter which is somewhat perplexing. Why was this the right thing? How did Jesus' baptism fulfill righteousness?

Fundamentally, righteousness is behavior that is demanded by the holiness of God. It fulfills what God deems as right. The righteousness of God is displayed in the gospel. Paul is not ashamed of the gospel because in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith. So there is a righteousness that is part of fulfilling everything that pertains to God's glorious work in Jesus. And this connects to what Jesus is saying to John. Jesus is intent on fulfilling everything in himself that pertains to the gracious work of God in saving sinners. And in some way Jesus' undergoing the baptism of John is a part of what he must do. In fact coming for baptism was coming as a sinner would come. So Jesus is identifying with sinners not because he had sins of his own but because he would bear sins of others.

Think of what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21: For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Identity is everything here. Christ identified himself with our sin and dealt with it properly so that his sheep might be identified with his righteousness.

Isaiah 53 underscores this identification as well, saying in verse 12, that he will divide his blessings with the many because "he was numbered with the transgressors and bore the sin of many."

Jesus fulfills the plan associated with God's righteousness in order to save sinners. He does this by being numbered with the sinners, and this fulfills all righteousness.

D. Further significance of Jesus' baptism. But not only did Jesus identify with sinners, he also provided a symbol of death and resurrection. He foreshadowed by his immersion the culmination of his work for sinners. Submerging into the water and bringing one out depicts death, burial, and resurrection.

This is something Jesus conveyed in his teaching about his suffering. Jesus made reference twice to his death in terms of baptism or immersion. One of these occasions appears in Luke 12:50 where he said, "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished." In Mark 10:38 in response to the request of two brothers to sit next to him in glory, Jesus charged, "you do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" The greatest degree of identification by which Jesus identified with sinners is that at last he actually did bear our sins upon himself and suffered in our place. He died. He was buried. And he rose the third day.

Jesus was baptized then at the outset of his ministry to display what that ministry was all about. His ministry was about humbling himself. It was about giving his life a ransom for others. It was about being numbered with us. It was about the sinless savior dying for the sins of others. It was about him being tempted in every respect as are we but without sin. It was about the infinite God suffering in the confines of finitude so that finite humans might experience infinite mercy and grace. It was about being immersed into the wrath of God in the place of those who incurred that wrath. It was about him wrapping a towel around his waist and assuming the form of a servant and washing the feet of his disciples.

E. How incredible is the humility of our savior! Paul extols the mind of Jesus in Philippians 2. He says "though he was in the form of God , did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death even death on a cross."

So by this baptism Jesus is introduced as the Messiah, the Hope of the world. And he portrays how it is he would ascend to the messianic throne. Not by exalting himself but by humbling himself and being numbered with the transgressors and bearing their sin and suffering for it. Hallelujah! What a savior!

In Christian baptism, those who believe in the glorious savior, who repent of sin and trust in him for redemption, are called on to be baptized in his name to be identified with him. To be baptized as a believer is to be identified with Jesus in his death burial and resurrection. And why would we hesitate being identified with him openly and boldly who so boldly was identified with us in all our sin?

II. The Anointing of Jesus (16b)

A. The opening of the heavens. When Jesus went up out of the water, Matthew gets our attention with the word, behold. He declares, "Behold the heavens were opened to him." This is a gripping declaration. Ezekiel opens up the words of his prophecies by telling in chapter 1 and verse 1 that in the thirtieth year, he was by the river, and the heavens were opened, and he saw visions of God. Here is Jesus in his thirtieth year by the river and the heavens were opened. And we see God.

Stephen, on the day he was stoned, said he saw the heavens opened. He saw the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. Three times in Revelation, John observes heaven open and he beholds the glories of God.

Here on the banks of the river following Jesus' baptism, the heavens open and what we behold is a display of the glory of God not up there in the heavenlies but down here on the earth! This is a powerful statement by God of His glory and majesty. And the focus is on Jesus.

B. Out of heaven comes the Spirit of God. He comes in the form of a dove and comes to rest on Jesus. Now think about this. When Saul was anointed king, it was Samuel who took a flask of oil and poured it on his head and said, "Has not the Lord anointed you to be prince over his people Israel?" After Saul was rejected, the Lord sent Samuel with his flask of oil to the house of Jesse saying, I have provided for myself a king among his sons. And when David came before Samuel, the Lord said, anoint this one; he is the one. So Samuel (this is in 1 Samuel 16) took the flask of oil and anointed him in the midst of the brothers, and the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon David from that day forward.

Now here we are at the edge of the Jordan River. John the Baptist is the prophet who has been proclaiming the kingdom of heaven is at hand. He is the Samuel figure who presents to Israel her king. He immerses Jesus and heaven responds by opening up and as with David the Holy Spirit comes upon this son of David in remarkable fashion, descending and remaining on him.

The Spirit of God comes upon Jesus to set him apart formally for the office of King of Israel. And more importantly, He is the King of the Kingdom of Heaven. He is anointed and empowered by heaven itself for the office unto which he is set apart.

C. The significance. This is heaven's declaration that Jesus is king. This event is the sign that indicated to John that Jesus was the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. He is Messiah and heaven itself has declared it to be so. You can't miss it and you can't deny it.

It is also significant because it was in the power of the Spirit of God that Jesus performed his work as Messiah. He did what he did through the power of the Spirit. Yes, he is the God-man, but he accomplished his work as a man through the Spirit of God. And this is the way the disciples of Jesus are to live. Jesus baptizes with the Spirit and his followers are to walk by the Spirit in order not to gratify the desires of the flesh. The weapons of our warfare have divine power to destroy strongholds. It happens on the level of truth. By the power of the Spirit of God we set our minds on the truth, live according to the truth, just like Jesus did.

III. The Introduction of Jesus (17)

A. There was not only a dove from heaven; there was also a voice from heaven. This was the voice of the Father. And in this way we have the participation of each of the three persons of the Trinity in this magnificent introduction to the Jews and to the world of its Messiah, of its king, of the king of the kingdom of heaven. These persons are simultaneously and actively involved in this event. The reality is of three distinct and eternal persons. They are not modes among which God manifests himself according to the need of the moment. Nor do we have three gods who act independently. There is one God who exists eternally as three harmonious

persons. That harmony is exhibited here. The son submits to the Father. The Spirit anoints the Son for his work. The Father is pleased with the Son in his work. To reject the doctrine of the Trinity is a repudiation of the Scripture and to undermine the glory displayed right here at the baptism of Jesus.

B. Part of the glory is manifest as the Father speaks. First, the Father declares, "This is my beloved Son." The Father is saying two important things here.

1. First, he is identifying Jesus as his son. Jesus is the son of God. Matthew has already informed us that Jesus is the son of Abraham and the son of David. And now the crowning truth about him is that the covenant promises made by God to Abraham and to David are fulfilled by one who is both descended from them and yet who also traces his ancestry to God himself. In an eternal sense Jesus is the son of God. He is here on earth not simply as an extraordinary man but as the God-man.

2. Second, the Father is declaring his love for Jesus. The father has a relational love towards the son. People who reject the Trinitarian nature of God worship an idol. The Bible reveals a genuine relationship here, one in which persons LOVE one another.

In love the Father commands the son and in love the son does what the Father shows him. The father admires his son. He cherishes him. The Son is precious to the Father. And well it is. The son is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature. And that imprint is seen in his creative work, in his sustaining work, and in his redeeming work.

C. Finally, the Father declares his pleasure in the Son. Over in the gospel according to John, Jesus is clear that the Father delights in showing the Son what he is doing. The son reflects love to the Father by doing the things the Father shows him. The Father is delighted by the Son's imitation of him. And here at the baptism of Jesus, the Father is expressing for the world to hear that he loves and delights in His son and what he is doing.

It magnifies the occasion here. Jesus at the appointed time has stepped forward to formally enter into the public eye as Messiah. He has done so by identifying himself with sinners to come and rescue sinners and bring them into the kingdom of heaven. And the Father is voicing to Jesus his love and pleasure. Son, yes, this is what I sent you to do. And I delight in this work. I delight in your humbling yourself. I delight that you delight in pleasing me. And I will declare and show my pleasure in you. Back in Philippians 2 what does the father do in light of the son's humility?

Philippians 2:8-11

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is LORD, to the glory of God the Father.

If God the Father is pleased with his son in this way, should we not also acknowledge the Son with similar joy and delight. Should we not be determined to follow this King wherever he leads, submit to him whatever he says? Should we not go ahead and get on our knees and confess this Jesus who humbled himself for us, who was numbered with us, who was baptized for us, is LORD. Should we not do it with our words? Should we not do it with our very lives? Should we not do so with our songs? Should we not do so when we find ourselves in the throes of temptation? Should we not when we are afflicted and even persecuted for the sake of his name? Oh yes! He is Lord!

Conclusion

And I show you one more thing. With this sense of the magnificent love of the Father for the Son, hear this. John 15:9 records these words of Jesus, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full."

Worship Jesus. Follow Jesus. Obey Jesus. Gladly and like him, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Him!