

Jesus, God's Son, Is Baptized

Matthew 3:13-17

by Rev. Michael G. Lilienthal

¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized by John at the Jordan. ¹⁴But John tried to stop him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?"

¹⁵But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, because it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then John let him. ¹⁶After Jesus was baptized, he immediately went up out of the water. Suddenly, the heavens were opened for him! He saw the Spirit of God, descending like a dove and landing on him, ¹⁷and a voice out of the heavens said, "This is my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with him."

Hymn: *ELH #547* - "To Jordan Came Our Lord"

Let us pray: Lead us, O Lord, to a true understanding of our Savior's humility and obedience, which led him to be baptized like sinners, standing in the place of all sinners and taking on his shoulders the sin of the world, which he paid for in his bloody Baptism on the cross. Grant that we, in our Baptisms, die to our sins with Christ by daily contrition and repentance and rise with Christ as new men and women in his image, to your glory. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Dear baptized in Christ,

What was Jesus thinking? Surely at one time or another many of us have had the same question on our minds that John had on his: "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?" We would tend to agree. Wasn't Jesus supposed to bring salvation? Wasn't Jesus supposed to be in power? John had said that Jesus would baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matt. 3:11, ESV), but here Jesus comes to *be* baptized with water. John had preached a Jesus so high and superior to himself that he, John, was unworthy even to perform the basest service for him: "whose sandals I am

not worthy to carry,” but here Jesus comes in lowliness and humility, to *receive*, like all these other sinners.

John’s Baptism is described as a Baptism “with water for repentance” (Matt. 3:11, ESV), but did Jesus need to repent? Was Jesus sinful? For the answers to these and all other questions that come to mind, we hear what Jesus himself says on this occasion: “Let it be so now, because it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness.” And hear the testimony of the entire Trinity, for the Holy Spirit came “descending like a dove and landing on him, and a voice out of the heavens said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with him.’” Learn from God himself what the mystery means that **Jesus, God’s Son, is baptized.**

I. To Fulfill All Righteousness

“Let it be so now,” Jesus said, “because it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Really, this answer should be evaluated closely, word by word.

Begin with the first word: ἄφες in Greek, it means, “Permit it,” or “Allow it.” This ought to be the first shocking word we hear in this account: *Jesus* is, in a sense, asking *John* for permission. “Permit it,” he says, because, although it is a reversal of what we would expect, a reversal of the natural order which puts God in authority over man, so that John (a mere man) is performing this great rite, and Jesus (true God) receives it. Jesus tells John to “Let it be so” because it was a part of “his state of humiliation: the

sinless Son of God receives the baptism meant for sinners because he shall be the sinner-bearer."¹

This is connected to the next word: ἄρτι, which means, "now." *Now* this strange act must be permitted, because *now* is not the time of glory and exaltation: John was looking for the Christ who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, but Jesus tells him, "Not just now! *Now* it is time for what must come first!" *Now* is not the time of exaltation, but the time of Jesus' humiliation, when he would take sin, Law, and later cross on his shoulders for us, because it is *through* humiliation that Jesus brings exaltation, *through* suffering that he brings joy, and *through* death that he brings life!

Jesus declares then that this act of his being baptized is πρέπον – proper, fitting, right, or appropriate. Jesus describes it with this word, because this act, this event, is in perfect alignment with the plan of God. By describing it as πρέπον Jesus indicates the higher power behind these events, therefore introducing the concept that God is acting now, deliberately, in order to accomplish his purposes.

"It is proper ἡμῖν – *for us*," says Jesus, and we must take this with the next word: πληρῶσαι – to fulfill. John and Jesus are both involved in the activity of *fulfilling* something, and fulfilling what? "πᾶσαν δικαιοσύνην" – all righteousness. "With John's participation, Jesus will perform 'all righteousness,' that is, he will enact God's saving deeds for people by (literally) standing with sinners, taking the place of sinners, receiving from John the baptism that sinners receive."² John participates, *of course* not

¹ Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1-11:1*, 179.

² *Ibid.*, 181.

as a co-redeemer or in any synergistic sense – there is *no hint* of that in the text – but as a tool of God, like ministers of the means of grace today, to perform what Jesus must *passively* receive.

Understand, the *πάσαν δικαιοσύνην* being fulfilled by Jesus and John together is the righteousness that neither of them presently *actively* performs or acts. It is *God* who acts. This is *God's* righteousness, and it is the righteousness which he brings forth in Jesus, and subsequently in every gospel message about Jesus: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it *the righteousness of God is revealed* from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (Rom. 1:16-17, ESV).

God's righteousness, it is demonstrated here, is precisely his *saving action*. And this saving action has a conclusion and a goal: “Therefore,” writes St. Paul, “since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). The righteousness of God, fulfilled by Jesus and John as God brought it to creation, is *revealed* in Jesus *for faith*, so that we receive that righteousness and live, and have *peace*.

Picture the Baptism of Jesus. He stood at the bank of the Jordan River, ready to go into that river and to metaphorically make a crossing. We too, reading this narrative, stand at the Jordan, on the bank of the Old Testament: in that Testament there was frequent talk of the Lord's righteousness, as, for example, when Psalm 23 says, “He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake” (23:3, ESV), or when another psalm petitions God: “In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear

to me, and save me!" (71:2, ESV). But its meaning there, although the righteousness of God always promises salvation, was always obscure and *unfulfilled*. Now, with Jesus, we cross the river that all Israel once crossed from the wilderness and into the *fulfillment* of God's promise for their homeland – and when *they* crossed, God warned them "Do not say in your heart, after the Lord your God has thrust them out before you, 'It is because of *my righteousness* that the Lord has brought me in to possess this land'" (Deut. 9:4, ESV) – so now we cross into the New Testament, where *God's righteousness* is fulfilled in Christ, salvation is won, and the promise comes to completion!

Included in this is the prophecy Isaiah gave: "And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever" (Is. 32:17, ESV), as Paul said. God's righteousness, God's saving action, has accomplished peace for us with him – peace, which in Hebrew is שָׁלוֹם. This is related to the name of Jerusalem in Hebrew: יְרוּשָׁלַיִם, or "City of Peace." Israel crossed the Jordan River from the wilderness of sin into the place where God would establish the City of Peace. Jesus "crossed" the Jordan River from the Old Testament and the looking-forward-to the righteousness of God into the fulfillment of that righteousness and the peace that God promised for us all.

II. Standing in Our Place

As stated, Jesus' fulfilling of "all righteousness" is his being the enactment of God's saving actions – on the occasion of his Baptism, this means standing, literally, in the place of sinners: standing in *our* place.

We noticed the absurdity, right? Jesus, God's Son, is baptized – ridiculous! He's not a sinner. He doesn't need to repent. And yet, he is baptized in a Baptism "with water for repentance" (Matt. 3:11, ESV), where the people "were baptized by [John] in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (Matt. 3:6, ESV). The very implication that Jesus could have any sin on him at all is enough to make Christians wince.

But just as John's objections were quieted by Jesus' statement: "Let it be so now, because it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness," so all objections should be silenced by the testimony of the whole Trinity: Jesus' words, the descent of the Spirit, and the voice of the Father.

"Suddenly, the heavens were opened for him!" Matthew records. This image recalls several Old Testament passages, including the plea in Isaiah:

Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains might quake at your presence –
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil –
to make your name known to your adversaries,
and that the nations might tremble at your presence! (Is.
64:1-2, ESV)

This is a prayer that God would come to bring judgment and righteousness, and it is depicted in fire, as John promised, that Jesus would baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matt. 3:11, ESV). The picture is of power and glory. How ironic that God's glory is revealed in a humble man partaking in a sacrament meant for sinners!

There is also the image from Genesis: "In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened" (Gen. 7:11,

ESV)! Again, the heavens open when God's glorious judgment comes on the earth, in this case with water. And the Flood is connected in many ways with Baptism: in both cases the wicked is destroyed and the righteous saved; new creation comes about; life results from something that looks like death. This is a parallel that St. Peter explicitly describes in his first letter: "Baptism, which corresponds to [the Flood], now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God" (1 Pet. 3:21-22, ESV). Again, notice, that heaven is mentioned here, but the direction has changed: the heavens opened to Jesus a second time, i.e. when he ascended! So the heavens opening have become something full, not of terror, but of great blessing for the faithful, as, again in the Old Testament, Moses wrote in Deuteronomy: "The LORD will open to you his good treasury, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hands" (Deut. 28:12, ESV). The blessings of God come down when he opens his heavens, including manna (Ps. 78:23), revelations of his Word (Ezek. 1:1), and his very Son, our Savior (Matt. 24:30).

On the occasion of Jesus' Baptism, the opening of the heavens preceded "the Spirit of God, descending like a dove and landing on him," which recalls more passages of the Old Testament: at the first creation, "the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2, ESV). At the recreation after the Flood, too, we read that "God made a wind [or spirit, for they are the same word in Hebrew: רוּחַ] blow over the earth, and the waters subsided" (Gen. 8:2, ESV). Again, for the Spirit of God to be hovering

over the waters implies a connection to creation or recreation: and Christ, here, the object of focus for the Spirit of God, was initiating the New Creation.

And finally, “a voice out of the heavens said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with him.’” “This is my Son,” said the Father, and he meant this in not just one, not just two, but three explicit ways: from eternity, Jesus is the Son of the Father, as in Psalm 2: “The Lord said to me, ‘You are my Son; / today [that is, in eternity] I have begotten you” (v. 7, ESV). At his conception as a human child, Jesus was the Son of the Father, as Gabriel told the Virgin: “the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God” (Luke 1:35, ESV). But beyond both of these, the words of the Father signify that “Jesus, the Son, embodies the nation and has come in the place of its people.... At the first exodus, God constituted the nation [of Israel] as his ‘son’ (Ex 4:22). In Jer 31:20...God, through the prophet, speaks of his love for Ephraim, ‘my *beloved* son.’”³ The prophet Hosea spoke the words of God: “out of Egypt I called my son” (11:1), which is true of Israel from Egypt in the first exodus, then in their second exodus from the “Egypt” of Babylon; but as Matthew demonstrated in his reference to the prophecy early in his Gospel, it also refers to Jesus, who is God’s divine Son, and the son who takes the place of the whole nation.

Therefore, picture what St. Paul writes to the Corinthians: “I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea [the

³ Ibid., 183.

Red Sea], *and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea*" (1 Cor. 10:1-2, ESV).

That first exodus was a type, a forerunning picture, of Baptism to come, as Moses was a type, a forerunning picture, of Jesus to come. In the final, end-time exodus which is the logical conclusion of our Baptisms, that is, our death as well as final judgment, when the wicked will be drowned in hell and the righteous raised up to heaven, Jesus is not only Moses, but he here, at his Baptism, stands as all Israel, in the place of all sinners.

And this then becomes the key thought; this is what Jesus' Baptism means *for us*: he stands in those waters as the substitute, in the place of sinners. His "willing Baptism in the Jordan is a sign that points forward. It is a cruciform harbinger, pointing forward to the hidden and unexpected, shockingly weak and vulnerable in-breaking reign of God, to the paradoxical enthronement of the King of the Jews on the cross."⁴ Just think how Jesus spoke to his disciples about his second Baptism: "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!" (Luke 12:50, ESV). This second Baptism he spoke of is the Baptism of his death. And, just as Jesus' Baptism pointed to his death, so our Baptisms signify our deaths in him. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Rom. 6:3, ESV).

Jesus' Baptism pointed ahead to his death and his resurrection. Our Baptisms connect us to the *same* death and resurrection. When we entered that font, our sins were placed on the cross with Christ; and when we were lifted out of that font, our

⁴ Ibid., 181.

righteous, spiritual selves left the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea with the exalted Christ. Christ's Baptism stands before, and Christian Baptism stands after, surrounding the midpoint, the focal point, the three-day point of cross and tomb where our sins were drowned and our souls given eternal life. In another place, St. Paul wrote:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. [And here comes the key:] This he set aside, *nailing it to the cross*. (Col. 2:11-14, ESV)

The absurdity of Jesus' action, therefore, once again is the point. It is absurd for the omnipotent and holy God to willingly accept a Baptism meant for sinners. But that is precisely what Jesus came to do: to humiliate himself in *our* place, to become a sinner in our place. His Baptism is the public declaration of his intent to do exactly that.

This Sunday stands on the brink of the season of Lent, a season of repentance, which will culminate in the betrayal, arrest, and death of Jesus, followed on the third day by his resurrection. We should also look at that occasion this season, as well as at our Baptisms which connect us to that occasion, and which "means that the Old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts, and that a new man should daily come forth and arise to live before God in

righteousness and holiness forever.”⁵ Jesus took our place. That is what his Baptism means. That is what our Baptisms mean. We rejoice in this, and daily renounce the Old Adam who constantly seeks to return, embracing the merits of our Lord who stands in the place of sinners. Love. That’s what Jesus was thinking.

Amen.

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⁵ Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*.