

Baptized into His Death

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Matthew 3:1-17 NIV

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

The word *Epiphany* means “revealing” or “manifestation,” and during this season called Epiphany we’re considering some of those Gospel events through which the glory of our Lord was first manifested, or revealed. On the first Sunday we celebrated the visit of the Magi to the child of Bethlehem. Then we looked at Jesus’ visit to the temple at age twelve, and how his growth to young manhood is a pattern for our progress in godly living. Last week we skipped ahead to Jesus’ first miracle, changing water into wine at Cana, when his disciples saw his glory and believed in him. Next week we’ll look at Jesus’ transfiguration on the holy mountain, and how his disciples responded to that revelation of his glory.

Today, because in a few moments we’ll witness the baptism of a young believer, we’re backing up a bit in the Gospel story to consider Jesus’ baptism in the River Jordan. We often speak of our “following the Lord in baptism,” as our entrance into the community of faith, so it’s important that we come to a good understanding of what baptism means. This message might be a little more theological than some, but if you’re concerned about a better understanding of the faith, I believe you’ll find it helpful.

Holy Baptism actually means several different things. And it can mean something different for different people. Perhaps that seems like a strange statement, for don’t we all come to the Lord on the same basis? Yes, we all come to him because we’re helpless sinners in need of a Savior. But our sinfulness and helplessness — and God’s loving answer to our need — can be expressed in different ways, depending on our stage in life and our particular journey of faith. We’ll explain what we mean by that as we continue our exploration of this ordinance.

That word, *ordinance*, reminds me that we ought to say something about Christian ordinances in general. Some Christians speak of *ordinances* and some speak of *sacraments*. An ordinance is something Jesus expressly told us to do in worship, something he specifically *ordained*. As you know, most evangelical Christian churches recognize two such actions: the Lord’s Supper, or Holy Communion, and Baptism. Some Christians recognize and practice a third action, washing one another’s feet, which Jesus commends in John 13:14. These are sacred ordinances of the Lord. Other Christians speak of *sacraments*. A sacrament is an outward action that signifies a special grace of God in the life of a believer. Most

Protestants recognize baptism and Holy Communion as the two sacraments of the church, but Catholics and others see a gracious, sacramental purpose behind other events such as marriage, ordination, or confession and reconciliation, and call them “sacraments” also.

Sacraments, or ordinances? In my opinion, it doesn’t matter. Whatever Jesus ordained is *sacramental*, for we see his grace through it. And whatever is truly a sign of God’s grace in our lives is going to be consistent with the way of life Jesus commended to us, so in a way it’s an *ordinance* too. Perhaps we’re too limited in our thinking about sacraments and ordinances. Even a sermon or teaching can be sacramental, if you hear God’s gracious word through it; and Jesus certainly told his disciples to preach and teach, so these activities are also ordinances of the Lord. But, conventionally, we think of Holy Communion and Baptism as the two major ordinances of worship.

So let’s begin by looking at Jesus’ baptism by John in the River Jordan. John, as the Gospels tell us, had been baptizing people as a symbol of their repentance of sin and turning to God. Now baptism, or immersion in a pool of water, was something the Jews had been practicing already whenever a Gentile would convert to Judaism. John was sort of “breaking the rules” because he was baptizing people who were already Jews. There hadn’t been a recognized prophet for hundreds of years, and now comes this weird guy wearing clothing made from camel’s hair and eating locusts and wild honey, calling people to confess their sin and return to the Lord. Yes, he was weird, but people were getting the message; the Gospels tell us that even some of the Jewish teachers and priests were coming to be baptized. John’s preaching was a sign that God is on the move again in the life of his people, and his baptism was a way of preparing for the coming of the Lord.

But now, here comes Jesus asking to be baptized, and Matthew tells us that John had a little trouble with that. John recognized that Jesus was the one God had chosen to redeem his people, the one who “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” He thought *Jesus* should baptize *him* instead! But Jesus insisted. “It’s the right thing to do,” he said. So John went through with it.

What happened next illustrates what I said earlier about baptism having a different meaning for different people. When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit came upon him and he heard God speaking to him in a special way: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” That’s almost a quote from Psalm 2, “You are my son, today I have begotten you.” That Psalm speaks of the Lord’s choice of his “anointed one” or *Messiah*. So Jesus’ baptism was a Messianic baptism! That’s not how you and I see our baptism, is it? If we do, we’re in big trouble! There’s only one Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ; as Peter says in Acts 4:12, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” Some people today think they’re their own saviors, because that’s what our culture teaches. But trying to be your own Messiah is a sure-fire formula for messing up your life, and the lives of others. When we “follow the Lord in baptism,” we’re following his action and his obedience, but our baptism doesn’t mean exactly what his meant.

So what does *our* baptism mean? Again, it might mean something different for each of us depending on our stage in life. In a few weeks we’ll have another baptism, when some young parents of our congregation will be presenting their baby to the Lord. Some evangelical churches don’t baptize infants, only believers old enough to confess their own faith in Christ. When babies are presented, they’re *dedicated* but not baptized. We’re glad to dedicate babies here also, if that’s their parents’ desire, but we will also baptize them. And, obviously, the baptism of an infant has a different meaning from the baptism of a young person or believer who can speak for himself. With infant baptism, it’s the commitment of the parents that makes baptism possible.

What’s the Scriptural basis for baptism of infants or small children? Looking at the New Testament, we see at least two occasions when young children may have been baptized. When Peter preached to the household of Cornelius, the Roman centurion, the Holy Spirit fell upon all of them, and Peter baptized everyone (Acts 10). And when the jailer of Philippi confessed his faith in Christ, Paul baptized his whole family (Acts 16). In that culture, a commitment made by the head of the family applied to every member of the family; unless we understand this, we can never understand how we might be reconciled to God through membership in the family of Christ. So when Christian parents enter into a covenant with the Lord to raise up their child in the faith of Christ, that decision applies to their baby as well. Baptism for

Christian babies is like circumcision for Jewish boys; it's a sign that they're part of the covenant people, members of the family of God. Later on in life, if the parents and the church do their job well, that child will have the opportunity to ratify that commitment in confirmation or some other appropriate action.

But when a person is older, and comes to Christ on his own, there's another aspect to baptism. When we're old enough to know that we need the Lord Jesus to cleanse us from sin and help us live in a way that's pleasing to God, then our baptism is a way of telling others that we've decided to put Christ first in our life. It's an action that signifies that we've accepted God's offer of forgiveness and new life in Christ, and we're ready to take our place in the family of God.

The waters of baptism symbolize the cleansing of God's Holy Spirit, the Giver of life. Yet, in the Bible, water can also symbolize death and separation from God. A good place to see this is in the prayer of Jonah the prophet, when he was cast into the sea. He prayed, "I am cast out from thy presence; how shall I again look upon thy holy temple? The waters closed in over me, the deep was round about me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me for ever; yet thou didst bring up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God" (Jonah 2:4-6). When we're baptized, in other words, it's like we're *dying!*

That's made explicit in what Paul says about baptism in Romans 6, and let me quote the passage:

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin — because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God (Romans 6:1-10).

So, when we're baptized as believers in Christ, it's a way of saying that we've joined with Jesus *in his death* and resurrection. We've *died* to our old self and we've come to life again as a member of the body of Christ. In other words, when we take this step we enter a new world, a world in which the motivation or "spark" of our life comes not from ourselves but from Christ, through his Holy Spirit. As Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

At this point you might be saying, "That's all very well and good, Dr. Leonard, but I've known plenty of baptized Christians who certainly didn't live out the meaning of their baptism. They're just like they were before, and I struggle with my old self too." In response, I would point out that this isn't a new issue; the apostle Paul, in the New Testament, surely had to deal with Christians who weren't living out that dying and rising with Christ in their behavior. And his answer was this:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:1-3).

In other words, "Quit living like somebody you're not, and live like the person you really are." Baptism isn't just something *we* do, it's also something *God* does. And here is where we have to appreciate the *sacramental* aspect of baptism. It does make a difference in us, because it's a sign of God's grace. In Holy Baptism we died with Christ, and our true life is with him in his heavenly glory. By his Spirit, we have the power to take that which is rightfully ours and live the resurrection life. God has put that money into our bank account, and baptism is our passbook or withdrawal slip. If we don't use it, we're the losers — but it's always there for us.

Just a few more things before we close. We haven't said anything about the *modes* of baptism: sprinkling, pouring, or immersion. Christians have divided over this question, but our denomination

doesn't think this should be a divisive issue. We're open to all modes, because essentially it's a question of how much water you use — and should churches define themselves by *that*? Our church is open to any method. Immersion, or going completely under the water, does preserve the symbolism of dying and rising with Christ. But the Book of Acts tells us that 3,000 people were baptized on the Day of Pentecost. Now there isn't any river in Jerusalem, so how could the apostles have immersed all those people? And when Paul and Silas baptized the Philippian jailer it was in the middle of the night, after a riot in which they had been beaten and wounded. Did Paul, his wounds freshly bandaged, take the jailer and his whole family out into the local creek at midnight? Probably not. What's important isn't how deep the water is, but how deep is the *repentance and faith* of the believer who's baptized, and how deep is the *love of God* for those who come to him!

Whether we're baptized as infants or as believing young people or adults, baptism signifies our entrance into the family of God. In a certain sense, then, our baptism *is* like the baptism of our Lord, who heard the voice from heaven: "This is my Son, whom I love." In Holy Baptism we hear that voice again: "You are my son, my daughter, and I love you." As members of Christ, we're adopted into a family that's larger and greater than our earthly family and transcends those distinctions of race or ethnicity, or family heritage and social status. That's why, when we baptize, we never use a person's last name. As children of our Father, we all have the same last name, the name of Christ. In Holy Baptism we take on that name, the name of Jesus, the name that is above every name — and wear it gratefully and *grace*-fully, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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