

TO FULFILL ALL RIGHTEOUSNESS

Matthew 3:13-17 The Baptism of Jesus

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

¹⁵ Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

¹⁶ 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 alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

MESSAGE:

John the Baptist sure knew how to get people’s attention! First he appeared out of the desert wearing weird clothes and eating bugs. Then he proceeded to rail against the people of Israel, accusing them of their sins and threatening them with hell and damnation. Finally, he told their religious leaders that they were the worst of the lot. John definitely knew how to make a splash. His preaching was effective, though. Many Israelites were convicted by John’s message and asked him to baptize them in the Jordan River. You see, the word “baptize” originally meant “to drown,” and so to be baptized in those days was a way of signifying that you wanted to drown your sins and turn away from them. It meant that you *repented*.

And that leads us to an important question: why would Jesus want to be baptized? He didn’t need to repent of his sins: he didn’t have any! So why did he need to be baptized? John himself appears to have been puzzled by it. When Jesus showed up in the river he said: *“I need to be baptized by you—and you come to me?”* Jesus’ answered, *“Let it be so now. It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.”* But what does that mean?

Understanding why Jesus underwent baptism gives us a key to understanding how he saved us. But to put it in the proper context, we have to go back fifteen hundred years before John’s time to the first act of this divine drama—to a time when another man appeared out of the desert—a man named Moses. Moses was the man God had chosen to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Through Moses, God delivered His children from the power of the Egyptians by parting the waters of the Red Sea, allowing them to pass through, and then closing those same waters over the heads of their enemy. Then, after leading them through the wilderness for forty years, God brought them to the Promised Land. As a result,

Moses, the deliverer, is revered by Jews to this very day above all other Old Testament prophets.

Now fast-forward fifteen hundred years to the second act. A new deliverer has appeared—Jesus of Nazareth—the prophet Moses had promised the Israelites God would one day raise up from among them. And this new deliverer starts doing some of the same things that Moses and the children of Israel did. The children of Israel passed through the waters of the Red Sea into the wilderness; Jesus passed through the waters of baptism into the wilderness. The children of Israel spent forty years in the wilderness being tempted by the devil; Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. But there was a difference: the children of Israel succumbed time and again to temptation and rebelled against God; Jesus resisted all the temptations the devil could throw at him and remained obedient to God. Clearly he was doing things that echoed things Moses had done. But why?

Jesus spent the next three years explaining why: why he came, what he had to do, and what it would mean for them. But they didn't get it. Sadly, most people still don't. In the end they deserted him and he ended up on a wooden instrument of torture. After suffering horribly, died amidst the jeers of his enemies. As some who witnessed his death remarked, this was some kind of deliverer! He couldn't even deliver himself from a humiliating and painful death. Instead of delivering God's people out of the clutches of their Roman enemy, he delivered himself INTO the clutches of the Roman enemy. What kind of deliverer was this?

The key to understanding it all is contained in Jesus' baptism. You see, Jesus' primary purpose for coming into this world was to take our place before the judgment seat of God. To serve as our stand-in, our scapegoat. When Jesus mounted the cross, he mounted a lightning rod which drew down all of God's wrath over sin upon Him. That's why His suffering consisted not only of excruciating physical pain, but of the very torments of hell itself—all compressed into six hours of unspeakable, superhuman agony. That's what Jesus came to do, and that's what he did. He was our scapegoat, our covering, our Yom Kippur.

And the whole journey began at the Jordan River. Undergoing a baptism of repentance though he was sinless was Jesus' way of telling us that he had come to stand in OUR place and take our sins upon himself. He underwent a baptism of repentance, in our place. Then, to drive the point home, he spent forty days in the wilderness to mirror the forty years Israel had spent there. He allowed himself to be tempted by Satan, just as Israel had tempted by Satan. But where Israel succumbed to Satan's temptations, Jesus did not. Time after time Israel succumbed to temptation and rebelled against God. But Jesus withstood all the temptations Satan could hurl at him and then banished him with God's word. He was Israel's—and our—perfect substitute: he endured where Israel capitulated; he succeeded where Israel failed. And he did it all for us.

Jesus was baptized *into* our sin and suffering and death so that we would not have to endure them. In Paul's words, He *became* sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God through him. And after he had done all this, He gave us a new baptism through which all that he had earned might become ours. This new baptism surpassed John's baptism as far as heaven surpasses earth. John's baptism was a baptism of *repentance* for sin; Jesus' baptism is for the *forgiveness* of sin. John's was a baptism of water only; Jesus' baptism is a baptism of water and Spirit, as John himself predicted: *"I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."* And so, as Peter preached to the crowd in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost: *"...be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."*

No wonder the Apostles speak with such joy and wonder about this marvelous and mysterious gift!

Paul writes: *"You who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ!"*

Peter writes: *"In [Noah's ark] only a few people—eight in all—were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also."*

John writes: *"I tell you the truth, no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."*

The author of Hebrews writes: *"Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water."*

And Paul writes to Titus: *"He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, who he poured on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior."*

Baptism is a pure, Gospel gift from God through which we receive the gifts Jesus earned for us. Luther called it a "joyous exchange": we give Him our sin, our sorrow and our death; He gives us his purity, his righteousness and his holiness. To be sure, there are those who water baptism down, calling it an ordinance or requirement which one does in obedience to God's command rather than a means of grace. For them, baptism is a response TO God rather than a gift FROM God. It signifies something like a coming-of-age rather than rebirth; becoming an adult rather than becoming a child of God.

But Jesus didn't come to be baptized into suffering and death for us so that we could become better students of the Law and learn to do things on our own. He came so that we could be reborn of water and the Word into God's family—so that we could be cleansed of our sins and invested with the power of the Holy Spirit. So that we could come to know the truth which makes us free—the truth about

ourselves and the truth about our Savior. So that we could be built up in every way until at last we acquire the mind of Christ.

Think of it! The mind of Christ! What conceivable earthly possession could compare with having the mind of Christ? When we contemplate possessing a treasure like that, we can begin to understand what led Isaac Watts to write the famous words: *“When I survey the wondrous cross; On which the Prince of Glory died; My richest gain I count but loss; And pour contempt on all my pride.”*

My friends, we are living out *Act Three* of a divine drama which began in Egypt, 3500 years ago. In *Act One*, God delivered the children of Abraham out of Egypt. In *Act Two*, God delivered the children of Adam out of their sins. Today, in *Act Three*, God made Zevy Tsiperson [*editor’s note: he is Powell’s grandson who was baptized at the beginning of the service*] His own dear child, and welcomed him into the Kingdom of God.

Praise the Lord! Amen.