

Beholding the Baptism of Jesus

Matthew 3:13-17

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13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 16 And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; 17 and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:13-17)

Behold is a great word. It captures an announcement, observation, and inquiry. It is kind of an "old-school" word with a regal flair to it. You might think it weird if I introduced my wife with "behold, my wife!" Imagine what it would be like if I introduced a proposal at a staff meeting with "behold, I have a great idea for us to consider!"

"Behold" announces and invites a crowd. The gospel of John records that when John saw Jesus coming for baptism he proclaimed, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Matthew 3:17 says, "...and **behold** a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." "Behold" is usually reserved for big events, important moments, and important announcements. The baptism of Jesus is that kind of event.

Three of the four gospel writers record the baptism of Jesus (Matt 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22), and all them make reference to elements of it (John 1:29). That is an unusual level of harmony since that is not the case with the genealogy of Jesus, the record of his birth, the Sermon on the Mount or the Great Commission.

Events that are listed with that degree of harmony are extremely important. Jesus' betrayal, arrest, crucifixion, and his resurrection receive that kind of attention and emphasis. In other words events that make it into all four gospels are really important.

Do you know why the baptism of Jesus is so important? Do you know what the purpose was? Was he repenting like the Jews? Was he preparing himself like they were – for the coming of the kingdom? How is the baptism of Jesus related to believer's baptism? Are they the same? How are they different? These are the questions that surface when we start looking at the baptism of Jesus.

Jesus' baptism is important, but why? That is what we want to work on today. Let me approach the question this way:

What do we see (behold) in the baptism of Jesus?

Let me show you three things that we should see, behold, and know when it comes to this important event called the baptism of Jesus:

1) Jesus doesn't fit John's baptism (v 13-14)

Two weeks ago we learned about John the Baptist and his role during the days of Jesus. We learned the following important details about him:

- He had a ministry patterned after Elijah (e.g., same clothing, strong message, same dwelling)
- His ministry was to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah – “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2)
- He utilized water baptism and confession as a statement of humility, contrition, and cleansing
- He talked about the Messiah as one greater than himself
- He was enormously popular (Matt 3:5)

Now from Matthew 3:13 we learn that Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan for the purpose of being baptized by him. This was quite some distance to travel. It was probably about 70 miles, and the nuance of the language¹ suggests that Jesus was purposeful in his visit to John.² In other words, Jesus wasn't just passing through this area. There was a very specific reason why he traveled a fairly long distance; his baptism was important enough for a long journey.

Verse 14 is an unusual verse. No other gospel writer records the conversation between Jesus and John upon his arrival at the scene. We had learned from our previous study of John that he understood that he was inferior to the coming Messiah – “...he who is coming is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry...” (Matt 3:11). So when Jesus came for baptism, the text (v 14) says that “John would have prevented him...”

The word “prevent” is a strong word that indicates an attempt to forbid, to stop, or to refuse. A form of this word is used by the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:36 when he said to Philip, “what prevents me from being baptized?” In our modern day vernacular it could be compared to “don't even think about it” or “No way!” And John's point here is very clear: He is not worthy to baptize Jesus. Notice what he says: “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Jesus doesn't fit his baptism.

¹ τοῦ with infinitive

² Leon Morris, The Gospel According to Matthew – Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 314.

How does John's baptism not fit Jesus? Let me give you three reasons:

1. The most obvious is the fact that Jesus had no sin to confess or no need of repentance
2. Jesus was greater than John which is why John suggests that Jesus ought to baptize him
3. John's baptism was preparation for the Messiah, and Jesus was the Messiah

So it is understandable why John would resist this. It is strange. Let me illustrate the weirdness of this in two ways. First, imagine what it would be like to have the President of the United States enter our auditorium. Typically when he enters a large gather a band plays "Hail to the Chief." It is a way to announce that he has arrived. But what would it be like to be trumpet player in the band who suddenly notices that the President has brought his own trumpet and he would like to play "Hail to the Chief" with the rest of the band. It would be an awkward moment, right? He's the president; the song is announces him; he shouldn't be playing in the band, he should be walking in the room. Second, think of what you do to prepare your house when you have company coming over. Imagine what it would be like for your invited guests to show up 8 hours early in their grubby clothes because they want to help you get ready for the dinner party. It would be weird, wouldn't it?

Well, that is what is going on with John and Jesus. So that means that there is another reason why Jesus is being baptized. What is it?

Let me summarize Jesus' baptism with two words: inauguration and identification.

2) Jesus' baptism was the inauguration of his ministry (v 16-17)

I want to deal with the issue of the inauguration of his ministry first so skip ahead to verses 16-17. First, let's look at what happened, and then I'll tell you why it is important.

"16 And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; 17 and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:16-17).

The text tells us that as he came out of the water that the heavens were opened to him (see also Luke 3:21 and Mark 1:9). This is more than just a record of what happened; it is significant statement about Jesus and his ministry. The opening of heaven means that God is about to speak, and it indicates that what is happening on earth is by Divine design. God is going to speak, inaugurating the ministry of his son.

Ezekiel 1 records an interesting parallel here. Ezekiel 1:1 records that while Ezekiel was at the river Chebar "the heavens opened, and I saw visions of God." And at the end of Ezekiel's vision

of the glory of God, including the wheel within the wheel – full of eyes, he is empowered by the Holy Spirit for his prophetic ministry.

And he said to me, "Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you." 2 And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me. 3 And he said to me, "Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. 4 The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God' (Ezek 2:1-4).

When the heavens open, God is getting ready to announce really important news.

But before God speaks, something else happens: the Spirit of God descended like a dove and it came and rested upon him (v 16). Now if you look up all the other gospel writers' account of the baptism of Jesus, they all have differences. But the one thing that everyone talks about it is the coming of the Spirit upon Jesus. It is a very important part of Jesus' story. Why?

Listen to the following passages:

"There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. 2 And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him..." (Isa 11:1-2)

"Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations" (Isa 42:1).

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 3 to grant to those who mourn in Zion— to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified. 4 They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations" (Isa 61:1-4).³

The coming the Spirit in this way was a clear picture of the prophecies regarding the coming of the Messiah. Spirit-empowerment was the defining characteristic of the chosen servant of God. This does not mean that Jesus was without the Spirit prior to this time; it is given here as a clear statement of divine endorsement and anointing.⁴ "Jesus is visibly equipped and commissioned to undertake his messianic mission."⁵ The presence of the Spirit identifies Jesus as the Spirit-empowered Messiah.

³ This passage was the one, according to Luke 4:16-19, that Jesus quoted as a young boy in the synagogue in Nazareth.

⁴ See the examples in 1 Samuel 16:13, Isaiah 61:1, Acts 2:4, 4:31, 10:44-46, and 19:6

⁵ R. T. France, The Gospel of Matthew – NICT, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 123.

But there is more – God speaks. Verse 17 says, “and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” This is a beautiful scene and it is loaded with meaning. Notice the following:

- We have a clear picture of the Trinity at this moment. Jesus has the Spirit of God resting upon him as the Father speaks a blessing over him.
- Jesus’ obedience results in the Father’s affirmation, picturing the roles of the triune Godhead: the Father decrees, the Son obeys, the Spirit empowers.
- By saying “this is my Son”, there are parallels to Psalm 2:7, a messianic psalm – “The Lord said to me, “You are my son, today I have begotten you” and to the story of Abraham in Genesis 22:2 where God said, “take your son, your only son...whom you love and go... and offer him there as a burnt offering.”
- But the main point of these words is that the Father is affirming his love and his pleasure in the Son. These are words of endorsement and affirmation.

Again Jesus doesn’t fit John’s baptism because his baptism isn’t about repentance; it is about the inauguration of His ministry. It is the moment in Jesus’ life where he is identified as the Son of God, empowered by the Spirit, and loved by the Father. And this Trinitarian ministry will characterize the next three years of ministry.

The preparation was over. The Messiah had come. The long-awaited Messiah, affirmed by the Father and empowered by the Spirit was in their midst. He’s the One.

However, Jesus’ baptism was not just about inauguration; it was also about identification, and that is what we see in verse 15.

3) Jesus identifies with us so that we might identify with him (v 15)

I’ve left this to the very end because I think it is the most meaningful at a personal level. I want to talk about it last because I think it is the one thing that I believe you **must** remember about this passage.

Jesus’ response to John’s refusal to baptize him is telling. He says, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (3:15). So Jesus’ answer to John was that there was something important about his baptism that went beyond John’s understanding. There was a fulfillment issue in play here. In other words, Jesus is telling John that he needs to be baptized for reasons other than why John normally baptizes people.

The other issue is a matter of identification. Let me explain. Jesus’ motivation for being baptized was so that he could fulfill all righteousness. I take this to mean that Jesus is embracing an act of obedience that God expects of his people even though it didn’t fit him. In other words, he was doing something that he didn’t need to do and that action was part and parcel of accomplishing righteousness. **This is the essence of Jesus’ mission – to identify**

with God's people so that righteousness can be fulfilled. Or to state it like I did in point three: to identify with us so that we might identify with him.

This theme – of Christ identifying with human beings so that they can identify with him – is all over the Bible. Let me show you two of the best verses:

“Surely he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa 53:4-6).

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth...and from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace” (John 1:14, 16)

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:2).

What a stunning thought this is! The Son of God identifies himself with humanity so that human beings could be identified with him. He becomes sin so that we could be righteous. And Jesus' baptism is announcement of this ministry. So John's baptism, the baptism of Jesus, and believer's baptism are all different.

- John's baptism prepared people for the coming of the Messiah
- John's baptism of Jesus was about Jesus identifying with mankind
- Believer's baptism is our identification with Jesus

So just ponder that for a moment! This is the essence of the gospel – that Christ came to bear your penalty for sin so that you could receive forgiveness and his righteousness. He identified with you so that you could identify with him. He became sin so that you might become the righteousness of God. Receiving Christ means that you identify his death as your death. And Jesus was baptized to identify himself with you.

Additionally, this should be great motivator to follow the Lord in obedience through believer's baptism. You are identifying with him, but before you ever identified with him – he identified with you.

So what do we behold in the baptism of Jesus? We see that his unnecessary entrance into the waters of John's baptism was meant to show how far, how low, and how deep he would go to make people clean. We see the power of the Spirit, the humility of Christ, and we see the depth of the love of Father.

How deep the fathers love for us
How vast beyond all measure
That He should give his only son
To make a wretch His treasure

How great the pain of searing loss
The Father turns His face away
As wounds which mar the Chosen One
Bring many sons to glory

Behold the Man upon the cross
My sin upon His shoulder
Ashamed I hear my mocking voice
Call out among the scoffers

It was my sin that held Him there
Until it was accomplished
His dying breath has brought me life
I know that it is finished

I will not boast in anything
No gifts no power no wisdom
But I will boast in Jesus Christ
His death and resurrection

Why should I gain from His reward
I cannot give an answer
But this I know with all my heart
His wounds have paid my ransom

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