

LEARNING BASIC BIBLE STUDY METHODS

An Inductive Guide to the Study of the Bible,

Using the Gospel of Matthew

Lesson 4

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

Matthew 3:13-17

(Note: This is the fourth lesson in this series on learning how to study the Bible. To work through the series in order, start with the General Introduction and then proceed through the lessons in their sequence. These are all reserved in the archives.)

With Matthew 3 we have the record of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry with His baptism. With the exception of Luke's account of the time Jesus was in the Temple at the age of 12 (Luke 2:41-50), the so-called "silent years" of Jesus are not looked into by the evangelists. They are clearly more interested in His public ministry. So after recording the various events related to His birth to show that He was unique, Matthew now jumps forward about 30 years to His baptism.

The first part of the chapter (vv. 1-12) tell us about John the Baptizer. Matthew describes John and explains that he was the one prophesied by Isaiah (40:3). If John was the forerunner, then of course Jesus is the Messiah, the one Isaiah described in that chapter as "your God" who will come as a "shepherd."

John's message was one of rebuke and warning. He called for people to repent before the "coming" of the Lord. People responded to his preaching and were baptized. Baptism, or ritual immersion as the Jews described it, was frequent in Israel. Jewish people immersed themselves in ritual baths before entering the holy place as a sign of inner purification. And the Jewish sect of Essenes in the desert at Qumran used ritual baths frequently to represent ritual purification. Converts to Judaism also would undergo such a ritual as part of their initiation into the faith. So "baptism," as the gospels call it, was fairly common in the religious life of Israel. John, though, was pressing them with an urgency to repent before it was too late: "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." It was a warning for people to repent; and repentance meant a change

of life, not just feeling sorry for wrongs done. To seal that repentance and commitment, John baptized them (meaning probably that he witnessed their immersion and said appropriate words to them, but probably did not touch them since that was never done).

But John announces that one greater than he was coming, who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire. There are a lot of interpretations offered for this prediction (as a survey of the commentaries will reveal), but I believe John is referring to the events that we know are connected with the first coming (the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost to baptize all believers into one body [1 Cor. 12:13]) and then with the second coming (a baptism of fire that he says will burn up the wicked). I know there were tongues of fire at Pentecost, but the context of John's "fire" is the judgment with unquenchable fire. John was really an Old Testament prophet; he would not have known that centuries would pass between the two events. The Old Testament prophets would include in their oracles descriptions of both comings of Christ, as we now know them.

But be that as it may, John clearly knew that Jesus was this coming one, the one greater than he. The Gospel of John tells us that John the Baptist was told that the one on whom the Spirit would descend would be the one who would baptize people with the Holy Spirit--He would be the Son of God; He would be the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29-34).

Luke gives us the details of the time that John began his ministry (Luke 3:1): it was in the 15th year of the reign of Tiberias Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. Scholars have settled on the year 29 A.D. for the beginning of John's ministry. We would put the baptism of Jesus, then, sometime in the fall of 29 (and this correctly allows for the several Passovers [every spring] that occurred during Jesus' public ministry from 30 to 33 A.D.). So Jesus' public ministry began in the fall of 29; and he was crucified in the spring of 33 A.D.

Reading the Text

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

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

¹⁶As 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. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased."

Observations on the Text

This is such a short passage that it is much easier to analyze than most. We have the story of Jesus coming to John to be baptized, and after some conversation is baptized. After the baptism we then have the descent of the Spirit from heaven on Jesus, and a voice from heaven.

What makes the passage significant, and often difficult to interpret, are the three quotations in it. The first is John's uneasiness about baptizing Jesus, the second is Jesus' explanation of why they should do this, and the third is the voice from heaven confirming the person and work of Jesus. Most of this Bible study will be spent on these three quotations and the meanings of the words in them. Once they have been interpreted, the significance of the baptism will be better understood.

So this particular Bible Study will basically be on each quotation. In them there will be words to define and figures to interpret, and so those can be done as they come up. Every passage that is studied will require the same procedures, but often in very different order depending on the layout of the text. The idea is to do the study in the simplest and quickest way. Here, that would be quote by quote.

Analysis of the Quotations

John's Question. The first quotation is found in verse 14; it is John's response to Jesus' coming to him to be baptized. A simple reading of the statement and question clearly indicates two things: John knew something about Jesus, and John knew that his baptism did not apply to Jesus.

John had been preaching a baptism unto repentance. People had listened to his preaching, were convinced of their sins, repented, and then received baptism as a witness to and sign of their inner purification. But when Jesus came to John, it was not as one who had sinned and wanted to repent, but one who was majestic and authoritative. Moreover, it is the witness of Scripture that He was absolutely sinless (if He were not sinless, then we have no gospel). John looked into the face of this one who now came to him, and he could see the difference. He had been looking into the faces of those filled with guilt and remorse and sadness; but this one had none of that. This was the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world; this was the one coming who was greater than he, whose shoe latches he was unworthy to loose. There was no place for John's baptism in the life of Jesus.

And so John countered that he should be baptized by Jesus.

Jesus' Explanation. Jesus responded to John by saying that it was proper for them to do this to fulfill all righteousness. There are two important aspects of this sentence that we should observe. The first is Jesus word "us"--"it is proper for us." It was not simply something Jesus was

to do, but John and Jesus had to do something to fulfill all righteousness. Jesus was not acting in isolation; he was acting with John--the Sinless one with the sinner, to fulfill God's plan. Or, as the gospel at large teaches, the one who had no sin to repent of takes his place among those who had sin to repent of. The one who was sinless went down into the water of baptism that was the portion of the sinner.

And this act of baptism would be part of John's fulfilling his mission as well, because the forerunner was to introduce the Messiah to the world.

But we have to probe a little deeper to find out what this identification with sinners was all about. The key has to be the meaning of the term "righteousness." It is one of those words that receives a lot of explanation in teachings and lessons, but some explanation talks around the basic meaning. Certainly righteousness is right living, good deeds, virtuous acts, and the like. But if you were to do a detailed word study, you would find a more specific meaning behind all these connotations.

As an aside here, the way that you would do a detailed word study is to trace the usage of the word. Most people simply check a word book and read a few paragraphs. That is usually satisfactory, if the word book has done its work. To do the work yourself, you would get a concordance, check all the passages where a word was used, and place the uses/passages in categories of meaning. The result would be a dictionary-type conclusion--such and such a word means this, this, and this. Then you would decide which of those categories of meaning fit this passage you were studying the best.

A concordance is not a dictionary; it is a reference book that will list the passage in the Bible where your word is found. You would have to know the precise Greek word, find the references in Matthew, then in the rest of the New Testament, and then in the Old Testament in conjunction with the Hebrew word it translates. As you would guess, for a commonly used word like "righteousness," this would take hours and hours (but you would learn a lot about many passages you found). This is why most folks will rely on someone who has done the work. That may be a little more risky, but usually the reliable sources have the basic things. You may want to check some passages they discuss and see if you agree with their interpretation; but on the whole they should provide the information.

In studying the words of Matthew it is usually helpful to see what the Old Testament Hebrew word behind the Greek would have been. The New Testament Greek is a translation of the things that Jesus would have said in Hebrew, or at times Aramaic. And much of the New Testament Greek terminology was developed from Old Testament Greek (usage in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament). I know this sounds technical at first, but it simply emphasizes the close connection between the New Testament and Old Testament vocabulary.

In light of this, a full study of "righteousness" for this passage will start with a survey of how it is used in the Gospel of Matthew, but ultimately draw in the Old Testament background. The whole study will lead to a meaning for the word as that which "conforms to the standard," which would mean doing the will of God.^[1] What is intrinsically "right" has to be in harmony with the will of God. Accordingly, then, the idea of fulfilling all righteousness does not

here mean that Jesus has been unrighteous. It simply means that here He is committing Himself to do God's will for Him, to conform to the standard which is the will of God.

And God's will for Him was laid out in Scripture for centuries. It is clearest in Isaiah 53 which announces that the Suffering Servant was to be "numbered with the transgressors." Here he began to be identified with sinners. And, as John had said of this Lamb of God, Isaiah had prophesied that the LORD would lay on Him the iniquity of us all. And further, Isaiah described this one as God's righteous servant: "my righteous servant will justify many." So the Messiah, the Servant of the LORD in Isaiah, would identify with sinners, take their sins on Himself, and justify them through the suffering He would endure. Jesus was saying that this baptism was the beginning of all that; it was here that He began to fulfill the righteous will of God that He become the Suffering Servant who would take on Himself the sins of the world. This baptism was the inauguration of that ministry.

In two other places Jesus used the word "baptism" to describe His suffering and death for the sins of the world. Two disciples sought positions of greatness. But Jesus said to them, "Are you able to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" (Mark 10:38). And on another occasion he said, "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how I am straightened until it be accomplished."

So this water "baptism" of Jesus had a different connotation; it began His mission in life as the Suffering Servant. He committed Himself here to God's will.

There is an Old Testament passage this appropriate to think of here (and rather than put it in a separate section of the study I will mention it here). It is the dedication Psalm 40. In verses 6-8 we have the words of the worshiper's dedication: "A body you have prepared for me . . . Here I am, I have come--it is written for me in the scroll. I desire to do your will O God, your law is within my heart." The devout worshiper would come to the sanctuary and express his commitment to doing what the scroll, what Scripture prescribed for him to do with these or similar words. The apostles saw right away that no one could say these words more meaningfully or appropriately than Jesus. And so they were quoted in Hebrews 10 with reference to Christ. The Father prepared a body for Him--the incarnation, not simply the natural body that others have as a gift from God; Scripture prescribed the will of God for Him--not just rules on how to live, but predictions about His Messianic work; and He came, delighting to do the will of God the Father--and no one could say that in the same way that He could. And so one can imagine these ideas in the mind of the Savior as He went down into the waters of the Jordan: "A body You [Father] have prepared for me. Here I am. I have come--it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do Your will, O my God; Your law is within my heart."

You would probably come across this passage in your reading if you did not know about it already--it is the main bit of liturgy for dedication in the Old Testament. Any discussion of dedication, commitment, prophecies about Messiah, or even a good commentary on this passage might very well tip you off about this. O bring Psalm 40 in on the study is not absolutely crucial for the understanding of the passage--but it makes a lovely addition about Christ's commitment to fulfill the plan.

The Father's Response. The rest of the passage records the supernatural response of God the Father. When Jesus went up out of the water, heaven was opened and Jesus saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove on Him. This is a little difficult grammatically, but we must be careful to read it correctly. It does not say a dove descended on Him, but the Spirit of God. The image of the dove describes the way in which the Spirit was descending--descending like a dove and lighting on Him. Of course people down through history have used the dove as a symbol of the Holy Spirit ever since.

Two things have to be explained here. The most important is the coming of the Spirit of God on Jesus. Why?--especially if Jesus is God in the flesh. If you read about the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament or Israelite world (and remember the events in this book are still in Old Testament times), you will soon come upon discussions of "anointing." Leaders were anointed with oil--kings, priests, prophets, judges. And with that anointing came divine empowerment to do the work set out before them. So today the church uses the expression "anointing" to refer to empowerment by the Holy Spirit. But in the New Testament that "anointing" comes when a person believes in Christ, or at the moment we call regeneration, and the Holy Spirit then dwells within our spirit, and our bodies become the temple of the Spirit. This is too big a discussion for me to take it much further; you will have to study this one at length later on. But what we have here in our passage is the reality of the Father's **anointing** of the Son for the ministry that lay before Him. It was not just an anointing to preach, but for His whole life to make atonement for sin. Even Jesus needed that extra **divine empowerment** to do the will of the Father, and so the Spirit of God descended on Him. By this, Heaven approved His commitment to do the will of God the Father and provided the power to fulfill it. Without the power of the Spirit of God, He would not have been able to fulfill the whole plan of God.^[2]

Second, why is the description of the dove used? The dove is often described in terms of peace, especially in the light of the doves sent out by Noah after the judgment of God on the earth. The dove is a harmless and gentle creature. But is "peace" all that is meant here? And why should "peace" be signified at this point? It is understandable after the judgment of the flood, but why here? Again, if you read up on doves in the Bible you will quickly see how significant they were in the religion of Israel. They were the sacrifices of the poor people who could not afford bulls or goats. The Book of Leviticus lays out how the sacrifices were graded according to income. The dove with its gentleness and harmlessness was accessible to the lowliest of the people. So right after Jesus made His commitment to doing the will of the Father to become the suffering Servant for the sins of the world, the Spirit descends as a dove, a bird of sacrifice for sin for the lowliest of the people. The dove then also symbolizes power in gentleness, the power of God to salvation in the meek and lowly Savior. And the dove also re-enforces the idea of Jesus' identification here with the people of Israel.

So Matthew is showing that the King was here empowered by the Holy Spirit to deal with what was fundamentally wrong in the kingdom and to set it right. Jesus has the will to do it; and He now has the power.

Finally a voice from heaven affirms the "rightness" of all of this: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." The word "Son" may carry two nuances here. According to the Davidic Covenant in the Old Testament (2 Sam. 7 and Psalm 2), the king would be known as

God's "Son." He would have a special relationship with the Father, and He would be the heir of all things, even his enemies. The gospels identify Jesus as this King, this Messiah, this Son; but He does not receive His kingdom at His first coming (see Hebrews 1). The second way the Bible uses "Son" to describe Jesus is to emphasize that He has the same nature as the Father, namely, that He is eternal and divine. Sometimes the people who followed Jesus declared that they believed He was the Son of God, no doubt thinking in terms of the first meaning. But their words were used by the writers with the fuller meaning as well because they were writing with the evidence of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. For example, Peter declared to Jesus, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God" (Matt. 16). Later, after the resurrection and after the sending of the Holy Spirit, Peter would have realized the full meaning of what he had said a year or so earlier.

The voice from heaven states that the Father was well-pleased with the Son. Was there anything Jesus should repent of? No. Was there anything He should have been doing differently? No. This witness from heaven affirms that as the Lamb of God He is spotless. He always did what was pleasing to the Father (and of no one but Jesus could this be said). So this statement not only approves what was happening here, but it also attests to His righteousness during the so-called "silent years."

In similar terms the prophet Isaiah had prophesied the effect of the death of the Messiah: "It **pleased** the LORD to bruise Him" (53:10). That does not mean that the Father took delight in the pain. It means that the suffering and death of the Messiah fulfilled the plan of God to provide salvation for sinner. Here, at His baptism, Jesus began His work as the Suffering Servant, and God the Father was pleased with that commitment; and so at the fulfillment of this commitment, namely His death, God the Father would be very well pleased.

Conclusions and Lessons

So the baptism of Jesus was unique. It was not like John's baptism before it; and it is not exactly like Christian baptism after it. There are similarities of course, but because Jesus was sinless, His baptism was different.

By His baptism Jesus identified with the people, the sinful people He came to save. And by His baptism Jesus submitted to the will of the Father, beginning His service as the Suffering Servant who would die for the sins of the world. And God the Father approved it, and sent God the Spirit to empower it. And John witnessed it.

I have already connected Old Testament and New Testament passages for this theology, and so it is not necessary to repeat those things here. The primary point of the passage is to report Jesus' submission to a life of service to do the will of God, and God's pleasure in and provision for that service.

As a little aside here it would be well to say that we as humans, with finite minds, cannot fully understand the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit, or what the church calls the trinity. We are not talking about three people, but three persons within one essence. There are simply some things in revelation that we have to accept as mystery, and realize that the nature of the Godhead is far more complex than we can imagine. It is one God, always acting in unity; but revealed as three persons. The incarnation makes it a little easier to grasp, but we will always be left with questions. This is why the apostles state that if revelation had come by the will of man, it would have been very different. But it came from God. And God does not see fit to explain everything to us, probably because we do not have the capacity to understand it all.

Now then, as to a practical application for believers, we have to look at the meaning of the event, and not the event itself. We cannot make a simple application to our lives from the event because it is a report about a unique event in Christ's life. There is no, "Go and do likewise" with the same meaning. But we can use the meaning of this event to make a practical application, simply because Jesus is the primary example for us of doing the will of God.

God desires every believer to make a commitment to do His will, and doing that will (we learn from Scripture) means sacrificial service--to God, and to others. That is what the Christian life is all about. This commitment often comes at the same time as conversion, but it may also come later when we realize what God desires of us. It should be connected with Christian baptism, if possible, because the ritual of baptism (as in the first century) was a tremendous sign of commitment to the Christian way. But a lot of people realize later in their life what it is God is asking of them.

Now God's will for us will obviously be very different from what Jesus was to do. But God's will for us is also recorded in Scripture (not as prophecies as there were for Jesus, but teachings), and so we should make an informed commitment to do it. And since it will mean a life of sacrificial service, or to put it another way, since it will not be a natural or easy way of life, we need the empowerment of the Holy Spirit--far more than Jesus did. The Christian life is not natural; it is supernatural. So the epistles are filled with instructions for Christians to present their bodies as living sacrifices, for example (Rom. 12:1,2), and to be filled with (controlled by) the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). With such a life of spiritual service our heavenly Father will be well pleased.

^[1]For an interesting illustration, take a look at a non-theological usage of the term in Deuteronomy 25:13-15. The warning is not to have two different sizes of weights and measures (for dishonest selling and buying), but to have weights that are "right"--that conform to the standard.

^[2]As a little theological rule of thumb, we usually say that in every work of "God" from creation through redemption, the Father decrees it, the Son does it, the Spirit empowers it. There is no work of "God" that all three persons of the Godhead are not so involved with.