



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 3:13-17

“The Messiah’s Baptism, part I”

TRANSCRIPT

[Audio begins] The theme of our present series of studies is the New Testament revelation of the Messiah and this is the continuation of our study of the Messiah. And after we looked at the Old Testament anticipation of the Messiah we’ve been looking in our last few studies at the New Testament revelation. And we’re going to study today Messiah’s baptism, and we’re turning for a text for our first study, to Matthew chapter 3, verse 13 through verse 17, today then, Messiah’s baptism.

From its opening stages to the eve of its close, the cross casts its shadow over the ministry of Jesus Christ. This has been tellingly caught in the great painting of Holman Hunt, *The Shadow of Death*. The day is fast ebbing away and the golden rays of the setting sun are slanting in through an open door. The weary toiler at the carpenter’s bench, having just straitened himself from his stooped and cramped position, stretches himself for a moment. The sun, catching the outraised arms, throws on the wall behind him the dark lines of a cross. It’s Hunt’s forceful way of stressing the fact that even in the hidden years of obscurity his decease at Jerusalem was inevitable.

The baptism of Jesus Christ with its vision of the dove and the heavenly voice and the words traceable to the great servant of Jehovah section of Isaiah also points on to the baptism of his death. The accents are not so heavy as they shall become later, but they

are definitely there. Ultimately the cross shall so possess him that it can be said that his face was as though he would go to Jerusalem, Luke chapter 9 and verse 53. That text was the text that Sangster used for a sermon so movingly entitled His Destination Is on His Face. The lineaments however, are already forming at the baptism. The narrative of the baptism is that of the temptation created acute difficulties for the early church. It seemed to say at first glance that Jesus underwent a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Were they not then his sins? How could he, the Son of God, occupy a position such as this?

Furthermore, as Edersheim points out, nowhere in rabbinic writings do we find any hint of a baptism of the Messiah, nor of a descent upon him of the Spirit in the form of a dove. We shall deal with the doctrinal question later, but it should be evident already that the possible embarrassment of believers over the Lord’s participation in the baptism of John is itself the strongest evidence of the genuineness of the accounts. The church surely would not invent an incident which raised so many questions about its Lord. It is most likely that the complete account is to be traced to our Lord himself. And perhaps, he gave it on the occasion in Matthew chapter 20 and verse 28 when he speaks about the baptism that he is to be baptized with.

The baptism of our Lord is the second of the critical moments of his life. It is narrated in all four of our gospels of the New Testament. Preceding it are the so-called hidden years; years of which we have little information regarding the life of Christ. There are hints and suggestions in the records, but in the final analysis they yield us only a whisper of his obedient existence. It may be helpful however, to say just a few things about them before we look in some detail at the Messiah’s baptism.

And so we turn now to the hidden years and first, a few words about his world. In the church of the holy sepulcher in Jerusalem, professor James S. Stewart has noted, “One spot is pointed out to travelers as being the center of the world. It is a strange and rather fantastic claim. Yet there is a sense in which the corner of the earth’s surface called

Palestine is the geographical center. Take the three great continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa. In between them, linking them up, lies this little land bridge on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. Clearly if you were to start a movement whose aim was to extend out into the three great continents simultaneously, that neck of land would be a natural starting point. The old legend about the center of the world is therefore truer than the men who invented it realized. It was no haphazard that made Bethlehem and Nazareth and Calvary the cradle of the Christian faith. It was the best possible place for the launching of a world religion” so professor Stewart has said.

And when Rome ruled the world, was the best time for the Messiah to make his appearance. Paul said it well, “But when the fullness of the time was come God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons” Galatians 4 verses 4 and 5.

We often seek to show by a survey of the situation of the world in the 1st Century that things were right for the coming of the Son. There was universal peace of sorts, the famous Pax Romana. Romans went everywhere building roads and taking baths and the Roman highways were useful for the spread of the gospel. The thousands of workers who built those triumphs of engineering little thought that they were preparing the way for the Son of God, but they were. Christ’s men marched after Caesar’s men and won greater victories.

The universality of the Greek language, that age’s *lingua franca*, also aided the gospel’s speedy trek over the inhabited world. In the interior of Asia, in the streets of Alexandria, in the forum of Rome, as well as in Greek city themselves, the tongue of Demosthenes and Plato was understood. So Rome united the east and the west and its peace, its roads, and in its adopted tongue. Government on a universal scale had been born, and to a genuine world empire could be sent a universal salvation.

Our Lord came in an era of economic unrest and poverty, somewhat like our era. Two out of every three men in Rome were slaves, with sixty million in the empire as a

whole, it has been estimated. While the golden age for the prophets of Israel lay in the future, that for the poets of Rome lay in the past.

In Palestine the situation was similar, wars having left their toll on the land. Herod the Great had been extravagant and the burden of taxation was heavy. The days were days of depression. The voice of hope that rang out in Galilee was not that of the secularist Marx, “Workers of the world unite” it was a hope springing from the deeper springs of man’s being, and offering far more than a steady job in an empire filled with citizens enslaved in mind, soul, and body.

Spiritually the old gods of Rome were dead or dying. Judaism was bankrupt, and paganism had always been so. Judaism had only a form of the truth; a ritual without righteousness. Amos, Hosea, and Micah, with the greatest of the prophets, Isaiah, had under God inspired and made inspired and fervent appeals to the people who were beloved for the Father’s sake, but to no avail. Rome imported a new batch of gods from the east, to stir up their jaded senses. Something like that which is happening in our land with its worship of the father mother god, the heretical gurus and swamis that the land seems to love, all ignorant of holy Scriptures, but at the same time like parasites trying to hang their weird and confused doctrines on the limbs of orthodox Christianity in order to find accreditation. Rome also sought to accord Caesar divine worship, but all of their expedience, religiously and philosophically, failed.

We must not however put the emphasis on the wrong side of the preparation for the Messiah. Paul makes it plain that God was behind all the things that were transpiring to make ready his advent. In his illustration in Galatians, the child is under his tutors and governors, quote, “until the time appointed of the Father” unquote. Notice Galatians chapter 4 and verse 2. Thus it’s clear that in Paul’s mind our Lord came, not so much because things were right on the earth, but simply because it was the time appointed by the Father. That’s why things were ready on the earth for the Messianic King. God didn’t look down and see that things on the earth had suddenly become the kinds of things that

were suitable for the coming of Christ, but he guided and providentially saw that the things on the earth were prepared for the coming of his Son, the Messianic King. We are thinking about the providence of God, not about a God who is dependant upon human forces beyond his control. We worship a non-frustratable deity.

There was evidence of something strange and impending from God, even in paganism, as is shown by the hopes of the wise men, there were rumors of the coming of the Messiah. And among the Jews themselves, the hope of their Messiah was shining more brightly than it had for some time, as is seen in the Jewish apocalyptic literature of the time. So when John’s voice was heard with its “Repent, for the kingdom of the heaven is at hand” Matthew 3:2. It’s no surprise that the Jews sent a delegation from Ecclesiastical headquarters with the question, “Who art thou?” Was the baptist making Messianic claims, they evidently were thinking. And John knew their intent and replied, “I am not the Messiah.” Man’s failure in religion, science, philosophy, and politics is no ultimate defeat for God. At his time, when the fairest flowers of religion and the sciences had failed, and the world was on the verge of anxious despair, Mary’s son was born to save his people. The Messiah entered a dying world as the ratifier of a new covenant, providing imperishable life.

We look now at his infancy. And the text that suggests some of the things that I want to say is found in Luke chapter 2 and verse 21 through verse 39. The gospels reveal little of the Messiah’s youth and young manhood, simply because their aim in their accounts is not biography but gospel, or evangelism. It is Luke who relates his circumcision, a right that marked him out of an heir of the blessing of the Abrahamic covenant. Look at Romans 4:9-12 and Paul’s words there. And that marked out also his presentation to the Lord. There had begun in the sphere of his flesh life’s progress from innocence to holiness, Luke 1:35.

Later it could be said of him, “Though he were a son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered” Hebrews 5:8. His childhood, and you might look in your

New Testament at Luke 2 verse 40, and then verse 41 through verse 51. As Campbell Morgan says, “The whole story of the childhood of Jesus from infancy to his religious coming of age is contained in one verse.” The text reads, “And the child grew and waxed strong, filled with wisdom and the grace of God was upon him” Luke chapter 2 and verse 40. The word “grew” in the original text is the broad term Luke uses for his growth, while the remaining words of the verse spell out the details. The “waxed strong” refers to the physical, while the words “filled with wisdom” and “the grace of God was upon him” refer to the mental and to the spiritual aspects of his being. There’s a beautiful harmony in this man’s development touching all the facets of his being.

In the following incident of the visit to the temple, the curtain is drawn open for a short moment and we are permitted a brief gaze into the silent years. A very beautiful picture is seen of the youth of twelve, trading, probing, queries and pellucid answers with the doctors. In view of the fact that it was the time of the Passover feast, it’s likely that the questions and answers revolved around this subject. And that was one certainly uniquely fitted for the exposition of the significance of the Passover lamb. Did he as he later did, in Matthew 22 verse 42 through verse 45, lead up with his questions to the deeper and fuller meaning of the festal rights of the Passover? Was he seeking in the questions that asked, that he posed the rabbis, was he seeking to bring them to consider anew the Passover lamb and how the treatment of the Old Testament suggested the coming of someone just as the boy standing before them. Was he even then attempting to prepare them and point them to the Lamb of God that John announced as one who would take away the sin of the world? Was Calvary always in the air?

It might be legitimately asked at this point, why were Joseph and Mary always in a state of wonder, or at least it seems that way, at the things he did or said. Perhaps the answer is that they had not quiet yet grasped the full significance of who he was, the divine second person of the Trinity. If they had, it would have made it impossible; it seems, for them to accept his submission to them, which his humanity required. After all,

think about it for a moment. If they really understood that he was the eternal Son, very God of very God, it would be very difficult for them to accept his submission to them as their child. And so, it seems that it’s likely that they did not yet fully understand all that was signified by the incarnation of the Son. It certainly would have been impossible for them to properly oversee his growth and wisdom and favor with God and men.

Now a few words about his youth, and you might turn to Luke chapter 2 and verse 52. In the final verse of the chapter Luke condenses the youth of God’s second man into one brief statement, “And Jesus was advancing in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men.” The word “wisdom” includes his intellectual and moral growth, while stature refers to his physical development. That he could advance in them attests the complete humanity of the Lord’s Messiah. He was perfect at each stage for that stage. The result was favor with God and men. A favorite at Nazareth, no doubt he was. With the perfect blend of holiness and love, he was the god man, a mystery indeed, but not a problem. His land, his home, and his kin, and notice verse 51 of Luke chapter 2. Our Lord’s home for the eighteen years until his manifestation to Israel was Nazareth.

It is sometimes been thought that Jesus lived in the sticks of the day, a kind of back water of history. That’s far from the case. In Jubilees it is stated that Jerusalem was the naval of the earth, the center of the nations of the world. And Nazareth too was well within the sound of the reverberation of world events. At the crossroads of highways leading from the east to the west, and from the north to the south, as well as being near Sephorus, a Roman military colony, and for many years Herod’s capitol, the little village of Nazareth was an interested spectator at the march of empire. By way of the Roman coins, upon which were born images of the great men and significant events of the times, together with innumerable coins of eastern currencies, the inhabitants of Nazareth were able to follow the events of the day. Jesus was interested in the coins. We know that from his interest in them in the gospel events, Mark chapter 12 verse 13 through 17. And there are many indications that he had a sharp eye for world politics as he was

acquainted with the things that were happening around him. One notices a number of texts bearing on that; Mark 9:13 and Luke chapter 13 verse 32 and Luke 22 and 25, and John 19:11. So amid the bustling family life of a large circle of kin, within the tribe of Judah in the north and in the south, he was prepared for the future. His occupation, Mark 6:3, it’s Mark who writes, “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joses and of Judah and Simon?” He learned his trade, that of his father, becoming master of the tools and skills of his craft. As one commentator remarks, “He trod the path of daily duty, learning thereby dependence upon other wills.” “There were in him no fugitive islands of secret reservations,” as someone has said, his life was as sensitive as a shadow, as selfless as a shadow, as obedient as a shadow.”

His physical appearance; the only portrait of Jesus found in the New Testament is that given by John in Revelation chapter 1, and that one is symbolic in nature. A physical description is given of John the Baptist, but none is given of Jesus. A hint or two may be found in the fact that the rabbis had definite standards for the outward appearance of a proper view, especially a teacher. They could criticize very harshly if the standards were not met, but they did not scorn his physical presence. Evidently he measured up to their standards. One of them was the claim that reflection of the divine presence could only descend upon a man of tall and powerful stature. He must have met this standard, a fact that is supported by the ruggedness required for his frequent journeys by foot in the land. The color of the Palestinian Jew in antiquity was light brown, and eyes might be brown or blue. They were black haired, and wore their hair to the shoulders. Beards and mustaches were worn. Thus, while Jesus may not have been able to make a professional football team as a line backer, as some popular youth speakers suggest, he must have been a man’s man.

One interesting fact is mentioned by John. Although Jesus was just over thirty years of age, John has the Jews saying to him, “Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?” John 8:57. Apparently, identification with men and their cares and

sorrows left its imprint upon the man of sorrows. The longing of men for a tangible, incarnate God finds its consummation in Jesus Christ, but often sinful man is not satisfied with the biblical record. He must have a picture, or painting of him. Luther said, “If I have a picture of Christ in my heart, why not one upon canvas?” That may at first sound logical, but is not the heart capable of change and growth in its picture and thoughts of Christ as the Scriptures are further studied, as acquaintance with him grows. The picture upon the canvas is fixed and represents old conceptions that one may outgrow. Thomas Carlyle’s words on the point are worth pondering. Carlyle said, “Men never think of painting the face of Christ till they lose the impression of him upon their hearts.”

A few final words concerning his biblical knowledge and understanding; John 7:15 is the reference. Joseph undoubtedly taught his son the Torah from a very young age as custom dictated. He probably studied in the village schools also. Of technical education such as university training, Jesus had none. Muggeridge is right, “There was too much sheer genius in him for him ever to have been subjected to the bridal, bit, and blinkers of education. The light he shown before men is rarely seen in the groves of academe.” He was able to speak Aramaic and Greek, the languages of ordinary intercourse, and he could also read the Hebrew Bible, we know that from Luke chapter 4 when he read it in the synagogue in Nazareth. When teaching in Jerusalem the Jews marveled saying, “How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?” The word grammata, letters, is found in Acts 26:24, where Festus blurts out, “Paul, thou art beside thyself, much learning” grammata, the word translated “letters” in John 7:15, “much learning doth make thee mad.” Festus had detected the knowledge and understanding of a man taught in the professional schools, but the Jews detected it in him who never sat at the feet of the rabbis in the academy for Torah studies in Jerusalem. Festus, and our Lord’s contemporaries in Israel, seemed completely blind to David’s words, “The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him, and he will show them his covenant, and never man feared as did our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

We’re going to continue our study of the baptism in our next study and we will deal there with some of the theological significance of that, but I don’t want to close this study without suggesting to you that in order for us to enter truly into an understanding of the Son of God, it is necessary that we understand that he has died, offering an atonement for our sins, making it possible for a universal invitation to go out to you and to all to, as John says, “Repent and believe” in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May God the Holy Spirit move in your heart so that you recognize your sin, acknowledge it before the Lord God, and lean upon Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

In our next study then, the baptism of our Lord...

[RECORDING ENDS ABRUPTLY]