



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 3:13-17

"The Messiah's Baptism, part II"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Our theme over the past few weeks has been The New Testament Revelation of the Messiah. In our last study, we were looking at Matthew chapter 3 verse 13 through verse 17 and studying "Messiah's Baptism." And this is the second of our small series on "Messiah's Baptism", which we will finish in our next study. Our passage that we're looking at is Matthew chapter 3 verse 13 through verse 17.

John the Baptist was the Messianic herald, the forerunner of the Messiah himself and, thus, one of the truly important biblical figures. His ministry was the subject of Old Testament prophecy. The prophet Isaiah wrote of him when he penned these words, "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." (Isaiah chapter 40 and verse 3) Malachi also spoke of him writing, "Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me." (Malachi 3:1)

In the New Testament, the evangelist Mark combines both of the passages and refers them to John the Baptist while the Baptist himself refers the Isaiah passage to himself in John chapter 1 in verse 23. There is, then, solid testimony to the Baptist claim that he was the Messianic herald.

Josephus, the Jewish historian, is also a witness to the ministry of John the Baptist, for he recounts the story of his preaching, his call of the Jews to baptism and his death at the hands of a Herod terrified by his popularity and fearing an insurrection. And typical of the unbelieving world, Josephus conceives of John as preaching a purification of the soul by good works. John, of course, preached a salvation through faith in the redeemer to come.

That John was an important figure is attested by our Lord himself who boldly and brilliantly contrasted John with the affluent and influential of the age. In an impressive series of rhetorical questions, he contrasted the rugged man of the deserts with the rich and powerful of the land.

"What went ye out into the wilderness to see? (He demanded.) A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously appareled, and live delicately, are in kings' courts. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet. This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist: but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." (Luke chapter 7 verse 24 through 28)

"John," Alexander McLaren said, "leaps, as it were, into the arena full-grown and full-armed." The voice of the prophets was no longer heard in Israel, but in John it suddenly returned, and the response of the people was fervent and full. "The news swept over the land that a preacher had appeared – not like the mumblers of dead men's ideas who spoke in the synagogues, or in the courtier-like, smooth-tongued teachers of Jerusalem, but a rude, strong man, speaking from the heart to the heart, with the authority of one who was sure of his inspiration." Those words come from James Stalker.

John, dressed like one of the old prophets, lived like Elijah, to whom he was likened, understood human nature like them, and was utterly without fear. That this stern John Knox kind of character entranced the people is not surprising. Many of them had been longing for a word from Yahweh, and they knew too the familiar saying "that if Israel could repent perfectly for just one day, the Messiah would come."

Matthew describes the popularity of John in this way, "Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region about Jerusalem, And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins." (That's Matthew chapter 3 verse 5 and 6.)

Why was John's message popular with the multitude, at least for a time? Well, in the first place, he was attractive, convictive, and invective in his no-nonsense kind of way. He tore away the masks of the Pharisees and the Sadducees crying out to them, "O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Matthew chapter 3 and verse 7) That was worthy of an Amos, who speaking for the Lord God in his day, cried out to the men of the northern kingdom,

"I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols. But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream."

That comes from Amos chapter 5 and verse 21 through verse 24. That was well received by the oppressed, but not so well received by the vipers themselves. In fact, judged humanly, John's ministry was a failure, although a magnificent one to those with eyes to see farther in the distance, for he eventually found his way to the slammer and then paid for his deep integrity with his life. His "interims etic" to use the German expression for interim ethic, that is, his message for the brief time of the incarnation, was

only a preliminary one. It was not without its fruit, for many of the apostles were probably his disciples. And even after the coming of the new age, after Pentecost, John still had some disciples as we learn from Acts chapter 19.

The principal reason for the popularity of John's message was its announcement that the Messiah was at hand and his kingdom near. He declared, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The call to repentance, however, was something different. It represented an attack on much of the theological thinking of the nation and particularly when coupled with the warning that it would be no avail to plead the name of Abraham in the final judgment. Many of them believed that to be a Jew was to be safe forever. 'All Israelites have a portion in the world to come,' they said. 'Abraham,' they claimed, 'sat at the gates of hell to prevent any Israelite from entering.' 'What,' the Talmud exclaimed, 'Shall the born Israelites stand upon the earth and the proselyte be in heaven?'

Well, John attacked the spirit that suggested that because one was the recipient of the Abrahamic covenant that that meant that he was safe forever no matter how he responded to the message of God.

John's baptism is not described in the Old Testament, and it is generally thought that it was derived from Jewish proselyte baptism. Gentiles upon conversion to Judaism were required to be circumcised (if they were males), to baptize themselves and then to offer a sacrifice. The thing that marked out John's practice was that he performed the baptism, from which he must have obtained his name of John the Baptist. And the thing that made his practice so disturbing to the Jews was that he commanded the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to submit to a rite that had been invented for pagans. In effect, he told the Jews that they had no right to the name and status of Jew having forfeited their sacred position by sin and wickedness. They must now take the place of the sinners of the Gentiles and repent bringing forth fruits worthy of their confession. It was as Professor Manson has said, "A very sharp and stinging point."

Now let me say, of course, that when we say that the Jews needed repentance and to undergo the baptism of John with a view to the remission of sins, we must not think that this was true of all of the Jews. John himself was a Jew. And that multitude who responded favorably to the message of John were Jewish as well. They were the true remnant of whom the prophets speak so often.

His message, however, created an excitement that had not been experienced in Judea in generations. This strong and fearless prophet who believed in striking sinners, not stroking them, who proclaimed no tired clichés, no worn-out religious formulas left by purveyors of the self-esteem of the psychologists, who was not embarrassed to speak of the wrath to come, who shunned the fads and follies of the pseudo intellectuals was the man of the hour. The crowds flocked to hear him and to hear him denounce them until there came the one mightier than John, "whose shoes he was not worthy to bear." He would baptize, John says, not with water, "but with the Holy Spirit and fire." And later when his influence was waning, the great forerunner and herald would utter one of his greatest declarations marking him out as a humble believing servant of the Lord God. He said, "He (that is, the Lord Jesus) must increase, but I must decrease."

Now, let's turn to the account of John's baptism, and I'd like to read Matthew chapter 3 verse 13 through verse 17. Matthew's account reads this way,

"Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to the Jordan unto John, to be baptized by him. But he sought to hinder him, saying, I have need to be baptized by thee, and comest thou to me? But Jesus answering said unto him, "Permit me now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he permitted Him. And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway from the water: and, behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, coming upon him: And behold a voice out of heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Now, notice in verses 13 and 14 John's reluctance to baptize Jesus. Our Lord had been born in Bethlehem of Judea around 4 B.C. in the reign of Emperor Augustus and while the Pax Romana girdled the globe. He grew up, as we noted above, in Nazareth of Galilee. When Augustus died in 14 B.C., our Lord was about eighteen years of age. A little or so over a decade later, the voice of prophecy rang out in the ministry of John the Baptist after years of silence, and Jesus knew the beginning of his ministry had come also. He therefore left for the last time the carpenter shop and went down from Galilee to the Jordan to begin a ministry in which he would proclaim a kingdom mightier than the Roman and tell of a world saved not by man who became God, like Augustus or Tiberius claimed, but by God who became man.

When Jesus arrived at the place of John's baptizing and submitted himself for baptism, John strenuously attempted to hinder him, saying "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" That second "you" is emphatic in the original text, and we could render the clause by "And you, are you coming to me?" What John means is: I have need of your Spirit and fire baptism, and are you coming to my water baptism?

There's something very remarkable about this. John's bearing and voice had never faltered when denouncing in his most vigorous language and vocabulary the highest rabbis and leaders in the nation. There had been no sign of self distrust. But in the presence of the candidate from the north, a sense of his own sin grips him. He had without hesitation baptized many others, small and great, but now he draws back in strange reluctance. Stalker comments concerning our Lord, "There were in his face a majesty, a purity and a peace which smote the man of rock with a sense of unworthiness and sin."

John and Jesus must have had some knowledge of each other, for their families were related, and the connection of their careers under God had been prophetically outlined before their birth. Read Luke chapter 1 and one will see that. John's unfamiliarity now so many years later with our Lord may have been due to the distance of

their homes from each other – one in Galilee and the other in Judea, or perhaps due to the peculiar living habits of the Baptist. It's true that John the apostle has the Baptist saying twice, "I knew him not." But that statement probably has to do with John's ignorance of Jesus' Messianic vocation. At any rate, who would have imagined that while John was thundering out his denunciations of the sins of his countrymen, such a deep sense of his own evil and iniquity was present and underlying his boldness. Characteristic of all the great prophets, apostles and preachers is this sense of unworthiness to touch the hem of our Lord's garment. And John displays that virtue here also.

Look at Jesus' reply in verse 15. These are his first words in the Gospel of Matthew, and he overcame the opposition of the Baptist. They are "Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness." The reply is an incidental claim to sinlessness and a substantiation of his exalted dignity. Why, if he had sins to confess, did he not reply to John when John said that he should be baptized by Jesus and not baptize Jesus, why didn't John say, or why did not our Lord say to John, 'But John, I too have sins and need repentance and remission.' Further, if the Lord Jesus had not till that very moment lived a completely sinless life, then he committed a sin of blackest consequences in tacitly endorsing John's estimate of his being and character. So when John said, "I have need to be baptized of Thee, and comest Thou to me?" if our Lord was really not the sinless Son of God, then to be baptized under those circumstances is to acquiesce in John's high regard for him. And it would have been a sin of blackest consequence if it were not true.

The expression "to fulfill all righteousness" will receive further attention in our next study, but in its simplest sense, it means that the Lord as Son of Man and Messiah must identify himself with the nation in its proper preparation for the coming of the king and his kingdom of heaven that John was announcing. The righteous requirements of the Law of Moses and the word of God must be perfectly fulfilled by the one who is to become their representative substitute and offer himself as their redemptive sacrifice.

"Then the wild anchorite", to use Muggeridge's expression, "arrayed in his camel's hair, submitted to his king and aided in the emersion of the Messiah."

At that point, heaven reacts, and verses 16 and 17 of Matthew chapter 3 record it. Malcolm Muggeridge writes at this point, "At that moment, a bird flew across the blue sky indicating God's joy in what had happened. Only in the natural may we see the supernatural, and vice versa. A bird could not exist without God, and through its existence, proclaims God. Not even a sparrow, we are told, can fall to the ground without causing God concern. All the material universe is, as it were, a message in code from God which mystics, artists, and scientists strive to crack, sometimes with a measure of success, but to which Christ provides the key."

There are valid and perceptive things in what Muggeridge has said, but there is more to what happened than that he has outlined. The bird is no simple fowl of the air but a spiritual symbol of the anointing of Jesus of Nazareth as God's Messiah. Luke says in his account that Jesus came up from the water praying. Was he praying according to his own model prayer – Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by Thy name, Thy kingdom come? When he rose from the waters, the visible heavens were torn apart and there followed the vision and the voice in which are found important clues to the meaning of Jesus' baptism.

The vision of the Spirit descending as a dove upon him is the fulfillment of the words regarding the servant of the Lord, "I have put my Spirit upon him," in Isaiah chapter 42 and verse 1. Let me read Isaiah 42:1 because it's important for understanding this word that came from God in heaven. "Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles."

The vision of the Spirit, then, descending as a dove is the fulfillment of these words regarding the servant of the Lord in Isaiah 42. The figure of the dove itself is suggestive - marking him out as the ideal typical and representative Israelite. The coming

of the Spirit upon him was his anointing as our Lord realized and the apostles preached. He later confirmed in the synagogue at Nazareth that this signified his inauguration into the office of Messiah when he stood and read Isaiah chapter 61, which has these words, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; because he has anointed me," and then added in the synagogue in Nazareth when he read that, "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears." (Luke chapter 4 verse 18 and verse 21)

The Spirit's coming, then, was the anointing of the Lord Jesus and his anointing is his induction into the office of Messiah. Messiah is a term that means "anointed one", mashiyach in Hebrew or mashica in Aramaic. Peter confirms this when he says in Acts chapter 10 in verse 38, "How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power." This then was the ordination of the servant of Jehovah.

Isaiah portrays the servant as a suffering servant, and therefore, it's fitting that the coming of the Spirit should be like the dove. The dove is a bird of sacrifice, and the servant is now the bearer of the Spirit that he may carry out his ministry of sacrificial death and ultimately baptize with the Spirit and with fire. (Matthew chapter 3 in verse 11) Later on, the Lord Jesus says in the 20th chapter of Matthew and the 28th verse these marvelous words, "Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." That was the work that the suffering servant of Jehovah would do.

Now with the voice from heaven, God himself takes over the office of the Messianic herald from John the Baptist and announces, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." The voice from heaven according him the highest transcendent dignity is basically an allusion to Isaiah 42:1 as well. The first of the great servant of the Lord prophetic songs, but combined with it is a reference to Psalm 2:7 – the psalm of the Messianic king. The voice, a confirmation of the vision, is a kind of coronation formula for the suffering servant. In Psalm 2 and verse 6, the psalmist writes, "Yet have I set my

king upon my holy hill of Zion. I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me,
Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee."

The force of the words, "This is my beloved Son," combining those two texts, Isaiah 42:1 and Psalm 2:6 and 7, is to inform him that he was born to suffer like the suffering servant of Isaiah 42 and born a king as Psalm 2 puts it. And they become a preview of his destiny, a synthesis of ruling and suffering of incomparable value. Jesus, then, emerged from the waters of the baptism of John the Baptist as the heaven-designated, heaven-qualified and heaven-proclaimed king.

"The baptism of Christ," Edersheim perceptively notes, "Was the last act of his private life. And emerging from its waters in prayer, he learned when his business was to commence and how it would be done. The principle of his life, known so early, "I must be about my Father's business" is further explained. His father's business is the establishment of the kingdom of the heavens."

It's sometimes claimed that Jesus had revealed to him at the baptism his Messiahship. This is an intolerable view of the event because if this were so, it would imply that he went to the baptism as any other Israelite to confess his sins and give evidence of repentance. The Messiahship is not revealed to him here. His view of himself is only confirmed. If this were not so, he could never have overruled John's objection as he did. But having had his Messianic dignity confirmed by the voice from heaven and the vision of the dove, he is the more able to affirm confidently shortly the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has drawn near. Repent, and believe in the gospel.

We close this part of our study by noting that the whole Trinity is involved in the scene. How divinely important the baptism must be. The voice from heaven is the seal of approval upon the hidden years, and we need ask for no further details of those years. The Father is satisfied, but the clause "with whom I am well pleased" is more than simply approval of the hidden years. The Greek does not mean "with whom I am delighted" but

"in whom my divine purpose rests" or as one leading New Testament scholar has said, "The one on whom my plan for the salvation of mankind is centered." That explains how important the baptism is. It is part and parcel of the greatest of all works – God's plan for the salvation of his people. Nothing is more important than that. And the king's anointing for preaching and for passion is a link in the divine chain that leads to our redemption. Come to Christ. Believe in him and trust in him. And by his grace, become a citizen of the kingdom to come.

Next week we'll finish our study of the baptism. I hope you'll be listening then.