



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 3:13-17

"The Messiah's Baptism, part III"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] The theme of our series of studies is The New Testament Revelation of the Messiah. And we have been looking in our recent studies at "Messiah's Baptism". And today is the third and final of our series on "Messiah's Baptism." The text that we have been looking at have been primarily Matthew chapter 3 verse 13 through verse 17, but we also might have in mind John 1:29 through 34. And so if you have your New Testaments handy, turn to those two passages, Matthew 3:13 through 17 and John 1 verse 29 through verse 34. "The Messiah's Baptism."

We have seen how the shadow of the cross falls across the ministry of the Lord Jesus from its very beginnings. Just after his birth, when our Lord's parents took him to Jerusalem to have him circumcised and to present him to the Lord, Simeon had ominous words for Joseph and Mary. To that just and devout man it had been revealed that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. When our Lord's parents came into the temple to present the infant to the Lord after his birth, Simeon took him up in his arms and blessed God saying, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel." (Luke chapter 1 verse 29 through verse 32).

Joseph and Mary were amazed at the things Simeon had said, which seem to indicate that even now they had not fully comprehended the immense significance of the birth of their son, the Messiah. Simeon continued his message from the Spirit of God directing it particularly to Mary saying, "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thine own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

Now, it is clear that from this last passage that Mary's son shall create a crisis of decision in the nation resulting in the suffering of rejection. A Peter will respond in faith. A Judas shall stumble and fall in despair. The son shall be a sign opposed by the masses. And the ultimate result will be the rejection and crucifixion of him accompanied by the piercing of a mother's heart. And as Simeon said, the purpose of it all is "that the thoughts of many hearts might be revealed."

The thoughts of men, up to this point – secrets of the inner man, shall be exposed by the Messiah resulting in either acceptance or rejection of him. Of Simeon's encounter with our Lord's parents, one commentator says, "Here for the first time in the narrative, we have an intimation of future suffering." It is what we've been talking about – the shadow of the cross again.

We've had in the baptism account a further intimation of this in that the voice from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased," contains an allusion to Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42 put together as a kind of coronation formula. We have seen that the voice said plainly to the Lord who studied the Scriptures, You are the Messianic king as Psalm 2 puts it, and it's your ministry to suffer. The words themselves coming after the so-called silent years indicated the Father's approval of the Son's life in the years of preparation for ministry.

It is our task now to raise the question of the theological meaning of the baptism of Christ. In our recent study, we gave a brief exposition of Matthew 3:13 through 17 and suggested that his baptism with the coming of the Spirit upon him was his induction into

the Messianic office. We want to develop that a bit now and also deal with the common popular view that since our Lord was baptized in water, we should, to use the common expression, follow him in baptism.

Is it true that Jesus' baptism is a prototype of the church ordinance of water baptism? Are we baptized in the same way and with the same significance? That's the question, and we turn now to further reflection on Christ's baptism and its meaning for us.

So, we come now to the theological significance of Messiah's baptism, and first of all, Christ's baptism and manifestation to Israel. (John 1 verse 31)

To most Christians, the baptism of Jesus Christ is as much an enigma as it proved to John the Baptist. This is reflected in the almost absurd statements made about it. For example, in urging believers to be baptized in testimony to salvation, it's common to hear the expression "Follow the Lord in baptism," as if our baptism is a carbon copy of his. It's doubtful if there is a single passage in the New Testament in which a biblical writer connects the baptism of Christ with Christian baptism.

But the baptism of Christ does have important theological significance. And one of its significances has to do with his manifestation to the nation Israel. The text that bears most directly on the point is John 1:31 where we read of John the Baptist speaking of his meeting with our Lord at the time he was baptizing and saying, "And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water."

There are several points about this statement that has been made by John that are of interest. First, John makes the point that although he had not known Jesus was the Messiah, he had announced his coming in his ministry and had extolled beforehand Christ's superiority over him. (Verse 30) And second, although he had no personal knowledge of Jesus the Messiah, John says that it was his baptizing ministry that was designed to accomplish his manifestation to the nation. "In what way?" one might ask.

Well, we've already seen that John's ministry contained the announcement of the coming of the kingdom of heaven, which clearly produced great excitement in the land. John preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand." And his accompanying call to repentance turned the thoughts of the men and women of the nation inward. They were forced to think of their spiritual condition before God and therefore, of their unworthiness to enter the coming king's presence. As a result, many were convinced and convicted of their sinfulness and came to John for his baptism of repentance unto the remission of sins.

Third, one might also ask, "What is meant by his manifestation to Israel?" The term to manifest, a favorite term for the Apostle John, generally is used of the disclosure to men of the divine glory of Christ and usually associated with his first coming. Thus, John's ministry had as its goal the glorification of the Lord Jesus as the divinely sent Messiah sent to save his people from their sins.

Fourth, John says that the manifestation of the divine glory was to be made to Israel. That the manifestation should be made first to Israel represents the intent of the ministry of the Lord Jesus, for he said to his disciples when the Canaanite woman was crying out to him as the Son of David for mercy, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of Israel." You'll find that in Matthew 15 verse 24.

Further, not only was Israel the intent of the ministry of our Lord in its earliest stages, Israel was also the limit of John the Baptist's ministry. And later, Peter in his second recorded sermon confirms the fact that our Lord was sent to Israel first, declaring in words addressed to the nation in Jerusalem, "Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities." Look at Acts chapter 3 and verse 26 for that.

The second thing that we might note in connection with Christ's baptism is his identification with Israel expressed in Matthew chapter 3 and verse 15 where Jesus speaks of the necessity of fulfilling all righteousness. John's baptism was founded upon the

redemptive work of the Lamb of God to come. And precisely for this reason, it seems to be the exclusive responsibility of those who are the recipients of the work of redemption to undergo it. How then can he who needed no redemption personally be baptized? The answer he gave John is a clue. He said it was necessary for him to be baptized "to fulfill all righteousness." (Matthew 3:15) But what does that mean?

"To fulfill all righteousness" is a phrase that bears a close relationship to Paul's "born of a woman, born under the law." (Galatians 4:4) It refers to the fulfilling of all the righteous requirements of the law under which he lived as an Israelite. He must be circumcised, although there is no necessity to put away the body of the flesh in his case, which was the meaning of that ancient rite. He must be presented in the temple, although he does not need deliverance from the house of bondage in Egypt as was suggested by the presentation. When he observes the last Passover with his disciples, he must see that all the requirements of the Mosaic law for its observance are carried out.

As Klaas Schilder, a well-known Dutch theologian, once said concerning the necessity of our Lord's keeping of the Passover as Moses commanded, Schilder said this, "Nothing can be out of line here or the place becomes one of disaster. Nothing is wrong. Christ obeys the law perfectly. He prepares the Passover according to all the rules the law prescribes for him. Neither an ultra fastidious Jew nor an eager angel can detect the slightest departure from the Law in him. The gospel of the New Testament enters the hour of its birth, but the law of the old covenant prepares the chamber."

The baptism signified not only the removal of sins. It also pointed to a positive preparation and dedication of heart to the coming king and his kingdom. Jesus too belongs to this people, although he is their king. And he must demonstrate his willingness to do the will of God. The baptism, then, is a phase of his humiliation under the law, just as the circumcision and the presentation. He acknowledged John's authority at this stage in the unfolding of the program of divine revelation. He went then to the baptism as a representative person convinced that this was a divinely imposed duty for

every Israelite. He was morally qualified for the coming of the king and his kingdom, he was saying by his actions.

MacLaren sums it up well writing, "Why then was he baptized? For the same reason for which he was found in the likeness of the flesh of sin and submitted to other requirements of the law from which as son he was free, and bore the sorrows which were not the issue of his own sins, and went down at last to the other baptism with which he had to be baptized, though his pure life had for itself no need to pass through that awful submersion beneath the black cold waters of death. The whole mystery of his identification of himself with sinful men and of his being made sin for us who knew no sin lies in germ in his baptism by John. No other conception of its meaning does justice to the facts."

Now, we must look at Christ's baptism as his inauguration into the Messianic office. As we said in a previous study, after Jesus' baptism and the descent of the Spirit from the open heavens upon him, God himself assumed the office of the Messianic herald and announced, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." Two important Old Testament passages were melded together – one from the Second Psalm with its "Thou art my son," and the other from Isaiah 42 and verse 1 with its "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 former text refers to the Messianic king, while the latter text outlines the ministry of the suffering servant of Jehovah.

The two passages form a telling coronation formula for our Lord announcing to him that he is the king to come and that his work is the work of the suffering servant who offers the atoning, penal, substitutionary sacrifice upon which our salvation is grounded. The words of the formula touch the mystery of his nature for he is said to be God's son including the distinct conception of a unique divine origin and nature going all the way back to the time when in the beginning the word was with God and in the bosom of the Father. His work is to bring judgment to the Gentiles, a royal work, thus, he's the king

because he's the eternal son. The reference to the spirit is important, too, for the Holy Spirit is the one through whom the Messiah performs his mighty deeds in the bringing in of his kingdom. In fact, that which constitutes him the Messiah or the "anointed one" is this anointing by the Spirit.

In our Lord's beginning of his ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth, he gave indication that he regarded his anointing with the Spirit as his induction into the Messianic office. He stood up in the synagogue at the time of the reading of the passage from the Old Testament. One of the attendants handed him the scroll of Isaiah. He opened the scroll, found the place he wished to read, and said,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord." (Luke 4:18 and 19)

He sat down to teach, and with the eyes of all that were in the synagogue fastened upon him as if under a spell, he declared, "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears." (Verse 21) He was claiming to be the Messianic king and announcing his mission of deliverance. Later Peter, in Acts chapter 10, confirms his anointing as Messiah at the baptism of John when he says to the gathering in Cornelius' house,

"The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ: (he is Lord of all:) That word, I say, ye know, which was published throughout all Judaea, and began from Galilee, after the baptism which John preached; How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him." (Acts 10:36 through 38)

The final words of Matthew 3:17 "in whom I am well pleased," also from Isaiah 42:1, express the divine complacency of the Father in the Son. The tense of the verb in the original text perhaps expressing a past delight in the Son that reaches back as far as the eternal communion to which our Lord refers when he in his high priestly prayer utters these words, "Thou lovest me before the foundation of the world." (John 17:24)

MacLaren is probably right in saying, "Silence is best in the presence of such words." And I agree with MacLaren. Silence is best in the presence of such magnificent, marvelous words.

Christ's baptism, fourthly, as the illustration of the goal of his ministry. When Jesus descended into the waters of the Jordan and then emerged from them, it seems most likely that this was intended to be a figure of his death. When we turn over in the pages of Matthew to verse 22 of chapter 20 and find him describing his death as a baptism, this becomes almost certain. In fact, that verse may well be Jesus' own interpretation of the term baptism. It has to do with death.

We're able to see a progression here. First, John's baptism foreshadows his death. Second, Calvary is his baptism in death, as Jesus says in that Matthew passage. Third, the great commission, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" is a charge to preach with the view of uniting men with his death and baptism.

Finally then, Paul in Romans 6 explains the subject in detail theologically. John's baptism, therefore, mirrors the event of the cross suggesting his death, his burial and resurrection as the ground of the forgiveness of sins.

And incidentally, when we are baptized after confession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, we are baptized by, and our baptism after our faith in Christ and forgiveness of

sins is designed to suggest our identification with him in his death, burial and resurrection.

Now, I want to say a few words by way of conclusion. It is true we must affirm that the cross casts its shadow over the ministry of the Messiah from the beginning. When we remember that the Lord Jesus did not accept Calvary easily, the greatness of his sacrifice becomes more significant. He hated death. This was one of the powers he came to destroy. And yet from the very beginning, he struggled with that power because he loved his Father's will more.

Luther said somewhere, "Every Christian is a Crucian," a reference to the cross because the Latin word *crux* is the word for the cross. But Jesus Christ is the greatest Crucian of them all

One final note may be worthwhile. It concerns the divine initiative in the work of salvation. The four words of verse 14 spoken by John to Jesus, "Comest Thou to me?" are a kind of summary of the divine initiative of the Christian good news. Will we ever really get over the fact that he laid the foundations and made the first move to us? He spoke in his Son when men did not really wish to hear from him. And when we were wandering and going astray, the good shepherd sought and has been saving his people.

A number of years ago in Dallas, I had for some weeks a Bible class in the home of a wealthy couple who invited their friends to the class. One evening during the message, I made a few remarks about religion as being insufficient for personal salvation. I remember saying, "Religion is man's attempt to ignore God. And the Christian's religion is the devil's masterpiece." I was referring to a Christianity that consisted in religious observances alone without a personal relationship to Christ.

One lady in the class, the wife of the man in whose home the class was held, when the time for questions came, said, "I'm puzzled. I've always thought my activities for the Lord, such as working in the church, were worthwhile. I pointed out that they might be if she had already believed in Christ personally as her savior, but her good

works in the church could not save her. She needed to receive Christ by faith. At this point, another woman in the class blurted out, "That's what I want to know. How can I accept Christ by faith? I don't know how. It was, of course, a wonderful opportunity to explain to her, and for the entire class, for many did not really know the Lord yet, how to receive Christ.

At the conclusion of the class, another lady came to me and said, "I'm fifty-two years old. (Now, she was a frank lady.) And this was the first time any one ever told me how to receive Christ. I've helped in the building of the chapel" (and she mentioned a well-known church in the city of Dallas) but no one ever told me how to become a Christian. I've been listening to Billy Graham over the TV this past week, and he's been talking about being reborn again. But he didn't explain how."

Now I don't want to fault the church or Mr. Graham, but often we fail to make plain just what the gospel is. Put in its simplest form, it's what Paul said to the Corinthians, "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures: And that he was seen of Cephas, and then of the twelve. (1 Corinthians 15 verse 3 through verse 5)

And if we wish to know how to receive the gospel and be saved, then here are the simple words the apostle spoke to the Philippian jailer: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved and Thy house."

And so I address the imperative to you. Receive him now by thanking him for dying for your sins and rejoice in the forgiveness of sins and in the assurance of life forever more. The gospel is God's work for sinners. And if God by his grace has brought home to your heart that you need him because of your sin, come to him in your heart. Give yourself to him. Receive him, thank him for dying for your sins, and rejoice in the possession of eternal life. Come to him. Come to him now. Receive him as your own personal savior.

“The Messiah’s Batism, part III” by S. Lewis Johnson
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Our next study will be a continuation of our theme, but we'll give attention particularly to the temptation of our Lord, and we hope you'll be listening then.