

The Baptism of Jesus
Matthew 3:13-17
Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

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 - 1. The Preaching of John the Baptist (3:1-12)
 - 2. The Baptism of Jesus (3:13-17)

The first two chapters of Matthew focus on the arrival of Christ. Matthew 1:1-17 details to whom Jesus was born, Matthew 1:18-25 details how Jesus would be born, Matthew 2:1-12 details where Jesus would be born, and Matthew 2:13-23 details how Jesus would be spared. The third chapter of Matthew begins Christ's preparation for His public ministry, with John's introduction of Him and John's baptism of Him.

The reluctance of John (3:13-14)

John the Baptist was reluctant to baptize Jesus because he considered Jesus to be more righteous than he. The baptism of John was for repentance (Matthew 3:11) and John believed that Jesus was not in need of repentance. To baptize someone who did not need to repent was unnecessary from John's perspective.

His statement about himself needing to be baptized by Jesus was not in reference to a baptism ministry of Jesus, as Jesus had not begun His public ministry and because baptism was practiced by Jesus Himself. John 3:22 describes baptism as a part of the ministry of Jesus but John 4:2 clarifies that while it was part of His ministry, Jesus did not personally do the baptisms but rather His disciples did.

There, John's statement was a simple comparative statement regarding John's view of Jesus' place above his own. John the Baptist understood that he was the sinful one in need of repentance rather than Jesus. The grammatically emphatic nature of the pronouns points to the degree of John's incredulity. This could be read, "**I** have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to **ME**?"

John did not mean that He would need the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire that he spoke of in Matthew 3:11 in that this was the role of the Messiah that John was preparing the people for. John 1:29-34 informs us that John did not know that Jesus was the Messiah prior to the events of His baptism.

The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He on behalf of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.’ **31** I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water.” John testified saying, “I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, ‘He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.’ I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

The righteousness of Jesus (3:15)

The reason that Jesus gave for why John should baptize him was “to fulfill all righteousness.” To understand this, we must distinguish between Paul’s use of the word “righteousness” and how it is used in the Gospels. Paul uses it in the sense of our positional righteousness, our standing as declared righteous by God in justification. Matthew uses it in the sense of ethical righteousness, our practice that is right in the sight of God.

So the meaning of “to fulfill all righteousness” is for Jesus to do all of the Father’s will. This was not only the Father’s will for Jesus to be baptized, but it was also the Father’s will for Jesus to be baptized by John (hence the word “us” in 3:15). This was to fulfill all righteousness. In other words, to practice complete righteousness included this act of baptism.

How could Jesus say this was to fulfill all righteousness when there was no revealed will of God for the Messiah to be baptized in the Old Testament? Some have suggested this prefigures Christian baptism and if Christians ought to be baptized then so should Jesus. Some have suggested that this is fulfilling His predicted death as pictured by baptism. Some have suggested that Jesus is taking upon Himself the obligation as a Jew to fulfill the Law.

A better understanding is that this fulfillment of righteousness looks to the nature of the Messiah in the Old Testament. It points to several revealed truths:

- Christ's submissive role as the suffering servant of Israel (Isaiah 53).
- Christ's validation of the ministry of John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Messiah (Malachi 3:1-2).
- Christ's identification with the repentant remnant of Israel who are coming for John's baptism.
- Christ's identification with those who would inherit the kingdom (1 Corinthians 15:20-24).
- Christ's humility (Matthew 12:18-21; 21:5).
- Christ's death, burial and resurrection is pictured (Luke 12:50; Romans 6:3-4).

The fulfillment theme in Matthew continues in this verse (cf. Matthew 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23). John understood Christ's desire to fulfill righteousness. He immediately accepted Jesus' statement to him in faithful obedience. This immediate acceptance shows John's own righteousness and serves as an example to us.

Matthew does not give us specific details about the baptism itself. Rather he emphasizes the unique events that follow. It is worth noting the uniqueness of the baptism of Jesus. It was different from the multitudes who were baptized by John since Jesus had no need for repentance. It was also different from Christian baptism since He is the One whom we are baptized into (Romans 6:3). We publicly identify with Him through His body, the church.

The reception of the Spirit (3:16)

Though simply descriptive of the baptism, the statement that Jesus "came up immediately from the water" provides further support for the practice of baptism by immersion rather than sprinkling or pouring. This is not to say that a different mode of baptism necessarily invalidates the baptism but there is a clear pattern of baptism by immersion in the New Testament. Also, baptism by immersion captures the imagery of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6:3-4).

The text emphasizes the relation between Jesus coming out of the water and the affirmation of God the Father. The New International Version captures this nuance well – "*As 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.*" The immediacy of the attestation to Christ is evident.

Since the text says “he saw the Spirit of God”, then the implication is that not all saw what Jesus and John saw. The pronoun “he” refers to Jesus according to the preceding context and John the Baptist also testifies to seeing the Spirit of God descend upon Jesus according to John 1:32.

This view that only Jesus and John saw the Spirit of God is supported by the phrase “the heavens were opened to him” (ESV). This phrase regarding the opening of heaven is a commonly used way for the Bible to communicate revelatory visions (Isaiah 64:1; Ezekiel 1:1; John 1:51; Acts 7:56; Revelation 4:1; 19:11). This event dramatically reveals who Jesus truly was.

The Spirit of God descends upon Jesus as a dove. There is no actual dove present as this is a simile, a figure of speech used to compare one event to something else for the sake of a more vivid or emphatic description. This is the only explicit connection between the Holy Spirit and a dove in the Scripture but the “lighting on Him” (NASB) or “coming to rest on Him” (ESV) may connect to the hovering of the Spirit of God at the dawn of creation (Genesis 1:2; cf. 8:10). The dove-like imagery of the Spirit of God pictures a calm peaceful presence and the descent of the Spirit evidences the divine act of this provision.

This is the fulfillment of Isaiah 42:1 —

*Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold;
My chosen one in whom My soul delights.
I have put My Spirit upon Him;
He will bring forth justice to the nations.*

Though Matthew does not direct the reader’s attention to Isaiah 42:1 in this chapter, he does so later in Matthew 12:18 as the manifestation of the Spirit’s power through Jesus’ miracles are described as the fulfillment of Isaiah 42:1-3. The Old Testament coming of the Spirit upon a person was to empower them for service to God, which appears to be the same purpose of the coming of the Spirit upon Jesus (Luke 4:14; 5:17; cf. Luke 24:49).

Isaiah 42:1 not only speaks of God’s Spirit coming upon Christ but also that He is well-pleased with Him (“whom My soul delights”). The role of Christ as “My servant” would be expanded upon in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 where the servant of God would suffer for our transgressions.

The recognition of the Father (3:17)

Together with 3:16, this verse captures the two foundational moments as Jesus is on the precipice of His public ministry. The heavenly vision (3:16) depicts the visual empowerment of Jesus by the Spirit while the heavenly voice (3:17) depicts the audio endorsement of Jesus by the Father. This dual validation of Jesus prepares the reader for the ministry to follow.

The statement of the voice from heaven is a powerful confirmation of the vision of the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus. After 400 years without a prophet, the people of Israel are sent John the Baptist whose baptism of Jesus brings this revelatory voice from the heavens.

It is clear that this voice is God the Father. This is evident particularly by the words “My beloved Son.” God the Father recognizes God the Son.

The words out of the heavens that Matthew records are slightly different that what we find in the other synoptic Gospels:

Matthew 3:17	Mark 1:11	Luke 3:22
“This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased”	“You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased”	“You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased”

It is evident that Matthew provides a general report of the announcement by the Father while Mark and Luke provide the actual words. Matthew is prone to give somewhat of a paraphrase compare to the other Gospels (cf. Matthew 17:5). This does not take away from the accuracy since Matthew’s goal is to emphasize Christ as the Messiah of Israel. While the only Jesus was addressed by the voice of the Father (“you are”), Matthew turns this to the Jewish reader to recognize. Matthew’s use of the third person language speaks to the reader that Christ is God’s beloved Son. This endorsement follows the fulfillment of all righteousness (3:15).

One could assume that if John also saw the Spirit of God descending upon Jesus (3:16) that he also heard the voice from heaven. Yet if John heard the voice from heaven, it is interesting that he would send his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the Expected One in Matthew 11:2-3. He ought to have known that Jesus was the Messiah if he had heard the voice and thus John probably only recognized Jesus as the messenger of God who was greater than John.

This squares with John's words in John 1:29-34 where John admits to not recognizing Jesus. The full realization of Jesus as the Christ was developing with John as Matthew builds the case for the readers regarding the identity of Jesus.

The Messiah as God's son is an Old Testament concept found notably in Psalm 2:7, "I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord; He said to Me, 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You.'" This verse is quoted as proof of Jesus as the Messiah by Paul (Acts 13:33), and by the writer of the book of Hebrews (1:5; 5:5). The Messiah as the Son of God is used by God of David's descendant who would follow him on Israel's throne (2 Samuel 7:13-14; Psalm 2:7; 89:26-29; Matthew 1:20; 2:15; 4:3, 6). It is also important to note that Christ was the Son eternally; He did not become the Son at the incarnation or at the baptism (cf. Colossians 1:13-16). At His baptism, Christ was declared by God as His beloved Son to initiate the work that only the Suffering Servant could perform.

Notice the involvement of the Trinity in Matthew 3:16-17. The Father sends the Holy Spirit and the Father declares Jesus as "My beloved Son." In this we can not only see the persons of the Trinity but their relationship. God the Father is the one sending the Spirit and making the pronouncement regarding the Son. While One in nature, the Father is the head of the Trinity (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:3) but there is a relationship existing in love ("My beloved Son"). In this interaction we see the persons of the Trinity along with the place of the Father with authority to make such a statement about the Son.

Conclusion

Matthew chose to omit all of Jesus' childhood, including His time at the temple (Luke 2:41-50) because the purpose of this book was to prove Christ as the Messiah more than to detail a biography of Him. Matthew presents Jesus as the Son of God who will bring the kingdom of heaven. God the Father declared this in Matthew 3:17.

The process of delivering this kingdom as foretold in the Old Testament began with the incarnation of Christ and then with Christ's announcement from the Father that initiated His work to bring this about this regeneration (cf. Matthew 19:28) according to the time that the Father has set by His own authority (Acts 1:7).

If the Son of God was baptized in order to fulfill all righteousness, so must His followers be baptized. Baptism is the responsibility of not only all believers (Acts 2:38) but is also a part of the Great Commission in which we all must participate (Matthew 28:19). We ought not consider baptism as optional.