

EVEN FOR JESUS
Matthew 3:13-17

Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
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I once baptized a man who was about six foot four and 275 pounds. He'd rededicated his life to Christ and wanted to be baptized, despite the fact he'd been baptized in another tradition about ten years earlier. I agreed to baptize him. As we were making our way down into the baptistery, I asked him if he had any questions. He said that he didn't, but he hoped this baptism would go better than his last one.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked, attempting to comfort him.

"Well, Pastor," – now remember, this guy is six four, 275 pounds – "when I was a young teenager, I nearly drowned, and I have been terrified of water ever since. The last time I was baptized it took two men and I nearly drowned them both."

He told me that right as my 175-pound body was getting into the water with his 275-pound body. And I was supposed to take him down and pull him back up. Given experience and technique, I was confident of my ability to do that until he said that he was absolutely terrified of water. I could already sense the panic in his eyes and in his voice as we descended into the water. The organ was already playing. It was time to start. Baptism was listed in the order of service. There was no backing out. But why, why didn't he tell me to get some help before now? We could have practiced more. But I'm happy to say that I did baptize him (I've learned that that if you can get them down, they'll come up), although he flailed around enough in the water to baptize the first two rows of the south side of the sanctuary.

Baptism is a strange thing, an oddity – to be sure. The first time that Jordan, our middle daughter, witnessed a baptism she was dumbfounded. She was sitting in the evening service – she was about 4 years of age. No one had prepared her for the event. Nobody had even thought about the fact that she'd never seen a baptism before. She and I were walking hand-in-hand to the car following the service, and she said, "Daddy, what were you doing? You were standing up there in the water, bending those boys backward in that water and dunking them. What was going on?"

I guess that is strange – to see your father walk out in church in a big pool of water and stick other people's heads underneath the water. She never imagined I would do such a thing to anyone. What on earth, indeed, was going on? It was a puzzle to her.

Perhaps baptism is a puzzle to you, too.

I remember my baptism. I was an elementary school child – really young, really small. But I understood – I understood well enough. (I don't suppose anyone ever fully understands what it

means to trust in Christ Jesus.) I was so small I sort of swam out to the pastor and was baptized. He gave me a push and I swam back. My brother was baptized during the same service. I'll never forget it.

It's a good thing – a really good thing to remember your baptism.

Our story today is odd, not simply because it's a baptism but because it's Jesus who is baptized.

Jesus baptized? Why on earth would Jesus need to be baptized? Isn't baptism for sinners? Doesn't it represent the washing away of our sins? What's a person like Jesus doing in a place like a baptistery?

Matthew's Gospel, interestingly enough, begins and ends with baptism. Here in chapter 3, it begins with the baptism of Jesus. And it ends in chapter 28 with Jesus giving a command in the next to last verse to go, make disciples, and baptize them. It's almost as if the ministry of Jesus is bookended by baptism at both the beginning and the end. Baptism is very important in Matthew's Gospel. So important that Jesus, Himself, is baptized.

When Jesus is baptized, you have to ask yourself some questions. Why isn't He the one doing the baptizing? Why isn't He standing on the bank and watching the others – those with sin in their lives – plunge beneath the waters? It's those who have messed up, those who need a second chance, those who have waded out so deep into trouble that going across and going back is all the same. Let the people who have drifted so far from mother's prayers and father's instructions that nobody can help them – let them come and be baptized. The people whose lives are just a tangle of bad relationships, who have messed up everything, who have ambition and greed, who think they are going somewhere but who are actually just circling the parking lot and going nowhere – let them come. The people who are rich in things and poor in soul – let them come. But the Messiah? Why does the Messiah need to be baptized? (Fred Craddock, *The Cherry Log Sermons*, p. 8)

Well, the baptizer is John, preaching his message. Look at Matthew 3:2. "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." We learn in verse 5 that many in Jerusalem and in all Judea, in fact, were going and being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they (notice in verse 6) confessed their sins.

If you have some objections to seeing the Messiah immersed, you're not the only one. John said in verse 11 that while he baptized with water for repentance, there was another one coming after him who was mightier than he was, someone so holy that John wasn't even fit to remove His sandals. And He would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

So when John sees Jesus coming to the Jordan to be baptized by him, John tries to stop it (verse 14). "You don't need me to baptize you. I need to be baptized by you. What are you doing coming to me?"

Jesus says something like, "Leave it alone, John. It is appropriate for us to do God's will. Let us do it."

Why is it God's will for Jesus to be baptized, for the sinless Son of God to be plunged beneath the waters of repentance?

Jesus had no sin. The author of Hebrews tells us that. In fact, it is Jesus who forgives sins, pronounces judgment on sins, demanded repentance of sins. It is Jesus who proclaimed a higher righteousness. It is Jesus who, although tempted, never sins.

His baptism left John puzzled. His baptism leaves us puzzled, too.

I want to give you a few reasons that Jesus found it necessary to be baptized.

I. Our Lord's submission to the baptism of John constituted a clear assent to John's authority.

It gave an endorsement of both the message and the ministry of John (G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, p. 55). By allowing John to baptize Him, Jesus has identified John as the forerunner of the Messiah, the one who carries the legitimate message of God – the clarion call to God's people to repent and be ready for Messiah.

Jesus is saying, "I'm with him [John]." For John, baptism is a preparation for a new exodus to be led by the Messiah. John retired to the desert where the new exodus is to begin. Baptism is a new passage through the Red Sea, whereby Israel is cleansed from her sins and made ready for the Messiah.

II. Jesus submits to baptism because in doing so He demonstrates His solidarity with humanity.

In one fell swoop, by plunging underneath the waters, Jesus condemns the self-righteous and the wicked for their lack of repentance. He takes His stand with the publicans and the sinners who look for the day of the Lord. The author of Hebrews tell us in Hebrews 2:17 that Jesus had to be like His brothers in every respect. He stooped down to be one with the people that He was to minister to and to die for. In His proper place, Jesus might as well have been up there in the front, standing with John and calling on the sinners to repent. Instead, He was down there with the sinners, affirming His position with them, making Himself one with them in the process of salvation that He would, in due course, accomplish.

This is what the incarnation of Jesus is all about. Jesus comes for sinners as if a sinner Himself. And so, if Jesus is to come at all, He comes as one of us. Jesus in baptism identifies Himself with sinful humanity. His road to Calvary, where He bears all of our sins, begins as He passes through the Jordan River. And by His actions He proclaims to the world that He comes for sinners and becomes like the sinner – not by His own actions but because He takes on the sin of our fallen race.

There seems to be a growing reluctance on the part of people to experience baptism. "Pastor, I'd love to join a church, but I don't want to be baptized." I spend a lot of time talking to people –

and I'm glad to do so – about their fears of the baptismal waters. Now, if someone wants to join with our church family and they've already been baptized by immersion into another denomination, that's fine. We don't require baptism again, because we're baptized not into a denomination but into the body of Christ. But there are folk who have never been biblically baptized (meaning as a believer and by immersion) who simply do not want to submit themselves to the baptismal waters. I sense in people a sense of pride in which they refuse to humble themselves and plunge beneath the baptistery waters.

Well, Jesus already took care of that. Jesus Himself submitted to baptism. He who knew no sin, the one who became sin for us, submitted Himself to baptism just as He commands us to be baptized. He did what He's asking you to do. In Matthew 3, Jesus Himself, the sinless Son of God, submits Himself to baptism. And in Matthew 28, He commands us to baptize.

Jesus identifies not only with sinful humanity, but with wayward Israel. He will be the new Moses to lead them through the waters of liberation from sin and death.

III. Another reason Jesus was baptized was that in doing so, He foreshadows prophetically His death, burial, and resurrection.

We have to be careful not to read too much of Paul back into the gospels. But there can be no doubt about the fact that the primary image in the New Testament for baptism is not that of the cleansing waters, although that image is certainly there. It is the image of participation. When Jesus died, we go under the water showing that we died with Him. And as Jesus was resurrected, we come forth from the waters indicating our resurrection.

Turn to Romans 6:3-5

Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore, we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection.

Jesus in His baptism foreshadows the fact that He will die, He will be buried, and He will experience resurrection. He foreshadows not only His death, burial, and resurrection, but He foreshadows our own baptism in which we indicate we are participants – we are those who die and live in the death and the life of Christ.

IV. Jesus was baptized in order to submit Himself to the will of His Father.

One day Jesus folded his carpenter's apron, having shaken the shavings from it, put it on the bench, left the shop, and went to the house and told his mothers and brothers and sisters goodbye. He made his way through the grain fields of Ezdralon, down through the dark valley of the gap of Jezreel, and presented himself to John for baptism. This was God's will. (Fred Craddock, *The Cherry Log Sermons*, p. 10)

v. 15. Righteousness equals conduct in accord with God's will, doing what pleases God.

Notice what happens as Jesus is baptized. Notice, it is submission to the will of God. Notice (verse 16) that “the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descended as a dove, and coming upon Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens, saying, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.’”

“This is My Son” is a quotation from Psalm 2, a royal psalm concerning the crowning of the king of Israel. Now, at Jesus’ baptism, now Jesus is king. He’s obedient to the Father, submits Himself to the Father. The Father declares, “This is My Son,” in the fashion of an ancient Israelite king.

Then He says, “My beloved Son, in whom my soul takes pleasure.” It comes from Isaiah 42. It is the description of the suffering servant of God, the one who gives his life. It’s the one who gives his life for the people. “This is my Son, the servant who gives Himself for the people.”

And so it was that Jesus, still wet from His baptism, left the Jordan and went about doing God’s business.

The Father finds eternal pleasure in the Son, in the Son’s becoming human, in His sinless life, in His faithfulness, and in His submitting Himself to ministry through baptism.

Baptism is a scary thing. It ought to be scary to the world when we baptize people.

For Paul, becoming a Christian is the image of being adopted into a new family. When you’re adopted, you take on new parents, new siblings, new names, new inheritances – in short, a whole new culture. Those who have been baptized into Christ, according to Paul, have been adopted by God. Baptism means that the Christian’s new parent is God the Father. Their new siblings are other Christians. Their name and most functional identity is simply “Christians” – those who know Jesus as Lord and determiner of their existence. Their new inheritance is freedom and the bountiful resources of community. Their new culture, or comprehensive way of life, is the church. Therefore, Paul can speak of conversion and baptism creating a whole new person – even a new world (2 Corinthians 5:17). Those allegiances we have to our biological families and to the state are no longer the primary source of identity, the source of who we are. In fact, Robert Nisbet commented that the deepest conflict that existed between the church and the Roman Empire was that in its baptism the church boldly insisted that there was a kind of kinship or particular allegiance more significant than that of the biological family or the state. (Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People*, p. 100)

And so, baptism created a new person with a new purpose.

The act of baptism is, indeed, a strange event in which we are showing our allegiance by symbol to the person of God and to the people of God. We’re identifying with the suffering and the resurrection of Jesus. We need to remember our baptism. We need to remember that day we said we were part of the people of God.

We all stray from our baptism sometimes. We forget our baptism. We even by our actions deny our baptism. But the call today is to see the baptism of the Savior and to remember our own baptism.

What about you? Have you been baptized? Have you plunged yourself beneath these waters? Have you followed in the footsteps of your Lord?

It's funny sometimes when people decide to be baptized. It's a Spirit thing. **A pastor remembers ministering in a small town that had a population of about 450 people. There was a Methodist Church, a Baptist church, a Nazarene church, and a Christian church. Each had its share of the population. But the best attendance in town, however, on Sunday morning was at the little cafe where all the pickup trucks were parked and all the men were inside discussing the weather and the cattle and the wheat bugs and the hail and the wind and whether they were going to have a crop. Meanwhile, their wives and sons and daughters were in one of those four churches. The churches sometimes had good attendance and sometimes had poor attendance, but the cafe had consistently had good attendance – better attendance than the churches. The men were always there.**

Once in a while they would lose a member of the men's group. Maybe his wife and kids got to him, so he would have to go off sheepishly to one of the churches with his family. But the men at the cafe still felt that they were the biggest and strongest group in town, and so they met when the churches usually met on Wednesdays and Sundays and, really, almost every other day to discuss the weather – all the things that farmers talk about. They weren't bad men, really. They were good men, family men, hard-working men.

Their patron saint was Frank. Frank was 77 years old when the preacher first met him. He was a good man, a strong man, a pioneer, a rancher, a farmer, and a cattleman. He'd been born in a sod house, and he had prospered. He had his credentials, and all the men there at the cafe considered him their patron saint. "Ha ha," they said. "Old Frank will never go to church."

One day the preacher met Frank on the street. He knew Frank knew who the preacher was. It had never been this preacher's custom to accost people in the name of Jesus, so he just shook hands and visited with Frank. Then he took the offensive – that is, Frank did. "I work hard and I take care of my family and I mind my own business." He said that as far as he was concerned, everything else is fluff. He was basically telling the new preacher, "Leave me alone; I'm not a prospect."

So the preacher didn't bother Frank. That's why he was surprised – indeed, the whole church was surprised and the whole town was surprised and the men at the cafe church were bumfuzzled – when old Frank, 77 years old, presented himself before the preacher one Sunday morning for baptism. He baptized Frank.

Some in the community said that Frank must be sick, he must be scared to death to meet his maker. Some said he had heart trouble, going up to be baptized. "I never thought old Frank would do that, but I guess when you get scared...." There were all kinds of stories.

But this is the way Frank told it to the preacher. They were talking the day after his baptism and the preacher said, “Frank, do you remember that little saying you used to give me so much? ‘I work hard, I take care of my family, and I mind my own business.’?”

He said, “Yeah, I remember. I said that a lot.”

“Do you still say that?” the preacher asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“Then what’s the difference?”

Frank said, “I didn’t know then what my business was.”

Frank discovered what his business was. It was to serve human need. It was to be like Jesus. So the preacher baptized Frank. He raised his hand and said in the presence of those who were gathered, “Frank, upon your confession of faith in Jesus Christ and in obedience to his command, I baptized you, my brother, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.” (Fred Craddock, *The Cherry Log Sermons*, p. 11-12)

Do you remember those words over you? Do you remember your baptism? If you haven’t had one, do you have the courage to walk in the footsteps of Jesus? Do you have the courage to join Jesus at the Jordan River?