

Jesus' Baptism

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[0:00] The words will be on the screen if you don't. To be fair, if you don't own a Bible and you'd like a free one, there's some on the table over here. The welcome team can help you at the end, or you can, if you're feeling confident enough, get up and just get one now.

You're very welcome. We've just had a notice about baptisms. And what I'm going to be talking about this morning is baptism. We're working through the Gospel of Matthew, as you'll know if you're part of the church here.

And we've reached the passage where Jesus gets baptized. And what I'd like us to consider this morning, as I read the text and I start to unpack it, is why do we do that?

Now, I imagine in the room most people here will be baptized, and so it is tempting to switch off and think that this is for those handful of people who haven't been as yet.

And yet, Romans 6, verses 3 and 4, tells us to remember our baptism. It says that's how we fight sin.

[1:00] Which I suspect is probably, for most of us here who are Christians, not the first thing that comes into our mind if we're thinking about living the Christian life, that we should, in some fashion, be remembering our baptism.

But it's a vital thing to do in your daily walk with Jesus, as hopefully will become clear as we work through it. I'm going to read to him, and read all of chapter 3. We do eventually get to baptism. We start with a different guy first. In those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.

Now, John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

[2:01] Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Bear fruit in keeping with repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as our father, for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.

Even now, the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hands, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

[3:21] Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him saying, I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?

But Jesus answered him, Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness. Then he consented.

And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him. And he...

Excuse me, it's my fault. Why is all tangled? Behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him.

And behold, a voice from heaven said, This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. This is the word of the Lord.

[4:25] Okay. Weird desert guy dunks people into river. I mean, I guess it sounds like the plot of some sort of gory serial killer show or something. But we do need to approach the Bible not in a way that sanitizes it, but embraces its strangeness.

There are, to be honest, so many things that we could open up from this passage. I'm going to deliberately focus on one frame, which is, why did Jesus get baptized?

Why did he do that? I mean, John asked the same question, right? When Jesus arrived, so John's been baptizing in the desert, people are coming to him as an act of repentance.

Some of these religious leaders, that's who the Pharisees and Sadducees are. We'll learn more about him as we go through Matthew. They come to him, and he's cross about it. But many people he is baptizing, as they repent.

And then Jesus comes. So John knows him. They're cousins. John's known him since childhood. In fact, John was the first to acknowledge him and welcome him when he was still in the womb.

[5:34] And his mother, Elizabeth, met Mary pregnant with Jesus. John jumped for joy in Elizabeth's womb. So he knows him well. He knows exactly who he is.

He knows that this is the coming king of Israel, the Messiah, and indeed God himself. And he looks at him as he's coming to be baptized and thinks, what are you doing?

Like, how can I baptize? You need to baptize me, he says to him. So why is Jesus doing it? The text gives us many clues, but Jesus' own response is, it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness. So what does he mean? Because Jesus doesn't need to repent, right? He's the only person who's ever lived who doesn't need to repent. Repent means to turn away or to change your mind from your sin.

Something that all of us, whether we've been following Jesus for a long time or not, need to be doing regularly. But Jesus is the one man who doesn't need to do that. So why does he want to get baptized?

[6:46] Well, essentially, to identify with our sin. So he knows where he's going.

He knows from the beginning of the story that at the end of the story, he is going to be nailed to a beam of wood as the only innocent man who's ever lived to die for crimes he didn't commit, but as he would see it, to die on behalf of all of those who would trust in him, to take for us what we would deserve.

And so as part of that, he kind of, it's like he gets into the muck with us first. If I can put it that way. So imagine you're, I don't know where you'd be, but it's been raining a lot, that's quite difficult to imagine, and the ground has got very muddy and churned up.

And you are, what would be a good example? Okay, your car's got stuck in the mud. I imagine many of us have been there. I can give a particular time once that we had driven to, in fact, driven to the village of Suffield in Yorkshire to take a photo by the sign and then got very stuck and met everybody in Suffield trying to get our car out of the mud.

But you're there and you're kind of getting muddier and muddier in the thing. You're trying to pull it and push it and just getting covered in it. And imagine that all of your life looked like that, so everyone you'd ever met was splattered with mud.

[8:12] If a person walked by in pristine white robes, you'd stop and look. They would look demonstrably different from you and everyone else that you'd ever seen.

And you'd think there's something different about them. How have they managed to live without getting splattered in mud? Like, how do you live life without getting covered in mud? It's everywhere, but they just seem to be able to move through it.

And then if that person who was like that jumped into the mud to help you pull the car out, you'd think, what are you doing? That's what Jesus is doing in his baptism.

He's getting into the muck of life. He hasn't sinned, but he's saying, I identify with you, people, everybody, who have, I identify with the fact that you're completely unable to live your life without just screwing up left, right and centre.

I'm going to get into the mud with you so that I can pull you out. So he's baptised as a sign of that identification with sinners.

[9:20] Not to repent, but to fulfil all righteousness. But why else is he baptised? Because I see a lot going on here.

He's baptised to retell Israel's story. How do we know that? Well, we started with John the Baptist, this weird desert man, eating his locusts and his wild honey.

And what Matthew quotes, Isaiah 40, we sang some of it earlier, though not this bit, the voice of one crying in the wilderness is prepare the way of the Lord, make its path straight.

And Matthew says, this, Isaiah wrote this about this wild desert man, John. Which to someone who knows Isaiah well is surprising. So Isaiah 40 is about the return of Israel from exile.

It's a promise that one day exile will end. Now Isaiah's writing before they even go into exile, but he's saying it's going to get bad, but it will get better. You will return as a people back into the land.

[10 : 32] By the time John's walking around, that's happened. They've returned from exile, the people that went into exile in Babylon for about 70 years, they've returned. Things are not as they were before, but they have returned.

And so you'd be forgiven for thinking, well, this has happened in some fashion, this voice crying in the wilderness, this must be somebody at the time that they've returned. And Matthew says, John. And you think, but how's that work? Hasn't exile ended? Matthew is saying, no. Matthew is saying the kingdom of Israel has not yet ended its exile.

And in fact, John has come dressed as someone very specific. He's come in costume. He's chosen to wear very specific clothes, a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt, so that anyone who sees him goes, it's Elijah.

Like, he's wearing Elijah's costume so that the people of Israel who met him and saw him were like, oh, he's dressed like Elijah. Now, some of you, if you were here with us over the summer, we preached to Elijah's life.

[11 : 46] You might remember that one of the first things Elijah actually did was leave Israel into the wilderness because he's like, we need to start again. We need to come back in over the Jordan. John's saying the same thing.

He's saying, we're not yet back from exile. It's like, we need to recross the Jordan. We need to be a new nation, a new people, a new kingdom in order to return from exile.

He's come dressed to Elijah so we see it. Matthew's quote in Isaiah 40 so we see it and he then wants to take people into the wilderness and then take them back over the Jordan, back into the land.

So their baptism is for repentance and also to say we want to be a new nation. And that is particularly clear when the leaders of the people come to him and he is not polite about it.

And he calls them you brood of vipers, you bunch of snakes. like he's rude. He is in their face.

[12 : 51] And he says to this bunch of snakes as he calls them, he says, where are we? Verse 9, do not presume to say to yourselves we have Abraham as our father for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children from Abraham.

His point is they, so Abraham is if you like the first Jewish person, he's the first person who followed the Lord. Eventually from his line came the kingdom of Israel. They're saying we're descended from him, we're right with God and John is like don't make that assumption.

If the Lord wants people he can make them out of stones. If he wants a nation, a new nation, he can make one. He is warning them that there is in one sense a new Israel to come.

He says even now the axe is laid at the root of the trees. He's like the whole thing's going to be chopped but a new thing is coming. And then what happens is Jesus goes into the wilderness to join them and we saw at the start of Matthew that Matthew is deliberately telling the whole story of the Old Testament through Jesus' life.

Jesus goes into the wilderness as though he were Moses is roughly the way he got to and then he crosses the Jordan through baptism as though it were the Red Sea. So Jesus is identifying with the people of Israel and saying he is that.

[14 : 21] He is the new Israel. He is the new one who's going to lead the new people. He is retelling Israel's story and saying this is a new thing that is happening.

So he's doing it to get in the muck with you. He's doing it because he's saying we need a new kingdom like Israel but new and it's me. Come with me if you want. He's doing it and these get stranger as they go on so you know come with me.

He's doing it to defeat evil. How do we know? Well I've said it's a little bit crossing the Jordan here like crossing the Red Sea.

That's one of the two when the New Testament goes on and talks about baptism in the letters it uses two Old Testament stories to describe what's going on. One is crossing the Red Sea which I'll kind of retell for you in a minute if you're not familiar.

The other is Noah and his ark. Those are the two stories that the New Testament uses to describe baptism. We probably don't often talk about baptism like that but that's the way the Bible does.

[15:31] So this crossing Jordan is a little bit like the Red Sea. What happens in the Red Sea? So in the story this is the Hebrew people they've been in slavery in Egypt and they have been told what God said come into the desert I'd like to party with you.

It's my slightly liberal translation of the Hebrew but it's roughly what's going on. And they're stopped repeatedly by the kingdom and eventually they do escape through the plagues and all the rest of it and they flee and they find themselves in front of a sea the Red Sea.

And they think oh no and all the people say have you just brought us out here to die as Pharaoh and the army are chasing them and then Moses prays and the Lord parts the waters and the people walk across they get across Pharaoh and his army chase the waters come back Pharaoh and his army drown.

so the Red Sea is a place of salvation for the people of God they walk through the waters of death but they are waters of death for those opposing the Lord.

We've been told that these leaders of Israel at the time John calls them snakes what else does the Bible associate with snakes well I wonder if you know what a Pharaoh's crown looks like because it's a little snake what happens in the Red Sea is that this snake like king and the Bible often does this it basically uses the image of a snake to describe particularly leaders who are evil and associating them with the devil this snake like king he drowns in the water or his armies do which now I'm about to say a few sentences which some of you will go what is he talking about so just bear with me but the Bible is consistent in suggesting that dragons live in the sea you find them in Genesis 1 your English translation glosses it to great sea creatures but the word is dragon and you repeatedly find that snake like creatures are depicted in seas in the Bible it's probably not how you picture them in your head it's not kind of how European symbolic world works but it is the way they talked about it these images are images of evil in essence evil and chaos so when Jesus is getting baptized he's associating himself with going through the waters of death but also a place that drowns evil things and a place potentially where evil things live in the water

[18:03] St Cyril of Jerusalem and this is a much more common idea in Eastern Christianity than in Western Christianity but St Cyril of Jerusalem said why did Jesus get baptized he said obviously Jesus went into the Jordan to break the heads of the dragons and we all go yes obviously and you might go is this one in this particular text not so obviously as the other two I've said or the one I'm going to come to I think but there is a theological symbolic thing in the Bible where water is where evil lives in a snake or dragon like personification and so Jesus goes into the waters to defeat what's there it sounds strange to us it is the way the church fathers talked we might think of St Athanasius who said who wanted to know why did Jesus die in the air and you would think well did he but he means he was suspended his feet weren't touching the earth that's what he meant he said why and we went because that's what crucifixion works and St Athanasius goes no to defeat the prince of the power of the air of course which is one of the phrases that the Bible uses to describe the devil so he said of course he died in the air he had to defeat the devil and again that sounds strange to us but is how

Christians certainly 1500 or longer years ago would have talked I'm not going to say lots more about that if you're thinking Tim you started talking about dragons and water and evil and it's got a little bit strange and you'd like to know more come to the next Bible study we're going to do Jonah chapter 2 which is full of the sea and dragons and we will I promise that we will I will show you where this actually is in the Bible and we will have some sense of what's going on but third reason to defeat evil Jesus has been baptised symbolically as part of his defeat of evil fourth reason Jesus gets baptised I actually think the strangest one though much more in the text to remake the world let me put it this way if you know your Bible which some of us here will and I talk about the word of God separating some water from some other water what might that sound like it's Genesis chapter 1 how does God make things mostly by separating things from other things with his word what is happening when Jesus gets in water the word of God is in a very literal sense separating water from water what Jesus is doing is giving a promise to remake the world the thing is

Matthew actually wants us to notice that and he gives us three different ways to notice that the first is that he says heaven was opened this is the first time that heaven and earth have been joined together probably since Eden he is saying that what's happening here as Jesus is baptised it's like something that has been split asunder through our own sin heaven and earth are coming back

together I mean the grand story of the Bible is heaven meets earth and they get married that's the whole thing is that at the end Christ marries his church and therefore symbolically heaven marries earth here heaven is opened it's like oh something like at the beginning is starting again second a dove comes that's the Holy Spirit in representation but doves in the Bible might make us think if we know the story of Noah and his ark which the New

Testament later goes on to talk about with baptism he sends out the dove across the waters to find out what if there's land but what's he doing because what happens in Noah's story in the flood if you read it very carefully is that in inverse order everything that God made over six days gets undone one at a time one at a time one at a time one at a time until we're back to just water and at the start of Genesis 1 we find the spirit hovering over water and then they make so Noah's flood is undoing creation and he sends out the dove to be like is it back yet and the dove finds out that there is a new creation that the waters are receding and symbolically there is a new creation so there's a dove maybe signaling is this is this it is this a new do we not only need a new Israel do we also need a new creation itself and that dove is the spirit who is hovering over the waters and then we put this together with something oh this just sounds like Genesis this sounds like remaking this sounds like Jesus is saying not just that he's going to get in the muck not just that he's going to be a new nation do you want to come and join him not just that he's going to defeat evil but he's going to remake the whole world that's where he gets baptized so why do we

I mean largely the same reasons at least to reflect them we get baptized to repent Jesus didn't have to but he got in the muck with us to repent as our kind of yes I want to come in I want to follow Jesus it is if you like Christian initiation we get baptized to repent and John said that in verse 8 bear fruit in keeping with repentance that's what he says to these snake like leaders he's like I baptized you if there was fruit of your repentance so we baptize people when there's fruit of their repentance we don't do spontaneous baptisms but we baptize for repentance yeah I've got time to tell you a story I think it's called New Life Church in Maine which is part of our wider commission church family now they wouldn't slightly disagree there they'd be quite up for spontaneous baptisms! [24:03] sweet he'd the Lord brings fruit which is this is where I've been given to serve

I'm going to get on my knees and we're going to serve in this ground where I've been put and then I think it was probably the next Sunday or certainly soon his team were saying to him they were doing a couple of baptisms his team were saying why don't we open up for spontaneous baptisms and he was like I don't have any reason sure okay I don't think it'll happen but alright and they do and they baptize a couple people and they say anyone else want to get baptised now and nothing happens he starts to feel a little bit silly why do we even bother asking that there's a little lad called Sawyer I think if I've understood maybe about 12 he's like I'd like to get baptised he's like okay great wonderful they know him they're confident baptise him they baptised I think about 30 people that day spontaneously every single week since they've baptised between 10 and 30 people their church is in revival he's tearing his hair out about discipleship and how on earth you do it when person after person after person is coming to the Lord I'm telling you this because it's fun if I'm honest it doesn't make any of my points but it's a great story he's a great guy but the we should know that a church in our family in the

United States is in what I think looks a lot like genuine revival week after week after week they're just like sure people just keep coming do not call bad what I have called good it isn't hard ground it's not hard ground Alton is not hard ground there's nothing wrong with the soil and there's nothing wrong with the seed and there's nothing wrong with the water the seed is the word the water is the spirit the soil is people's hearts all you've got to do is sew it there you go I turned that idea of a point anyway what we're supposed to be talking about baptism why do we get baptized to repent yes also in Romans 6 it says that we are baptized into Christ so yeah he kind of gets in the muck with us but when we get baptized we join him we get to participate in him we are united with him we also get baptized to join this new

Israel Jesus family because water is thicker than blood I wonder if you think about it like that water is thicker that's not the saying the saying is the other way around but water what I mean by that is actually the bonds of baptism are tighter than the bonds of family that what happens to us when we're baptized into the church is that not just this church but all Christians they become your family and it's tighter than blood relation and we don't necessarily act like that or think like that but that is Jesus claim on us he's like you now join my people and we'll see as we go through Matthew as it's quite a regular theme of that like leave your family join with the brothers and sisters with me we get

baptized to join those stories like Jesus did of the Red Sea it's like we're baptized Paul once says I think in one Corinthians but he says we're baptized into

Moses it's a wild thing to say what do you mean but he means that as we're baptized we join those people crossing the Red Sea it's like you did too now you also cross the Red Sea with them you're part of it it's part of your story that you also join them and evil has been crushed by the waves that we join as it were with Noah on the ark that we are rescued in the ark of the church the ark of Jesus why else are we baptized to be washed to be raised to be rescued from evil and of course the biggest one to be citizens of a new creation you join a new creation that's the bible's claim we're not just waiting for a new creation later it's like you want to see what it looks like come to church and then we think are we that good at that well maybe not but that's the bible's claim if you want to see new creation come hang out with some Christians they're there the world has not yet been renewed!

[29 : 27] but their hearts have or are being renewed what the church is outposts of the new creation on the world you kind of get to taste it yes in part not in full and we're sinners and we don't do very well I lost I think all true but still outposts of the new creation that you get to taste and experience so that's why we get baptized it's kind of how you start if you say you're a Christian you've not been baptized do come to the exploring baptism a week tomorrow we'd love to talk you through that it's how you start and if you're thinking I started a long time ago but I never did it don't worry about it let's start now a friend of mine often says if the best time was a long time ago the second best time is now I think that's quite helpful principle for life the second time is now and if you're thinking I don't know if I am a

Christian I'm kind of exploring some of this I'm not sure I know there's some people in the room in that position well it's up to you but if you want to come along and find what getting baptized would involve you're really welcome to we would baptize you if you've made a profession of faith in Jesus and we've seen a little bit of evidence of that in your life we'd love to following him will be the best thing you ever do if you repent you'll find that you become part of Christ that you join this new Israel that you're washed that you're raised that you're rescued that you're part of a new creation it's great and for the rest of us do you want all those things that I just said in your life regularly remember your baptism like one of the benefits that a really liturgical church we believe in baptizing believers but a really liturgical church that might baptize infants is that as you go in for me there'll be a little font with water in it and you dip your fingers in the water as part of worship on your way in you remember your baptism we need to find ways to remember that we as it were made a vow to the Lord but also that he made a bunch of promises to us such that when we came out of the water it's like he said over us this is my beloved son or daughter in whom I am well pleased because he can say that because we join to Christ and he loves Jesus which means he says things to us I'm like good at it he is like you are amazing because you are in Christ and he speaks to us like he would speak to Jesus he loves us like he loves Jesus we get all Jesus benefits as a gift so remember your baptism live in light of it and bear fruit in keeping with repentance okay what's going to happen now is the band are going!

!! we're going to lift our voices in song to worship Jesus after that Sean will come and lead us through the Lord's supper together our chance to come and enjoy some of these things to come and sit at Jesus table and eat what he might put in front of us enjoy new creation food in bread and cup and enjoy the presence of Jesus together when I pray why don't we stand together if you're able Lord Jesus thank you that you chose to get in the muck with us thank you that you chose to make a new kingdom a new nation for us to be part of thank you that you defeated the enemy sin and death on our behalf and thank you that you made a new world and are making all things new so that we can enjoy a new way to be human a new way to live a new way to operate under your leadership and your friendship we are so grateful that you have done it all for us help us remember it help us remember that we have been washed and raised help us remember that we are new people so we don't need to sin help us encounter all that you have done for us as gift again and again and again and again help us bear free in keeping with our repentance we love you thank you that you first loved us we're so grateful amen let's lift our voices in song