

The Baptism of John

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[0 : 0 0] All right, well, it's a great day today because we're gonna celebrate the sacrament of baptism in just a few minutes. And in God's providence, as we start a new series, the Gospel of Mark, the very first passage that Mark wants to tell us about the life of Jesus is about baptism.

And Mark's Gospel is the shortest gospel. It's the earliest gospel that was written and it's action-packed. The stories are very quick. They're very short.

If you look at the other Gospels, Matthew and Luke in particular, and then you come back to Mark, one of the things that you notice is that Mark has no birth narrative, so there's no story about Jesus' birth at all.

Mark skips the first 30 years and he goes straight to year number 30 and gives you the last three years of Jesus' life. And he tells us in the first verse, I'm giving you the beginning of the good news, the Gospel.

And so Mark says, let's get right into it. Let's go straight to the good news. Straight to the big, the most important stories. And the very first story that he wants to tell us is about John the Baptist baptizing Jesus.

[1 : 0 9] Why? And so let's see three things this morning. First, the baptism of John. Secondly, the baptism of Jesus. And then finally, what that means for our baptism.

All right, so first, the baptism of John. Whenever there's a baptism, questions always come up. There's a lot of talk in the church between different Christian traditions about baptism.

And one of the questions that pops up regularly with baptism and comes straight out of our passage is what is the difference between the baptism that John the Baptist administers here and what we're gonna do today?

What's the difference between the baptism of John and what we're gonna do today in the name of Jesus? Now, Mark gives us permission to ask that question because he says in this passage, there is a difference.

So in verse eight, John says it. He says, I baptize you today with water, but there's one coming after me who's gonna baptize you with the Holy Spirit. And so there is a difference.

[2 : 1 1] And so the question here is very real. And the way to answer it is to notice the key really to these first 11 verses.

And that's the striking feature that is verse one and verse nine. Verse one says that Jesus Christ came into the world, the Son of God as the Messiah.

And then you get to verse nine and it says, and John the Baptist baptized him. And you're meant to say what? And the key to understanding verse one and verse nine and the relationship is verse four.

When it says John the Baptist was baptizing according to a baptism of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. And you put all that together and you have to ask the question, why in the world was Jesus Christ baptized?

Now, to think about that, we've gotta think about John and his baptism for a second. John is Jesus's cousin and he's in verse six. We find him here.

[3 : 15] All of a sudden he's in the wilderness and he's a bit of a wild man. So he eats locusts, he eats honey, he wears leather, presumably that's leather that he's tanned himself from animal skins.

And he's out in the wild and people are coming to see him. Now, when I was a kid in Mississippi, I grew up in Mississippi in America, we used to take locust shells and stick them on our clothing all the time.

And I know there aren't any locusts in Scotland, but locusts, technically what we had are called cicadas, but they're just like locusts. And when they grow their wings, they have an exoskeleton that they leave behind and they only stick the exoskeleton on trees.

And it's incredibly sticky. And so you can gather all these locusts skeletons, skins, and the kids for whatever weird reason, we stick them on our shirts and wear them around all day.

We were strange kids, I guess. Now, I never did eat a locust. John eats locusts. Why? You can't pass over the details.

[4 : 26] John eats locusts, he gathers wild honey from the bees, he wears leather that he's tanned himself. Why? What is happening? What is this?

And here's what's happening. In the Old Testament, it's all about the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, God would raise up a prophet, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, whoever it might be, and he would give them a message and he would say, go tell Egypt, go tell Israel, go tell Babylon, the message of judgment and mercy.

But they didn't just speak the words. God often told the prophet to live the message, to embody it. And so in one instance, for example, Isaiah remains completely naked for three years in order to tell Egypt that they are naked before the Lord exposed.

They're going to be judged. John is doing the exact same thing. He is the last Old Testament prophet. He's the last prophet of the Old Covenant and he's embodying the message that he's preaching.

You see, he lives in the wilderness because in the Old Testament, everybody knew the wilderness is the place that's symbolic of sin. It's not the garden, it's not the cultivated land, it's not Eden where humanity was meant to live, it's the wilderness, it's the place where Adam and Eve are dismissed to.

[5 : 44] And in the camp of Israel, on the day of Atonement, they would put all their sins on that one lamb, that one goat, and send that lamb out into the wilderness and say, that's where sin belongs.

And you see John, he's in the wilderness. And he's not there by himself, he's actually calling all of Jerusalem to come. And what is he saying? He's saying, this is where you belong.

So whether you're a religious person in the middle of Jerusalem or you're the prodigal son, prodigal daughter, you belong in the wilderness. You're wild. You see, you belong out here where sin belongs.

He's embodying his very message. And he's saying, he's saying that the condition for being prepared to see the Messiah is to first know that there's something wrong with my heart.

And he's embodying that message. And that's why Mark here quotes from Isaiah and Malachi. And the Isaiah quote in verse two and three, verse three says, the voice of one crying out from the wilderness, the place of sin saying, prepare the way of the Lord.

[6 : 48] In other words, he's saying, if you wanna be prepared to see the Messiah that is about to come, you've gotta know your condition. And your condition is that you're not clean, that you're wild on the inside.

And that's not a good thing. That this is the domain that you're meant for, the domain, this is the domain that you live in, the domain of sin itself, the wilderness. And so that's why when John baptizes people, it tells us in verse four exactly what it means.

It says he baptizes with a baptism of repentance for unto the forgiveness of sins. Meaning he's saying to people, when you come out into the wilderness and you know who you really are and you're willing to be baptized under my baptism, it is you saying, I'm not clean.

I deserve to be judged. This is the land that I deserve to live in, not the city, not the garden, but the wild. Because that's exactly who I am on the inside. Now, every Israelite, every Jewish person that came and saw this would have known what it meant because they knew that baptism was a message that was all about the Old Testament.

Two images that they would have seen. One, whenever somebody went down under the waters of the Jordan, they would have known it's all about the flood. It's all about the fact that in the Old Testament, when the water comes down, you drown.

[8 : 04] You know, if it's the floodwater of Noah or the Egyptians crossing the Red Sea, Israelites were scared of the water and they were scared because it preached a message.

I deserve to go under the waters. I deserve to be judged. The second image they also thought about was the fact that if you were to come to the temple, what did you have to do to come? You had to wash yourself.

You had to go under ritual washing. The priests had to wash. The people had to wash. Everybody had to wash. And it was saying, if I'm gonna come near to the Lord, if I'm gonna prepare myself to see the true God, I need to be cleaned.

I need to be washed. And so they all heard it. They all understood that this is a baptism of repentance. And that's the very first thing we learned here that baptism first says to us a message of repentance.

It says, it says, it preaches. It says, you need to be cleaned. That there's something wrong with you, not just on the outside, but also on the inside. Now, before we move on, it's never been harder to hear that, I think, than 2023, than the 21st century.

[9 : 09] Because we live in the age of authenticity, in the age of expressive individualism, where the culture at large tells every single one of us from birth that who you really are is on the inside.

It's how you feel. And if you're confident in yourself and you're confident in the way you feel, all you need is self-esteem. You don't need anything else. And so if you look to the inside, you'll find your true self, and you know that whoever it is on the inside is really you, and that's good.

And John the Baptist comes and says, you need to know that on the inside, you're wild, you're dirty. Baptism's about coming and saying, I know I need to be cleaned.

I know that's what on the inside is not right. It's not healthy. It's not good that I'm guilty, that I've done in heart things before the Lord and to other people that is not what God has called me to do.

The other reason it's really hard to accept this message, the baptism of repentance, is because it then turns and says, look for one that is to come.

[10 : 09] Meaning every single person that got baptized was saying, I'm willing to look for the Messiah and know that my life is not gonna be my own anymore. I know that there's something wrong inside of me and that when the one who is coming comes, I'm gonna have to give my life away.

It's not gonna be just for me anymore. We prayed together the Lord's prayer this morning from Matthew seven. It's a daily prayer. The Lord teaches us to pray. It's good when we all say it together.

That's how he intended it. But you know what it says? It says, forgive me, forgive us our debts today. That every single day, if you're a Christian today or you're not a Christian, you're coming and you're exploring or you're a believer, today is the day to say, Lord, forgive me my debts.

The baptism of repentance calls us every single day to remember our baptism and to repent and to say, Lord, I'm not clean, I need help. And that's the first message baptism preaches.

Now the second thing is this, the baptism of Jesus. John's baptism says, I'm unclean, I deserve judgment, I'm wild at heart.

[11 : 19] And then Jesus in verse nine gets baptized by John. Whoa, it's meant to be read as a shock. You're meant to say, why in the world would Jesus Christ be baptized?

And you're meant to say that because of verse one. Verse one says, the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the commentators, the Greek scholars will say that that is not really the first verse as much as it is the title.

So Mark actually intended the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ to be the title of the book. And so you're to read everything in the light of that. And the very first thing, he says, let me tell you exactly what I want you to know about the good news.

The word beginning in Greek is not a chronological word, it means the most important. So the very first principle, the most important thing I want you to know. And so he's saying the most important things I want you to know about the gospel, the good news.

And it's this, he says, Jesus Christ is the Christ. He's Messiah and he's the Son of God, he's God. And he's saying that in this man, the absolute has converged into the creaturely, into the human.

[12 : 30] And then you come to verse nine and it says, and John baptized him with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And you see the problem, the problem is, is Jesus saying when he gets baptized, I'm unclean.

You know, I need to be washed. I need help from the outside, because my inside is wrong. That was what John's baptism meant. And then Jesus gets it, he receives it. And John, it's even more confusing because John says it himself.

He says, I'm not worthy, verse seven, to untie this guy's sandal straps. But then he baptizes him. And it's so nonchalant and Mark's text in verse nine, you get four or five words.

In those days, Jesus was baptized by John. And he just passes by. Now, when you go to Matthew, you go to Luke, you go to the other gospels, you get more. And one of the things that you find in Matthew, and this is the key, the big idea, Matthew 314, John tried to stop this.

John said to Jesus, no, no, no, I cannot baptize you. He said, you should be baptizing me, but you want me to baptize you?

[13 : 46] And there it is. That's the key. That's the message of Mark one. John said it, John the Baptist said it. He said, you're coming Jesus to me and saying, me for you and you for me.

I should be getting the baptism of forgiveness and repentance at your hand, but yet you're gonna get it at my hand? And you see the message? He's saying, John didn't understand.

He comes back later and he asks questions. He doesn't get it, but he should start to see something. And that's this, Jesus Christ came to be our substitute. And John said it, he said, you for me and me for you.

When I should be baptized by you, you baptize me. And that was it. He's saying, I shouldn't be doing this, but you're taking my place. You're standing in for me.

I'm the one who has to say, I'm not clean, yet you're saying it. You're doing it for me. Now look, this is the principle. It's all across the gospel of Mark. Let me flesh it out just in one or two minutes.

[14 : 54] Back at the very beginning of history, Adam. He's in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve. And it's a place of perfection. It's a place of righteousness. It's a place of goodness. It's paradise and God is near.

He's there, he's with them. And then they get kicked out. They get kicked out for their rebellion and they go east of Eden. And for the rest of the Old Testament, one of the great themes, as we've already mentioned, is that humanity now belongs outside the Garden, east of Eden in the wilderness.

The wilderness is the place of sin. It's paradise lost. And that's exactly where human beings belong. But Paul calls this man, Jesus, the second Adam.

And when the second Adam comes into history, he doesn't go to the Garden. Where's the first place he shows up? The first place we see him in his ministry is in the wilderness.

You see, because Adam got kicked out and we got kicked out with Adam, Jesus goes straight to where we are. He goes straight to the wilderness. And he's saying in that, I identify with you.

[15 : 58] I'm here, I'm for you. Me for you and you for me. I will go to where the sinners stand. I'll go deep into the wilderness. Now you read on, you read the rest of the gospel.

And this theme starts to develop. He identifies with us. He identifies as us. So later on he's gonna sit down for dinner with tax collectors and with sinners.

And everybody around him's gonna accuse him and say, how could you do that? Because in the first century, to sit down and eat a meal with somebody like a tax collector is to act like you're in a covenant relationship with them.

And he's saying, I'm with them. I'm with the public center. I'm for them. I will take into myself everything that they are. But it gets, it's even more.

He goes and meets with the woman at the well, the Samaritan woman. And he takes her cup, illegal in Jewish law, to drink from the cup of a Samaritan.

[16 : 57] And he's saying, I am with her and for her. I will identify with her all the way to the bottom. Everything she's ever done. And it's not just, look, the principle is not just that he comes and he identifies with us and stands in our place.

It's not just that he takes in what's wrong with us, but it's also that he gives what is right to us. And so in Luke chapter five, the leper comes to him and says, Lord, if you will, if you will touch me, you can make me clean.

And every single person there would have known, would have been thinking the same thing. Lord, do not touch that man. If you touch him, you'll be unclean.

You won't be able to come near to God in the temple. And Jesus says, I will touch him, be clean. And the man became clean. You see, it's not just that Jesus takes what's wrong, but he gives what's right.

And you see that principle all throughout the entirety of the gospels and it begins right here on the day that he was baptized. Now let me be more specific as we close this point and move to our final point.

[18 : 03] The passage gets more specific than that. And it's down in verse 10. Jesus is baptized. He goes down into the waters. He comes back up again.

And it says that the heavens were torn open and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove. Now this passage is all about the Old Testament.

And for you Old Testament readers, for the reader of the first century, they would have seen it. Jesus goes down into the waters and he drowns. And then when he comes up again, all of a sudden the heavens are ripped open.

That's the verbiage. And there's one place in the Bible that the same language is used. And it's in the story of Noah's flood. In the story of Noah's flood, it says that the heavens were torn open and the waters came down upon the earth and drowned and judged everything.

But then when the water subsided, what happened? A dove. A dove was the great sign of peace. It was a dove that said, there's life again. There's new life. There's hope.

[19 : 08] There's resurrection in the midst of judgment. And right here, Jesus goes down under the waters of Noah's flood. What human beings really deserve.

And when he comes back up again, what descends? The dove, the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove saying, because this man has gone down and come up again, the world can have peace.

And you see, that means that the beginning of the gospel, as Mark puts it, is the exact same as the end of the gospel. What Jesus is doing here is he's telling you exactly what he came for.

He's telling you that he was always meant to go down into the waters. In other words, it's telling you at the very beginning of his ministry that he's come in order to go to the cross.

He's come. He lives in order to die. He's come so that he could be drowned by the wrath of God at the cross for every single one of us.

[20 : 07] And that when he comes back up again, he would change baptism forever. Now what's the difference in John's baptism and the baptism of Jesus Christ that we received today? And the difference is that when Jesus came up out of the waters in resurrection life, God, the Holy Spirit, went out into the world and said, peace be with you.

He changed Ambrose, an old pastor from Milan in the fifth century. We quoted him at the tip top of the bulletin, if you see it there. He said it like this.

He said, our Lord was baptized, not because he needed cleansing, but to cleanse the waters for us. Jesus Christ went down into the waters taking everything we deserved, and he was drowned for it.

But when he was there because he was perfect, he cleansed the baptismal waters. And he came back up again, and now he offers peace.

And from start to finish, that means that Jesus Christ came into this world because he loves you. He came to die, and he knew it.

[21 : 10] And it's all because he loves you and he wants you. And Isaiah said in the Old Testament, prepare the way, there's a forerunner, John the Baptist, he's coming, and he's gonna prepare the way of the Lord.

And when the Lord comes, there's gonna be a new road and a new path, and you see the path? The road that Jesus has created for us? It's the road that begins in the wilderness, exactly where you are, sinful, broken, cast away from Eden, far from the Lord, far from God.

And Jesus Christ has paved the path to the garden. And that's what Isaiah meant. And it's all because he loves you. Now let's close our time together, lastly, with thinking for just a moment about our baptism in light of that.

What we're about to do, what we're gonna do today is all because Jesus changed baptism here. And he changed it when he went down into the floodwaters of the cross and came back up again in the resurrection.

And we just said that when that happens here at the beginning of his ministry, he knows what he's about to face. He knows that he is the boy, and now the man, come to die.

[22 : 31] How could he endure it? How could he endure it? He's three years away, and at the very beginning of this three-year ministry, he goes down into death symbolically for us.

And he's saying, I know what I'm facing. I know what's coming for me. And the question I think we should leave ourselves with is how could he face this?

And we get the answer. And it's in verse 11. When the heavens open, it's not just the dove, the spirit, but a voice comes from heaven and says, you are my beloved son.

Very literally, you are my son, the beloved one. And with you I'm pleased. The Lord God our Father, he says to his son, you are my son, the beloved.

And I delight in you. I take pleasure in you. And it's the voice of the Father by which Jesus Christ is able to endure and go all the way to the cross.

[23 : 35] By the way, this is the first moment in Scripture where all three persons of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Spirit appear together on earth. All of us today are looking for identity.

We need an identity in life. And we need, as part of that identity, critical part of that identity, we need affirmation. We need to be told by somebody, I love you.

And as I mentioned earlier, it's a grand lie of the culture that we live in and large measure to say that all you need is your own feelings. All you need is your self-esteem.

That you can be who you are entirely from the inside out. And it's not true. And that's why we live in an age of such psychological disorder. We need external affirmation. We need to hear somebody in our lives say to us, I love you.

We were made for that. I know you. I know who you really are. And I love you at the same time. And Jesus heard that here at the beginning of his ministry at his baptism, Tolkien said it really well and the Lord of the Rings, the two towers.

[24 : 41] He said, the praise of the praiseworthy is above all reward. When you hear the praise of someone who is praiseworthy, there's no reward like it.

I was reminded this week of the meaning of baptism. That baptism is ultimately an identity marker. It is God the Father saying something to us.

I was reminded this week, thinking about that, of a great film, a great film and a terrible film. And it's the movie The Elephant Man.

It's about Joseph Merrick. He was born as a child radically disfigured. He's got tumors all over his body from birth.

And he's born in the late 19th century, the 1870s, 80s, 90s, something like that. It's a true story. And he's rejected by his family. He gets pushed into a carnival, traveling carnival show.

[25 : 42] And he was put on display. People would pay, you know, ten cents and they would view him. And he was beaten. He was enslaved, left many times for dead.

And he's in this carnival show. And the only reason he gets rescued is because he's beaten by his master once to the point of the end of his life. And his master realizes, if I don't take Joseph, the elephant man, to the hospital, he's going to die and I'm going to lose my financial, his marketability is gone.

I can't make any money off of him anymore. So he takes him to this hospital in London. And you see even in the hospital that people don't know what to do with him. They're afraid of him.

They don't want to look at him. And there's one enlightened Englishman, a doctor, there, a surgeon, who struggles with Joseph too, but then he overcomes it. And his name's Dr. Weber.

He's played by Anthony Hopkins in the film. And they develop a friendship. And it's the first friendship Joseph's ever had in his life. And Joseph has never been in anybody's home. He never had a home.

[26 : 48] And at the end of the film, he gets invited by Dr. Weber to tea, to afternoon tea. And Dr. Weber and his wife are there and I always choke up. This is, I don't, I never cry in sermons, very rarely, but we'll do, I'll do my best here.

They're there at afternoon tea. And Dr. Weber's wife says to Joseph, tell me about your mom. And Joseph says, I have a picture of her. So the one prize possession he has, a picture of his mother, he pulls it out, he shows it and they expected his mother to be in some way like him.

But yet she's normal, she's beautiful. And he says this, and here's the hard part. He says, if only my mother could see me now, I was such a disappointment to her.

If she could see me now with such lovely friends. And you know, he's saying, if she could see me now with somebody else loving me, maybe she would have loved me.

And you know, every single one of us want to hear somebody in life say, I love you. And we're seeking a lasting identity. You know, you can do it in one of three ways.

[27 : 56] You can get it from the outside, where it's all about your accomplishments, you know, your family life, your role, who you are, your vocational life. That's your outside identity. Some of us go all the way into that.

Some of us seek it from the inside. And we turn to our own feelings and self-esteem. Both those ways will end in disaster, because you can lose them.

If it's outside and you fail, you've lost your identity. If it's inside and you feel guilt and shame, you've lost your identity. And it's all because we were made for divine identity and upward identity to be defined and named by the living God.

And this day, this baptismal day, Jesus Christ heard from his father, you are my son, my beloved, and it means that at every single baptism, Christian friends, God says to you exactly what he said to Jesus.

You are my son, my daughter, my beloved, I delight in you. And when Jesus goes down into the waters of death and comes back up again, yes, he rescues you from your legal guilt.

[29 : 01] And all you have to do today is say, I'm not clean, I hope in this Lord. But it's more than that. It's also that he turns to you, the father, and says, hear me say to you today, you are my beloved son and daughter, I delight in you, I want you.

Joseph Merrick wanted to hear that from his mother. And I wish his mother would have loved him. But even she would not have been enough.

He needed even more. He needed to hear God the Father say it, because only when the Lord says it to you, can you have a love that will never go away, eternal love.

And that's exactly what you have in the Good News. And this is the beginning of the Good News. The last word, our confession, we subscribe here as elders and ministers to the Westminster Confession of Faith.

And in it, when it talks about baptism, it says that at baptism, you give your name away to Christ. You give your name away to Christ. And then it says to Christians who are baptized, remember your baptism as you watch another person be baptized.

[30 : 09] And you know what that means? It means that sometimes in life when you're at the end of your rope and you're facing the worst circumstances or you're tempted beyond temptation, the only thing you have is to say, I don't know what to do right now, but I gave my name away to Jesus Christ.

I have been baptized. God has said over me, I've heard him say, you are my beloved son and daughter. And today, if you've been baptized as you look on, remember your baptism, even if you were a baby, remember what God has said about you.

Because in baptism, it is not first our profession before him, it is first God's pronouncement to us. I have come to you, I have put my son in the waters of death for you, and he rose again, and now you can be named my beloved, my son, my daughter.

Let's pray. Father, we ask today that you would help us to remember the meaning of baptism and that today, Fay and Shwin and Dylan would hear you, oh God, open the heavens and say, you are my beloved sons and daughter.

And it's all because of this Lord, Jesus Christ. So Lord, I ask now that you would give us faith, hearts of repentance, hope in the Lord that was drowned but did not stay dead, and that for those who are looking on and wondering about this, that they would find this message to be life-giving and exactly what they need.

[31 : 49] And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.