

Matthew 3.13-17 'An Unexpected Baptism' Transcript

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A little while ago, John McIntyre, Caleb, and I were seated in a lawyer's office in Invercargill, having one of the final legal documents for the purchase of the church building witnessed by a solicitor. On the wall in the building where we were, there was a framed copy of what is called the Magna Carta. Upon doing a little bit more homework later on, I've since learned of the immense significance of this document, not least of which was a shift away from absolute monarchy to a system where the monarch's powers were constrained by legal frameworks. The Magna Carta was approved by King John of England on June 15, the year 1215, and John was, by record and definition, a wicked man. It was said of John, "Hell itself is made fouler by the presence of John." Yet, as one writer has said, few men have been less mourned, yet few legal documents more adored.

The Magna Carta's 63 clauses laid much of the groundwork for our modern legal systems, and it resonates to this day through the English Bill of Rights, the US Constitution, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, among others. The impact of this document illustrates that it is often the case in human history that countless numbers of people can be influenced for better or for worse by events and actions of others over which they have no control. The way the world is and can be can easily change by the course of action of a few who sign their signatures, who make decrees, even if it is just one man like King John with the Magna Carta.

I use this story of the Magna Carta to illustrate the profound impact of an infinitely more important event, which occurred when Jesus of Nazareth presented himself to John the Baptist for baptism in the Jordan River. I can hardly overstate for you the reality of this text as it affects you and me this morning. The course of human history changed even because of an act like this, where the Lord submitted himself to baptism in the Jordan. King John gave his stamp and seal to the Magna Carta, the effects of which have

shaped the world that you and I live in. Jesus Christ surrendered himself to baptism in the Jordan River, and our security of eternal salvation through him remains intact.

Jesus' baptism contains the significance of even life and death for all whom he represented. It holds the surety of our salvation. It holds the weight of Old Testament prophecy. It holds the weight of the new creation and even Jesus' suitability to be the substitute for sinners upon the cross. The unexpected baptism of Jesus is of such importance that our very gathering in this room this morning would not be without it. If you don't understand why that is, then this morning will be of great help to you and grant you a deeper appreciation of all that the Lord has accomplished for us.

Christ's obedience in undergoing the baptism of John is, in a single act, a foreshadowing of his entire life and ministry of obedience to the Father's will. A life in which it was his work to faithfully meet all the obligations upon him to save those whom the Father had given him. This is a brief summary of the significance of the passage of interest to us this morning. Moving into the biblical text, I want to put before you this first heading, of which I have three: Jesus' request.

We see that Jesus arrives at the scene of this revival event. The popularity of John the Baptist is such that many are thinking that he himself is the Christ, as we learn by reading John's Gospel, for example. John has even managed to attract the attention of the members of the Sanhedrin, as we recall. The Pharisees and the Sadducees have arrived prior to John, seeking to know who John was, and they were met with his rebuke. You remember we saw that in the last passage there in Matthew chapter 3, verse 7, where the Lord called the Sadducees and the Pharisees, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

Notably, Jesus has taken a much longer journey to arrive at the Jordan than the rest of the people that were there. You'll notice that the text says that Jesus arrived from Galilee. He has traveled undoubtedly from Nazareth, that is in the region of Galilee. This is where Jesus was raised, as we have learned. So Jesus comes, and in verse 13, Matthew states that he comes with this purpose: to be baptized by John. Jesus has lived in obscurity until this moment, as far as we can tell. The only words of Jesus from his youth that we have are found in Luke, where he says to his parents after they had lost him, "Why is it that you were looking for me? Did you not know I had to be in my father's house?"

Yet Luke summarizes those hidden years of Jesus before he is revealed here in the passage this morning in this way: "And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men." There's so much we don't know about Jesus' life, as he is 30 years old at this point. He had lived in obscurity for so long, but now Christ arrives; his public ministry as the Messiah shall begin.

And so, obviously, Jesus' arrival is a significant shifting point in the Gospel of Matthew. For now, he is revealing, as an adult man aged 30, the one whom he established earlier in his Gospel in Matthew 1 as the son of David, the son of Abraham, none other than the prophesied Messiah. This text, therefore, is, for lack of a better phrase, the opening ceremony of the Messiah's ministry. John undoubtedly knew Jesus, but he is shocked all the same that Jesus is here to receive this rite of baptism.

If we take John's Gospel alongside Matthew, we can deduce that Jesus' arrival occurred the day after the Jewish leaders showed up on the Jordan. So this is a multi-day event that's taking place here. John has just announced that Jesus, who comes after him, whose ministry he is preparing the people for, is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That's the language we find in John's Gospel of the same event. Jesus comes in, and he says, "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. His winnowing fork is in his hand. He comes to baptize with the Spirit of God and with fire," he says.

But now Jesus comes, and he says to John, "I wish to be baptized by you." It seems a little bit underwhelming almost, and John is probably confused, just as he is shocked. It's worth our observing here that the first ministry activity we witness of Jesus was one in which he substituted himself to undergo what was really for another to receive themselves. What do I mean here? Well, John the Baptist had assessed the situation correctly. See in verse 14, he says, "I have need to be baptized by you, Jesus, and do you come to me?" John had assessed the situation correctly. No sinner, even as John was a prophet, was in any standing to perform a rite such as this for a man such as Jesus.

And so John's logic is this: the baptism sign that he was commanded by God to perform was a preparatory sign, one in which the repentance of sins was symbolized—a washing of sins symbolized by the passing through the waters of the Jordan. A people spiritually consecrated for God that they might embrace the coming of the Messiah. And so now that Jesus is here, John is baffled that Jesus, whom he's announced that the people should look to, is here before him requesting to be baptized. Because Christ is the sinless man. He's the one without blemish or iniquity. He has no sins to confess. So what possible need could Christ have for baptism?

And John understands this, and that's why in verse 14, as I've just said, he says these words: "I have need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" We learn something here, don't we, about Jesus' purpose, his goal, and divine prerogative, don't we? Jesus switches positions with John. He substitutes himself for baptism, though it was John who should have received it from Jesus' hand. Jesus enters into a state of humiliation. Here we see what Paul describes in Philippians as a laying aside of his divine rights. He adopts a lowly position as a servant of the people whom he will represent in his life and his death.

You must understand that it was the Messiah's work from the outset, in every waking moment of his life, to substitute himself in the stead of sinners. To put himself in the place of his people for whom he came to redeem. To be obedient to every precept of the Father and so earn the righteousness that we required to inherit eternal life. This was Jesus' work as yours and mine representative. Jesus is the second and better Adam, after all. Our new representative head, our law keeper, our sin-bearer, our mediator. And so isn't it right to see him switching positions with John, saying, "No, no, permitted at this time that I be baptized by you."

Now, let's look at Jesus' baptism in verse 15, noting here we find Jesus' explanation as to why he must undergo this baptism despite the protest of John. So we read again, "But Jesus answering said to him, 'Permit it at this time, for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.'" One commentator of this passage rightly stated that when approaching the account of Jesus' baptism, there are always two questions in our minds. The first is, why did Jesus come to John for baptism? And the second question is, whatever did Jesus mean by this phrase here, "to fulfill all righteousness"?

Two questions, but they're really answered together. What Jesus means is that his full obedience to the Father's will was required of him. At that time, it was God's will that through the ministry of John the Baptist, the Jews consecrate themselves to God through repentance of sins and prepare to receive the Messiah who comes with his kingdom. There was the will of God, and Jesus is prepared to submit to the will of God at all times. He had no sin to confess, of course, but he aligned himself with his Father's expressed will and underwent the sign of baptism. Thus, Jesus coming for baptism is Jesus coming to be obedient. Jesus coming for baptism is a willingness to submit his life to the will of the Father.

Jesus would say in John 4, for example, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work." He is a faithful son. His delight was to do all that the Father required of him, and so in this way, he is the true and faithful Israelite. So yes, his baptism was necessary, but let's probe a little bit more at this phrase, "to fulfill all righteousness." What does righteousness in the context of Matthew mean?

Well, as another has said, in Matthew's Gospel, righteousness means simply conformity to the expressed will of God. To see this, we might substitute that phrase in a few occurrences of righteousness, and we'll hear its truth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for conformity to the expressed will of God, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of conformity to the expressed will of God, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Do you see? In Calvin's commentary on these verses, he so simply puts it this way: the general reason why Christ received baptism was that he might render full obedience to

the Father. He is conforming himself to the expressed will of God, so he says, "to fulfill all righteousness." But how can I, my goal now, is to ask this question: how can I make this truth of Christ's obedience a reality that is comfort for you in Christ? That is, to increase your affections for Christ. How do I really show you what is the reality of Christ's obedience?

Well, to do that, I need to briefly explain a biblical doctrine as simply and as carefully as I can. This doctrine we call the active obedience of Christ, the active obedience of Christ, alongside which is the equally important—and the two go together—the passive obedience of Christ. Don't be alarmed into thinking I'm about to dive on a technical side quest here. This is the application of Jesus' obedience.

If I were to ask you this question: on what basis can I be assured of my salvation from sins and entrance into the new creation, entrance to heaven? What's the foundation? What's the basis? If I would ask you that question and you responded, of course, "The cross of Christ, where he died for my sins," it's a good answer, and I would say, of course, amen. Now, this is true, of course; however, in a very real sense, the death of Christ on the cross, what we call substitutionary atonement, that's half the picture.

You say, "What do you mean?" Well, Christ's death on the cross is certainly effective to cancel out the believer's debt of sin and guilt, to make them no more, but you see, that's only half the story of all that Christ did in your place. Jesus undergoing the judgment for sins on your behalf on the cross—that is what we call his passive obedience.

Theologian Lewis Birkoff put it this way: "Jesus' passive obedience consisted in his paying the penalty of sin by his sufferings and death and thus discharging the debt of all his people." The sufferings of Christ did not come upon him accidentally nor as the result of purely natural circumstances; they were judicially laid upon him as our representative.

That's the passive obedience of Christ—his death on the cross for our sins. But you see, we require not only that Christ take and pay for our sins; we also require that God impute perfect righteousness to our account. To enter God's presence, you see, the sinner requires not only a covering for sin but perfect righteousness—perfect divine law-keeping. That was required for man to enter God's presence—not only the removal of his sin but positively righteousness, and that's a problem.

The active obedience of Christ speaks to this problem because the active obedience of Christ speaks to Christ's life of perfect obedience. In fact, it was Christ's perfect obedience to the expressed will of God that qualified him as our sin substitute, and so Jesus' perfect life was as much a necessary part of yours and mine salvation as was his death. Do you know that? Jesus' death on the cross and his life must be found together to accomplish our salvation. His active submission to the will of God, the law of God, in

which he perfectly met its every standard, so enabled that grand transaction to occur: my sin to him to bear, his righteousness to me to wear—the active obedience of Christ.

In his life, Christ merits for his people their access to God and the new creation. Perhaps one scripture we see this line of argumentation is Paul in Galatians 4, verse 4. He says this: "But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons." Do you notice that phrase that Paul used—that Christ was born under the law? That is Paul's shorthand way, his understanding, that perfect righteousness was required on Jesus' part to represent and redeem we who were born under the curse of the law.

And why is the law a curse? Not because there's anything wrong with God's law; it's a curse for us because we can't meet it. We can't attain to its standard, so we are under its curse. But Christ, who was born under the law for his people, lived for the righteousness that they required. So how does this relate to Jesus' baptism? Now you should see the depth of significance because Christ's obedience in undergoing the baptism of John is, in a single act, foreshadowing his entire life and ministry—a life in which he had to faithfully meet all the covenantal obligations upon him in order to save his people.

Christ carried in him the words of Psalm 48: "I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart." And as he prayed, think of Matthew 6, verse 10: "Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." So you might picture the baptism of Jesus at the hands of John the Baptist as representing his active obedience—his obedience to the expressed will of God. And then you might think of his passive obedience in respect to his true baptism that he had to undergo. What was his true baptism? It was death on the cross.

Jesus spoke about it this way in Luke 12, verse 50: "But I have a baptism to undergo—not John's baptism again—and how distressed I am until it is accomplished," he said. In that passage, Jesus connects the idea of himself being emerged, immersed, plunged through death into the wrath of God in judgment for the sins of his people, representing his passive obedience for us. So as you see Jesus being taken in baptism by John the Baptist, I want you to think of his active obedience—his obedience to the expressed will of God. And then, as you think of his death on the cross, where he underwent the baptism of God's wrath, I want you to think of his passive obedience for us.

In those two truths, you have the fullness of the gospel: a perfect life and a substitutionary death. There's our salvation; there's our hope.

We have a final heading: Jesus' sonship, verses 16 and 17. I will be brief on this one. Look again at the text: "After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the

water, and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on him. Behold, a voice out of the heavens said, 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.'

Given what we have just gleaned from Jesus' baptism itself, we're in a good position to comprehend the scene which unfolds immediately afterward. We read, therefore, of the divine witness. We read of God the Father speaking in an audible voice, God the Holy Spirit in the likeness of a dove, sealing and approving God the Son, who comes into the world. We note that it is particularly following Jesus' obedience that the Father's approval comes, where he says, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

We have, therefore, in this scene, a clear biblical example of the Trinity of God—all three persons of the Godhead—one God, three persons—here to witness God the Son. The language of the Father's audible voice here is a mixture of Psalm 2, verse 7, and Isaiah 42, verse 1. These are two well-known Old Testament messianic prophecies, each of which show one of two aspects of Jesus' role.

Psalm 2 is the one which speaks of the reality of Jesus' messianic kingship and his right to rule. Do you know what the crowning of Israel's kings was? When a new king was appointed in Israel, Psalm 2 would be sung. It spoke of the greater and true Davidic King to come, the Messiah. Psalm 2:6-8 says, "But as for me, I have installed my King upon Zion, my holy mountain. I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord. He said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will surely give you the nations to you as your inheritance and the very ends of the earth as your possession.'"

Christ's kingly rule. Furthermore, we also hear the overtones of Isaiah 42 coming through in the Father's attestation of pleasure in the Son. In the original context of Isaiah, it shows us that the ministry of the Messiah would come to be known first, before he was the king over all the nations that is to come, he would be the suffering servant. Isaiah 42, verse 1 says, "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."

Jesus, the God-man, is marked out as the divine king here, whose rule will reach even the furthest parts of the world. He is both King and Savior. As we come to a close, there's a final observation that we can make confirming relating to Jesus' divinity and sonship confirmed here after his baptism. It's an observation I learned from reading J.C. Ryle and his excellent book, "Expository Thoughts on the Gospels." If you want a book to buy this week and have beside your bedside, buy J.C. Ryle's "Expository Thoughts on the Gospel." It's one of the best Christian works you can get your hands on.

He says these words on this passage of scripture: "We read of no voice from heaven before this except at the giving of the law on Sinai with Moses. Both occasions were of

peculiar importance. It therefore seemed good to our Father in heaven to mark both with peculiar honor at the introduction of both the law and the gospel. He himself speaks." In other words, when here in Matthew 3 it says, "A voice out of the heavens said, 'This is my beloved Son,'" an audible voice from the heavens comes when God gave the law through Moses, and here, as Christ the Son arises from the waters of baptism.

I'm reminded of this passage, thinking about that it says, "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." You see, at the giving of the law, man's transgression increased; our iniquities piled high, no ability to keep the law, no means to atone for our transgression of it. But now comes God's thundering voice from the heavens again: once more, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is here, and he's announcing peace, and he's proclaiming forgiveness of sins and everlasting life to all who will believe upon him.

Shall we pray?