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Matthew 3:13 - 3:17



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discourse, Steve Gregg provides an exposition of Matthew 3:13-17, where Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. Gregg highlights the significance of baptism as a commandment from Christ, as well as its symbolism of being buried and resurrected with Christ. He also notes John's testimony of Jesus as the Son of God and how it relates to the concept of the Holy Spirit coming upon believers. Gregg concludes by emphasizing the importance of receiving the Holy Spirit as a source of power and guidance in the Christian life.

Transcript

Today, we're turning to Matthew 3, and beginning at verse 13, continuing our study through the life of Christ in the Gospel of Matthew. Last time, we were introduced to the ministry of John the Baptist. And now, we find Jesus and John encountering one another, possibly for the first time in their adult life.

It says, Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. And John tried to prevent him, saying, I have need to be baptized by you, and are you coming to me? But Jesus answered and said to him, Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness. Then he allowed him.

Then Jesus, when he had been baptized, came up immediately from the water, and, behold, the heavens were opened to him. And he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

Now, the baptism of Jesus has raised a lot of questions for Christians. The main one seems to be, why did Jesus get baptized? We are told that John's baptism had the significance of being an emblem of repentance. That people who were repenting of their sins were to be baptized in order to give indication that they were repenting of their sins.

This is something that Israel desperately needed to do, and John the Baptist had come to prepare the way for the kingdom of God, for the coming of the Messiah. And, therefore, one of the first orders of business when you're getting right with God is you need to

repent of your sin. And so that's what John was calling people to do, to repent and to be baptized, to indicate that they needed to repent and did so.

But the problem is, when Jesus came, of course, Jesus did not have any sins to repent of. The Scripture tells us that though Jesus was tempted in all ways as we are, in fact, the very passage following this, in Matthew chapter 4, describes some of the temptation that Jesus faced. Yet, the Scripture says he did so without sinning.

Jesus never did succumb to temptation and, therefore, was sinless. So, why should he come to John and be baptized when John's baptism was everywhere known to be an indication of repentance from sin? Well, we are not the first persons to be confused by this question. In fact, John was the first to be confused by it.

When John saw Jesus coming to him, John protested and said, What? You know, I ought to be baptized by you. Why should you be baptized by me? Now, Jesus' answer is not as clear, at least doesn't communicate as much information as we might wish. He simply said to him, Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.

In other words, in order for Jesus to fulfill all the things that God wanted him to do, he had to also be baptized. But why? That still doesn't explain why. Now, obviously, John wondered why and would have liked to have known why he had to baptize Jesus.

And Jesus didn't really give him a very clear answer. And I guess if John, the prophet, was not given a clear answer, perhaps we can't hold out for a real clear answer ourselves. But there are some suggestions that have been made.

There are some who feel that Jesus was baptized in order to prefigure his own death and resurrection. We know that in the New Testament, we are told that when we are baptized, that we are being baptized into Christ's death and we are buried with him in baptism, and we are raised with him in baptism. That is apparently saying that when we are immersed in water, it is to picture the idea of being buried.

And when we come up out of the water, that this picture is the idea of being resurrected from the grave. This is found, of course, in Romans chapter 6, verses 1 through 6, and also in Colossians chapter 2, verses 11 and 12, we find this taught. So, some have felt that since when we are baptized, it depicts the idea of being buried and resurrected.

That perhaps when Jesus was baptized, he did so in order to prefigure his own death and resurrection, just as many of the things that were in the Old Testament law prefigured Jesus' death and resurrection. Well, this is a possibility, but it is certainly not the only suggestion that has ever been made. A second possibility is that Jesus did so in order to identify with John's ministry.

You know, John was a very famous man in Israel in these days that we are reading about. John was the talk of every dinner table. Everyone in Judea was going out to be baptized

by him and to hear him preach.

And there were some who were wondering whether he might be Elijah or whether he might be the Messiah himself. John was all the rage in those days. In fact, in some ways, John was more famous than Jesus even later on, because we find that in Acts chapter 19, the apostle Paul comes to Ephesus, and there he finds 12 men who are acquainted with John's baptism but had not heard of Jesus.

And this is in Asia Minor, which is modern Turkey. There's also other times when Paul is preaching throughout that same region that he is trying to introduce Christ for the first time, speaking to the Jews in the synagogues. And he sometimes in his sermons mentions John the Baptist just off the cuff, as if they already know who he was, even though these people were hundreds of miles from where John had lived.

John apparently was much spoken about, both in Israel and eventually outside of Israel among the Jews. He was a great prophet. But if Jesus had simply started preaching on the next hillside or on the other end of town, many people might have seen Jesus and John as rivals or as having separate movements.

Jesus was obviously going to soon become all the rage himself. He was going to have multitudes following him. And some people would be tempted to compare him with John the Baptist as if the two were in competition.

In fact, John's own disciples, we see, had that very problem. In John chapter 3, we find that some of John the Baptist's disciples came to him and said, you know, that man Jesus is baptizing more people than you are. And they expected John to be jealous, but John said he wasn't jealous.

He said, I must decrease, he must increase. But the point is, John's disciples were probably not the only people who would be inclined to see the rise of Jesus' popularity and the decline of John's popularity as something of a rivalry, something of a competition between the two movements. And Jesus could, of course, prevent that by himself being baptized by John.

That is, coming and submitting to John's ministry in the sense to affirm him, to recognize John as one that God had sent and that Jesus himself, who was sent by the same God, was willing to receive the ministry of the prophet who came first from God. And this would be intended, perhaps, to dispel any notion that Jesus had come to rival John the Baptist. Rather, he came and submitted to John the Baptist's ministry and then went on his own as sort of an offshoot of it.

Well, that's another theory as to why Jesus was baptized by John. One another that has been suggested is that Jesus, we know, requires us to be baptized. We see this, for example, when he gave the Great Commission at the end of Matthew.

In chapter 28, Jesus said, Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In Mark's gospel, in chapter 16, Jesus said, Whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved. And on the day of Pentecost, when the people asked Peter what we must do, Peter said in Acts 2.38, he said, Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So we see that baptism is a command of Christ and of the apostles. And if we are required to be baptized, it is at least possible that Jesus did not wish to require us to go through anything that he was not himself willing to go through. Not that he needed it.

He didn't need to come to earth at all. And he didn't need to die either, because the wages of sin is death. But we need to die.

And so Jesus died so that he might taste death for us, the scripture says. He tasted death for every man. In a sense, Jesus went through things that were not altogether necessary for him to do, because it was our lot to do it, and he wished to identify with us in every way, and wished to set an example for us to follow in every point.

This is another suggestion of why Jesus might have been baptized. Because although he didn't need to be baptized for the same reasons we do, he expects us to be baptized, and he does not expect us to go through anything that he himself would not do also. And so he took the first steps.

And this was the very beginning of his public ministry. Just as when we are baptized, it is the very beginning of our Christian life. At least normally, that's how the Bible teaches it should be.

So this is yet another possibility. Now, the only answer Jesus gave to the question that John, or to the protest that John raised, was, he said, it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness. Now, all righteousness means all the things that are right in the sight of God.

And whether it was something that Jesus must be baptized in order to be fully right in the sight of God, or whether it's simply the case that God was requiring all righteous men to be baptized, and Jesus, wishing to do only what all righteous men must do, so that he might fulfill all the requirements that God has for righteous people, went ahead and did it. All of these suggestions probably have some merit. It's difficult to know if any of them really hits the mark, because the Bible doesn't really clearly tell us why Jesus had to be baptized, but there were, of course, these various suggestions have been raised.

Now, one thing that has been raised as a problem for some people, is that when John first saw Jesus, he apparently recognized who Jesus was. Because he says, you know, as soon as he came to Jesus, he said, or Jesus came to him, he said, I have need to be

baptized by you, and are you coming to me? Obviously, John is dealing with Jesus as someone he recognizes to be his superior, somebody who's not just like the other people. Now, John and Jesus were cousins, but it's very unlikely that they had seen each other in their adult life, for the simple reason that they probably didn't see each other much when they were children either.

John's family lived in Judea, and they were priests, and Jesus lived up in Galilee, and therefore they were at opposite ends of the country. They were not extremely closely related. They weren't exactly first cousins.

They were probably second or third cousins or something along the lines, and they may not have seen each other at all for that matter in their childhood, but if they did, it was probably very seldom. But John, when he reached manhood, which in Jewish custom would be at age about 12 or 13, John had gone off to live in the wilderness and to be separate, and it seems very unlikely that Jesus and he had seen each other after that point in their lives. And so, here comes Jesus, whom John may well have known from childhood, but had probably never seen as an adult, and therefore might be expected not to recognize, but John immediately recognizes him.

But that's not the biggest problem. The biggest problem is that John, in the Gospel of John, indicated that he had not known Jesus when he first saw him. Let me read you some verses from John chapter 1. It says in verse 29, Now, this testimony of John the Baptist that we're reading actually occurred much later than the actual story of the baptism that we're reading in Matthew.

In the Gospel of John, the Gospel of John skips over the actual baptism itself, and also it skips over the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted, which Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include. But John picks up the story after that. After the baptism, and after the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, Jesus came back to where John was, and it was on that occasion that John pointed him out to these people.

And he recollected to them that he had seen the Spirit come down. When he had baptized him, he had seen the Spirit come down on him like a dove. Now, of course, we read about that happening in Matthew.

As we read it in John chapter 1, it's just John the Baptist telling the story long after the actual event. But the difficulty is that John is saying that he did not know Jesus, and it seems to indicate that he did not know him until he saw the Spirit come down and rest upon Jesus as a dove. Well, that certainly sounds different than what Matthew says, because Matthew has John recognizing Jesus right from the beginning, before the baptism and before the Spirit came down.

Now, I will tell you what I think is the harmony of these two sets of information. I believe that when John says, I did not know him, in John 1.33, he's saying, I did not know who he

really was. I did not know him as I now know him.

Because at the very end, John says, and I have now seen and testified that this is the Son of God. Now, I believe that John, when he first saw Jesus coming, knew who Jesus was, in that he knew it was Jesus of Nazareth, his cousin, and I believe he knew that he was the Messiah, which explains why he was so reticent to baptize him and thought, rather, it should be the other way around. But I also believe that John did not fully grasp the concept that the Messiah would be a divine person.

Many of the Jews did not grasp that. Many of the Jews believed that the Messiah would simply be a descendant of David, and Jesus was that, but they did not have in their theology the idea that the Messiah would be supernatural or divine or someone from heaven. Now, they could have had that, of course, because the Old Testament prophets made reference to that fact in certain places.

But this was not well understood by the Jews. So, on one occasion, Jesus said to the Jews, he said, What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he? And they said, David's son, which was the thing that the Jews would say, that the Messiah would be David's son. And then Jesus said to them, Why then did David call him Lord? Now, we know why David called him Lord, because we know that Jesus, the Messiah, is the Son of God, as well as the Son of David, which is why David himself could call him Lord.

But the Pharisees were unable to answer Jesus, because they didn't understand that Jesus, or that the Messiah, would be the Son of God. They only believed he'd be a descendant of David. It's not clear how much John knew about this, either.

After all, there was a time much later in John's life, when he was in prison, where he was still having questions as to whether Jesus was all that he thought he was. And he sent messengers from prison to ask Jesus about that. I'm of the impression that when Jesus came to John, John had a defective understanding of who the Messiah was.

He probably had an understanding very much like that of the Jews of the time. And he knew Jesus was the guy, and so he recognized him as more important than himself. But he did not understand that he was divine and from heaven until he baptized him.

And why would that be? Because when John baptized Jesus, the heavens opened, and the Spirit came down in the form of a dove and rested on Jesus. And a voice from heaven said, This is my Son, in whom I'm well pleased, my beloved Son, in whom I'm well pleased. Now, notice that John says in the Gospel of John, that after the Spirit came down, John says, Now I know him, I can testify that he's the Son of God.

Now, he could have pointed him out as the Messiah before that, but he didn't know, I think, that the Messiah was the Son of God until the voice from heaven said, This is my Son, in whom I'm well pleased. And so I suspect that while John did know who Jesus was,

he didn't know very much about the theology of the deity of Christ. Perhaps didn't have any concept of the deity of Christ until the Spirit came down on him and the voice from heaven spoke.

And that would explain why John said what he did in the Gospel of John. Well, it says in verse 16, Then Jesus, we're back in Matthew 3 now in verse 16, Then Jesus, when he had been baptized, came up immediately from the water, and, behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon him. Now, this just speaks of Jesus seeing the Spirit coming down as a dove.

But in case we wondered whether this was seen by others, we already can answer that question from the verses we just looked at in John. John the Baptist saw the Spirit come down as a dove also. Did anybody else? Well, we don't know.

The Scripture indicates in one of the Gospels that Jesus came when all the people were baptized, which sounds like it could be after everyone had gone home. We don't know if there were others there or not. Whether Jesus was baptized publicly on this occasion, we don't know.

But even if he was, it would not necessarily follow that everyone present would see the dove and hear the voice from heaven. This could have been in the form of something of a vision that both Jesus and John, John being a prophet would be capable of having such visions, would see, but that the other people would not see. There was another occasion recorded in the Gospel of John, in chapter 12, I believe it is, where a voice spoke from heaven to Jesus and said to him, I have glorified my name and I will glorify it again.

Now, the Scripture says that there were people standing around when that voice spoke, but some said it thundered. Others said an angel spoke to him. And that means that while there was a sound that was heard by many, not all really understood it or understood the words.

It's not clear how much any audience may have seen or heard of this event of Jesus and the dove coming down on him and the voice speaking. But John certainly heard it, and John also saw the dove. And that is what he testified to later on.

Now, the Holy Spirit coming down on Jesus as a dove, I believe is, we could say, the point at which Jesus was baptized in the Spirit. He was not only baptized in water. He was baptized in the Holy Spirit.

The baptism in the Holy Spirit is sometimes spoken of in Scripture as the Holy Spirit coming upon a person. For example, in Acts chapter 1 and verse 5, Jesus said to the disciples, John baptized you with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. So he used the term baptized with the Holy Spirit.

But three verses later, in Acts 1-8, Jesus said, You will receive power when the Holy Spirit

comes upon you. So Jesus spoke of the Spirit coming upon the disciples as being the baptism in the Spirit. And now we read of the Holy Spirit coming upon Jesus and resting upon him and this happened at his water baptism, but he apparently was baptized in the Spirit and baptized in water on the same occasion.

There are other instances of this in the book of Acts happening to other people. Now, the baptism in the Spirit is an empowering of the Holy Spirit, an anointing that God gives to his children. And it is interesting, perhaps, that Jesus never did any miracles prior to this time.

He lived 30 years prior to this time, and no doubt there were many occasions where a miracle would have been helpful. But we read that he never did a miracle until he turned water into wine at the marriage feast of Cana in John chapter 2. There that is spoken of as the beginning of his miracle ministry. But that was after the Holy Spirit came upon him.

And no doubt it is because when Jesus did do miracles, he worked them through the Holy Spirit. Jesus said in Matthew 12, 28, If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. In Acts chapter 1 and verses 1 and 2, it tells us that Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, gave commandments to his disciples.

So we can see that the Holy Spirit worked through Jesus in his ministry and did the miraculous works that he did. And this is the beginning of that point in Jesus' life when he was baptized in the Spirit and the Spirit came down upon him and empowered him for future miraculous ministry. And then, of course, God the Father spoke from heaven and acknowledged Jesus as his Son.

This happened again at the Mount of Transfiguration much later in Jesus' ministry. However, here, he tells that this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Also, in the other Gospels, it has the voice saying, You are my beloved Son.

So, obviously, they record it as Jesus heard it and Matthew records it as John heard it. But here we have the Trinity, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit all in one place. And we will see what the Son and the Holy Spirit do next as Jesus goes off into the wilderness in the next chapter to be tempted by the devil.

But we're out of time for today's study, so we will turn again to these chapters when we come back next time. I hope you'll be able to join us at that time. Thanks for being here.

This is Steve Gregg.