

# OpenTheo

## Q&A#76 Why Was Jesus Baptized?

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Today's question: "Why did Jesus have to be baptized? Was Jesus' baptism a baptism of repentance?"

Within my discussion I reference Peter Leithart's book 'The Priesthood of the Plebs':  
<https://amzn.to/2S9rl3c>.

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<https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

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## Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, why did Jesus have to be baptized? Was Jesus' baptism a baptism of repentance? There are four gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism, three direct ones, and then one indirect within the Gospel of John. I'll read out these three accounts because I think each one of them sheds some light upon the question.

First is Matthew's, 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. Mark's account, it came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan, and immediately coming up from the water, he saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove. Then a voice came from heaven, You are my beloved Son, whom I am well pleased.

And immediately the Spirit drove him into the wilderness, and he was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan, and was with the wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him. Luke 3, now when all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also was baptized, and while he prayed the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended and bodily formed like a dove upon him. And a voice came from heaven, which said, You are my beloved Son, in you I am well pleased.

In John, the next day John saw or earlier on, and then they asked him, saying, Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet? John answered them, saying, I baptized with water, but there stands one among you whom you do not know. It is he who coming after me is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. These things were done in Beth-Av-Av-Reh, beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me comes a man who is preferred before me, for he was before me. I did not know him, but that he should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water.

And John bore witness, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and he remained upon him. I did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, Upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon him, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.

So there are a number of things that we can already see. Within John, it's very clear that it's associated with John the Baptist's witness. That John the Baptist was sent to baptize in part to reveal Christ and to be a witness to him.

The witness bearing of John the Baptist at the beginning of John's Gospel is paralleled with the witness of John the Apostle in the book of Revelation. John the Baptist witnesses to the first coming of Christ. John the Apostle witnesses to the second coming of Christ.

And in both cases we see a witness bearing at the very outset of the book. This witness bearing also creates a sort of continuity that John is the last of the prophets. We see this more in the Synoptic Gospels where John passes on the baton of ministry from the prophets to Christ.

That last great prophet bearing witness to the Messiah who comes on the scene is an important theme. And I think that is something that comes out in places like Matthew and elsewhere. That the witness bearing of John is preparing him for the way, passing on of the baton by the great last prophet.

There's also these themes of continuity are significant that it occurs on the banks of the Jordan. We see the ministry of Moses passing on to the ministry of Joshua at the banks of the Jordan. We see the ministry of Elijah pass on to Elisha at the banks of the Jordan.

And in both cases we have a desert prophet passing on ministry to a prophet who will lead a sort of conquest of the land. In the case of Joshua it's through the physical conquest of the land taking out the key cities. With Elisha it's the conquest of the land through miracles.

Whereas Elijah is associated with the wilderness, with the Sinai and with these struggles in the realm of the wilderness. For Elisha, he's very much associated with establishing order within the land. Same with Moses and Joshua.

Moses is associated with the wilderness and God's work in the wilderness and then that prepares the way. The Aramite prophet, the desert prophet, prepares the way for the land prophet who succeeds him. And this is the same thing that we see in Christ.

These succession narratives are also important as a handing on of the baton. The ascension of Elijah is the Pentecost of Elisha. And we see the same thing at the beginning of Acts.

At the beginning of Acts the ascension of Christ is the descent of the Spirit. The flip side of that is the descent of the Spirit of Christ upon the church. Just as the Spirit of Elijah descended upon Elisha, so the Spirit of Christ descends upon his church.

And that succession narrative begins the book and the core of its narrative. And that's something that we see within Luke and the other gospel narratives more generally. There is a passing on of the baton here.

That Elijah, Moses and John the Baptist pass on to their successors. And here the baton is passed from the last great prophet, the one who comes after him. Christ, his name is associated with Elisha and Joshua.

He's the one who's associated with God as Savior. His ministry is comparable to the ministry of Elisha and Joshua in many respects. He's the one who casts out demons from the land.

He's the one who goes throughout the land performing miracles. Miracles that remind us of the miracles of Elijah in a number of respects. And so we see a very close connection between these characters and it helps us to understand the nature of Jesus' ministry.

At his baptism, particularly within Luke's gospel, Jesus is also set apart as a priest. The priest was set apart from ministry at the age of 30. Christ, being about the age of 30, is baptized by John.

He's set apart for a priestly ministry and the connection of baptism with priesthood is something that we see throughout the New Testament in various places. That we put on Christ in baptism. This is a point of investiture.

It's also the point that having our bodies washed with pure water we can draw near. And Peter Lighthouse has done significant work on this in his Priesthood of the Plebs book, which is based upon his Cambridge doctoral dissertation. I'll give the link to that below.

I highly recommend that you read that. It gets into some of these themes. There are more things going on here.

The baptism is an association with the people and we see that the people come to John to be baptized. This event is not just a lot of individuals seeking baptism. It's a national event.

It's an event that has ramifications for the whole nation. And Christ is the leader of the nation, associates with the people. That Christ's association with the people takes place in a baptism of repentance and remission of sins is significant.

I think that there is possibly some sort of Day of Atonement theme going on here. That the people confess their sins at John's baptism. And among all these people being baptized, Christ comes to be baptized by John.

And as the people confess their sins, Christ is baptized. And then he's sent out into the wilderness. He's cast out into the wilderness in Mark's account.

This is an expulsion. It's an exorcism language. And he spends his time among the wild beasts and being tempted by Satan, tested by Satan.

Now, what could be going on here? I think this might be associated with the goat for Azazel in the Atonement ritual. The ritual of the Day of Atonement. In the ritual of the Day of Atonement, there are two goats that are offered along with a bull for the sin offering for the priest.

There are two goats offered for the people. And by lot, one of these is sent to Azazel and the other is for the Lord. Now, the one to Azazel is associated with the demons of the wilderness, with Satan himself in the wilderness.

And it's brought out to that realm, not as a sort of sacrifice to Satan, but because it belongs to Satan. It's associated with the sins and the trespasses of the people that have brought uncleanness and these high handed sins, particularly that need to be dealt with.

And that rebellion is dealt with by sending this goat into the wilderness to Azazel.

And Azazel is this demonic figure in the wilderness. And here we see Christ having been in this event as the people confess their sins. Christ is associated with them in that event.

He's baptized with them. And as he's baptized with them, he is sent out immediately, cast out into the wilderness to do business with Satan. The references to being cast over a precipice that we find in the penultimate and then in the final, in the penultimate temptation in Matthew's gospel and the final one in Luke's, I think might be associated with this theme, too, because the goat was often cast over a precipice.

And so Satan is, as James Jordan has put it, the lord of the trash heap. And so sending the goat into the wilderness is sending the goat to the one to whom it belongs, to the lord of the trash heap. And Christ being sent into the wilderness, he goes in association with the people, in solidarity with the people, bearing their sins into that wilderness to do business with Satan, to face off against Satan as the one who represents the people at that point.

And so that representation is significant, that baptism is an event of joining and Christ has become associated with the people and their sins. We see the events of joining in, for instance, the baptism of the Red Sea, that the people are baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea in 1 Corinthians 10, as it's described by Paul. And then we see in the account of Exodus 14 that the people believed Moses and the Lord, that this is an event that sets up a new relationship between Moses and the people.

And likewise, being baptized together in this event in the Jordan through the baptism of John, Jesus is associated with the people. Then he can bear their destiny and he goes out into the wilderness as the one who is associated with their sins. He does business with Satan, the Lord of the trash heap, as the one who is associated with the sins of the people, who goes bearing them like the scapegoat.

And then he recapitulates the testing of Israel in the wilderness where they committed their high handed sins that originally defined them as a rebellious people, people who stood against the law. The 40 years of testing in the wilderness are associated with 40 days of testing in the wilderness. The temptations are associated with the temptations and testings in the wilderness, as we see within 1 Corinthians 10 as well.

And these temptations are each answered with words from the book of Deuteronomy, which draw back to those testings in the wilderness. And so Christ, I think, is associating with the destiny of the people, with the sin of the people, bearing that out in the wilderness and then doing business with Satan and then bringing in a new form of faithfulness, that he's faithful where the people had failed. So he does, he takes their sin upon them in this baptism of repentance and then he goes out into the wilderness to this

realm of exile.

And then he also recapitulates their sin, but where they sinned, he enacts faithfulness and he fulfills righteousness at that point. Other things that are taking place here, I think that there are themes of baptism associated with the flood, the dove descending, the heavens being opened, the creation of something new out of the water. And Christ brings in these themes.

Christ's baptism in the Jordan is the beginning of his ministry. It's a marking out of a new reality starting. The spirit descends upon Christ like a dove.

He is the new land ascending from the waters of chaos, the waters of the flood. And so the flood of Israel's sin, of its exile, Christ ascends from those waters as the new land that emerges. And the dove descends as the dove descends upon the land after Noah's flood.

And this event is a marking out of Christ in the first stage phase of his ministry, particularly within Luke. We have a two phase ministry of Christ. The first begins with the baptism in the Jordan where he prays and the spirit descends.

The second begins and the testimony of John the Baptist. The second begins with the testimony of Peter and the death after the death of John the Baptist. And the spirit, Christ is transfigured on the mount as he prays.

And so these two events begin the two phases of Christ's ministry. And so that's another meaning for Christ's baptism. And in these sorts of cases, I think we see an accumulation of meanings, each one of them being focused or brought to a clearer emphasis within one gospel or another.

That Christ is the one who bears the identity of the people, bears their destiny. He fulfills righteousness where they failed. He's the one who deals with their sins and takes them into the wilderness to Satan.

And he's also the one who set apart for his own ministry. He's the one who succeeds from the former prophet. He's the one who sets apart the waters for baptism.

Christ's story is a story of three baptisms. It's a story of his baptism in the Jordan. It's a story of his baptism of his death.

It's a story of his baptism of the church at Pentecost. And in our baptisms, we are implicated in each one of these. We are implicated in the event by which he is set apart for his ministry in the Jordan.

We are implicated in his baptism of his death as we are baptized into his death so that we might share in his resurrection. And we are also implicated in the baptism of

Pentecost as we receive the Holy Spirit and are baptized into one body and all participate in that one spirit. And so Christ bears the destiny of the people, but he also establishes a new destiny.

And that new destiny is something that is really brought to the forefront within his baptism. He is set apart for ministry. He is the beloved son.

And as we are baptized, we are baptized into the beloved son. He sets apart the waters of the Jordan. He sets apart the waters of creation as waters of cleansing, of waters of renewal.

This is a new creation order, not just the dealing with the sins of the old creation, but the establishment of a new creation order. And for all of these reasons, I think it helps us to understand why Christ is baptized. Christ is baptized also because John the Baptist can then bear witness to him.

There is a theophanic event that John the Baptist sees the heavens opened and the spirit descend upon Christ. And this is like the prophetic witness that is born by Elisha. He sees Elijah, his master, depart and he sees the heavens opened.

He sees the chariots of fire and then the spirit descends upon him. What we see in John's witness is associated with the purpose of the gospel more generally, that it is a witness bearing. And John the Baptist witness is a very important part of that, which is one of the reasons why any apostle had to be there from the witness of John the Baptist on.

And also witness the resurrection of Christ. There is a succession of witness from the witness of the prophets, the last of whom is represented by John and then the witness of the church, the witness of Christ and the witness of the apostles. And this, I think, helps us to see the multifaceted reasons why Christ is baptized.

There are various other reasons that could be mentioned. I could elaborate a bit more upon his baptism of priesthood. I recommend you read Peter Lighthouse priesthood of the pebs on that.

But I hope that this goes some way towards answering the question. If you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you would like to support this and future videos, please do so using my Patreon account.

And the links for both of those are in the notes. Thank you very much for listening and for your time. Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow.

God bless.