

**“GOD’S BELOVED SON”**

John was out in the Judean wilderness, preaching and administering a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Scores of people were going out to him and being baptized by him. We do not know how many, but it was a lot. Mark employs hyperbole to make that point very clear: he says that all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to John. It was a moment of great revival in the history of Israel. But all of this would have been to no effect were it not for what is recorded for us in these verses. All of those baptisms by John, and every baptism performed ever since, including yours and mine, all of them would have had no more significance than an ordinary bath were it not for the fact that this one Man, the Man Jesus, had travelled from the town of Nazareth in Galilee out to the Jordan and submitted to the baptism being preached by his cousin John. It is for this reason that Martin Luther said that the New Testament does not truly begin with Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, but with his baptism in the Jordan (see Whyte, *The Walk, Conversation, and Character of Jesus Christ Our Lord*, 86). Jesus’ baptism gives meaning to every baptism.

But we might wonder why Jesus needed to be baptized in the first place. For that matter, we might ask why Jesus had to be circumcised as well. Both signified the same thing: the fact that a person’s sin has to be dealt with before they are can be accepted into God’s covenant family. But Jesus did not have any sin. He is the only sinless human being that

ever lived. This truth is fundamental to the Christian religion. If Jesus had not been completely free from all iniquity, then he would be no different than other men; he would be subject to the same judgment as all other men. He would not be able to be our Savior. But he is our Savior because, in the words of the apostle Paul, he “knew no sin” (2 Cor. 5:21). And this raises the question: if Jesus did not have any sin of his own from which he needed to be cleansed, why did he go out to the Jordan and submit to John’s baptism, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins?

He did it in order to make himself one with us as we stand in need of cleansing from our sin. By submitting to John’s baptism, Jesus was acknowledging that God’s judgment stands against us, and he was declaring his intention to endure that judgment on our behalf. This is why, in chapter 10 of Mark, Jesus refers to his impending death on the cross as a kind of baptism. When James and John asked to be given seats of honor in Jesus’ kingdom, he responded with a question of his own: “Are you able...to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” When Jesus submitted himself to John’s baptism, he was saying that he would endure the wrath of God that was directed against us. Jesus’ baptism functioned as his public acceptance of the role that God had ordained for him as the representative of all of the elect in the covenant of grace.

One of the central features of biblical doctrine is the notion that there are two covenants by which God relates to mankind: the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.

Adam represented humanity in the first covenant, the covenant of works, a covenant in which God promised life to Adam and to his seed upon condition of Adam's perfect obedience. Adam failed to keep that covenant, and his failure resulted in the ruin of the entire human race. But the Lord made a second covenant, a covenant of grace. He made this covenant with Jesus and with all of those whom he graciously elected to salvation in him. Jesus is the second Adam, the representative head in the covenant of grace. That is why he underwent baptism: because of his union with the elect in the covenant of grace. Listen to Thomas Boston's reflections on this covenant of grace:

“O admirable contrivance of help for a desperate case! Wonderful contrivance of a covenant of God with them who were incapable of standing in the presence of his holiness, or of performing the least condition for life and salvation! A new bargain for the relief of lost sinners made on the highest terms with those who were not able to come up to the lowest terms! Infinite wisdom found out the way, to wit, by a representative. The love of the Father engaged him to propose the representation; and the love of the Son engaged him to accept of it. Thus God had one, with whom he might contract with the safety of his honour; and who was able to fulfill the covenant, to the reparation of the injuries done to his glory: and sinners also had one able to act for them, and to

purchase salvation for them at the hand of a holy and just God.” (*A View of the Covenant of Grace*, 26-7)

Jesus’ baptism established his solidarity with his people. Apart from his baptism, our baptisms would be the height of presumption; they would represent cleansing from sin without having any basis for that cleansing in reality.

Mark also tells us about what took place immediately after Jesus’ baptism. As Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens opening and the Spirit of God descending upon him like a dove. What was the significance of this opening up of the heavens? The Greek verb actually describes something even more dramatic: the heavens being ripped apart. It is the same idea that is expressed by the prophet Isaiah when he prays, “Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down.” (Isa. 64:1) This rending of the heavens is not something akin to a hole in the ozone layer; it is the pulling back of the curtain that veils God’s presence from ordinary reality. God is omnipresent. He is always and everywhere present. But we cannot see him. Spiritual reality is hidden from our eyes. But on this occasion, the veil was removed and God’s glory was seen.

Interestingly, there is a very close parallel between this passage and a later passage in the Gospel of Mark. In Mark 15:37-39, Jesus’ final moment on the cross is described in these words:

“And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, ‘Truly this man was the Son of God!’”

Here again we see a connection between Jesus’ baptism and his death on the cross. The same Greek verb that in our passage refers to the opening of heaven is used in chapter 15 to describe the tearing of the curtain in the temple. Also, in both passages, Jesus is declared to be God’s Son. Such a close parallel begs for an explanation. In both of these passages, the barrier that separates man from God is removed and Jesus’ identity as the Son of God is made known. This is the reason why Jesus came into the world: to rip open the heavens; to remove the veil; to reconcile fallen people to God. And it was only because of his identity as the one and only Son of God that he was able to do this.

The other thing that happened when Jesus came up out of the water was that the Spirit of God descended upon him in the form of a dove. Why a dove? Various explanations have been suggested. But most likely, it is not the significance of this particular species of bird that Mark has in mind, but the connection that this image has with Genesis 1:2. In that passage, the Holy Spirit is described as hovering over the waters of creation. This would provide yet another example of how Jesus is to be understood as the beginning of God’s

new creation and of the redeemed humanity. Just as the Holy Spirit was instrumental in God's original work of creation, so also is he instrumental in the work of new creation, or redemption, that God is bringing about in Christ.

But why did the Spirit need to descend upon Jesus? Wasn't Jesus already filled with the Holy Spirit, since they are co-members of the Trinity? Yes, but this filling was for a specific purpose: to empower Jesus for his ministry as the Messiah. We need to remember that this took place just before the start of Jesus' public ministry. The outpouring of the Spirit is precisely what the Old Testament had predicted about the Messiah, as we read earlier in Isaiah 42. Furthermore, Jesus' filling with the Spirit establishes that he is the one who is qualified to baptize with the Holy Spirit, just as John had said in verse 8. Jesus receives the Spirit in order to empower him to complete his saving work; and then he gives the same Spirit to his church so that we might be united to Christ and receive all the benefits of his redemption.

As the Spirit descended upon Jesus, a voice from heaven said, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." Now, this does not mean that Jesus became God's Son at that moment. He has always been the unique Son of God. He fully shares in God's nature, which means that he is an eternal being. He has always existed as the second person of the Trinity. What is taking place here is that Jesus is being publicly declared to be the Son of God in our flesh. That had never taken place before. Furthermore, this was

the first time since before the fall of man that God was able to look upon a man and declare that he was perfectly pleased with that man.

This pronouncement of divine pleasure over Jesus is extremely important for us. It was not only for Jesus' sake that God spoke these words, but also for your sake and for mine. This declaration about Jesus is the basis for our acceptance with God. In Christ, we become sons and daughters of God. We are adopted as his children. As John writes, "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." (John 1:12) And as Paul has it, "when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Galatians 4:4-6) God looks upon every baptized, believing Christian in the same way that he looked upon Jesus Christ on the day of his baptism.

Through Christ, we have been adopted into God's family. We are his beloved sons and daughters. He is well pleased with us. Can you believe that? Think of all the ways in which your life really ought to be a disappointment to God. Think of all of your sins: every impure thought; every selfish act; every unkind word. Think of your spiritual dullness; your neglect of prayer and God's Word. Think of the fear that prevents you from bearing witness to the gospel. Think of all of these things, and more; and then,

think upon this great truth: God is well pleased with you. This is what your baptism means, if you are abiding in Christ through faith. It means that the words that God pronounced over Jesus at his baptism are the words that he pronounces over you.

These are great things. We need to meditate upon such things. It is in our nature to take for granted the blessings that God has lavished upon us in Christ. And this prompts John Owen to write,

“If we thought more of this glory of Christ, and of the wisdom of God in the restoration of all things in Christ, how much more diligent we would be in fulfilling our duties, and how full of gratitude we would be for the glorious privilege of being in this new family.” (John Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, 97)

If you have been baptized into Christ and are united to him by faith, then you really are God’s well-loved son or daughter. What more could you possibly ask? What else is there? Just consider what it means for God to look upon your heart, to look all the way to the bottom of your soul, and to say to you, ‘I find nothing here to condemn. Here I see only that which is pleasing in my sight. You are the son, you are the daughter, whom I cherish. I am completely satisfied and delighted in you.’ If you know yourself at all, then you know that God could never say such things of you were it not for the fact that

you are united to Jesus Christ. God will never speak those words of anyone except his only begotten Son and all of those who are found in him.

And so, brothers and sisters, it is absolutely crucial that we abide in Jesus Christ; that we stand in relation to him as branches in that tree; that we always remember that he is everything to us. Only Christ can provide us with the heavenly, life-giving sap that we need. Only in Christ are we God's beloved sons and daughters. Let your prayer, for all the rest of your days, be this prayer prayed by John Duncan, a 19th century Scottish minister, missionary and scholar:

“I pray the Lord my God to circumcise my heart to love the Lord my God, to love Him for his own essential, revealed excellencies with *devoted* love; that the Beloved [Christ]...may be mine, and I His, and I His, *and I His.*” (Stuart, *The Life of John Duncan*, 45)