



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 3:13–17; Luke 2:21–24, 39–40, 52

Gospel of Matthew

“The Baptism of the King”

TRANSCRIPT

For those of you who have been following along in our studies in the Gospel of Matthew, you will know that we have arrived at the passage which recounts the baptism of our Lord, which is found in Matthew chapter 3 verse 13 through verse 17. But in the light of the fact that this is the period of time at which our Lord emerges from his hidden years to begin his ministry, I think it is appropriate for us to read a few verses from the 2nd chapter of the Gospel of Luke also which details some of the events that transpired between the **time** of his infancy and the time of his manifestation to Israel.

So, will you turn over first with me to Luke chapter 2, and I want to read verses 21 through 24, then verses 39 through 40, then finally verse 52. Luke chapter 2 verse 21 through verse 24,

“And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called JESUS, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb. And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord; (As it is written in the law of the LORD, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;) and to offer a sacrifice

according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves,
or two young pigeons.”

Then will you notice the 39th and 40th verses which describe the return to Nazareth,

“And when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord,
they returned unto Galilee, to their own city Nazareth. And the child grew,
and waxed strong in spirit, and filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was
upon him.”

We should, I think, mention that in between there is described by Luke the visit that our
Lord made upon his 12th year to the city of Jerusalem. But then we conclude Luke chapter 2 by
reading,

“And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto
them: but his mother kept all these sayings in her heart. And Jesus increased
in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.”

Now let's turn over to Matthew chapter 3 and we read this brief account of the baptism of Jesus.
Matthew chapter 3 verse 13:

“Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him.
But John forbad him (or tried to hinder him), saying, ‘I have need to be baptized
of thee, and comest thou to me?’ And Jesus answering said unto him, ‘Permit it
to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he suffered
him. And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water:

and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him, and lo a voice from heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

May God bless this reading from his Word.

From the opening stages of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus to its close, the cross casts its shadow over the ministry that our Savior has had. This has been very tellingly caught in one of the great paintings of Holman Hunt entitled *The Shadow of Death*. The day is fast ebbing away, and the golden rays of the setting sun are slanting in through an open door, and the weary toiler at the carpenter’s bench, having just straightened himself from his stooped and cramped position stretches himself for a moment. And the sun, catching the out-raised arms throws on the wall behind the dark lines of a cross. In this way Holman Hunt has stressed the fact that even in the hidden years of the obscurity of the Lord Jesus, before he began his public ministry, his decease at Jerusalem was inevitable.

Now this is, I think, very obvious and strikingly before us when we come to the baptism of the Lord Jesus. For the shadow of the cross is evident in the baptism, with its vision of the dove which is the bird of sacrifice and the voice about the suffering servant of Jehovah which comes from heaven.

It is of course seen all throughout the ministry of the Lord, and we shall be commenting upon it as we go along in our exposition of Matthew, but here it is very strikingly brought before us, and there can be hardly any question but that it is brought before us to stress the fact that the significant thing about the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ is that one day he shall accomplish the task that was set before him in the Old Testament Scriptures concerning the suffering servant of Jehovah.

And that great chapter, Isaiah chapter 53, is probably as beautiful a presentation as one can find before the event itself of the substitutionary sacrifice of the penal satisfaction which our Lord shall accomplish.

I am sure that as you read this account of the baptism, particularly if you think a little bit while it is being read, that you would grasp that this event would produce some acute difficulties for the early church. For in the first place, and most obviously, anyone who had heard the claims that the Christians made for the Lord Jesus, that he was the sinless Son of God would have immediately asked a very embarrassing question just like this. They would have said, “Did not John the Baptist, who you have called the ambassador of the Lord Jesus, come to accomplish a baptism for the remission of sins? Was not that his purpose? Did not he himself say that that was what he was doing?” And the Christians, of course, would have to answer, yes.

And then they would follow with, well then, if John the Baptist was baptizing with a baptism that was for the remission of sins, then why was Jesus Christ baptized? Is that not, in itself, a confession of the fact on his part that he needed some sins to be remitted? And so the baptism created, undoubtedly, acute difficulties for the early church.

Now in spite of that, we still have the account of the baptism in the Scriptures. It’s evident then, that while it may have created acute difficulties for the early church, still, those who have given us the New Testament have given us these passages that would have embarrassed the church. And that in itself is also testimony to the reliability of these records of the ministry of the Lord Jesus. It is surely not a church invention.

Furthermore, some individuals who might have been somewhat sympathetic to the ministry of the Lord Jesus might have had difficulties with the baptism, because if you will search through the Old Testament, and read, particularly, with a great deal of attention the Messianic passages, those also have to do with the coming of the Spirit upon him—for this event is clearly the time when the Holy Spirit came upon him for the inauguration of his ministry. I speak of passages such as Isaiah chapter 42 and verse 1, and Isaiah chapter 61 and verse 1, in which it is stated that the Holy Spirit

will come upon the Messiah for the carrying out of his task. You'll discover as you read those passages and ponder them that in not one of them is any reference made to a baptism in water of this Messiah who is to come. And furthermore, in the Rabbinic writings themselves, there is no evidence of any understanding whatsoever, that the Messiah, when he came should undergo a water baptism. So you can see that this event created acute difficulties for the early church. But nevertheless, it is given to us a testimony to the reliability of these records that we have.

I might also ask the question, how did the apostles become acquainted with the significance of the baptism, and how did they become acquainted with what actually happened? For if you read the accounts you gain the distinct impression that not all of what happened here was revealed to everyone present. It is possible that the voice from heaven was heard by both John and the Lord Jesus, and it is certainly stated by the accounts in the New Testament that they both saw the dove coming and resting upon him. But this event is not altogether a public event. Then one might ask the question, well, how did they come to an understanding of the events of the baptism?

There is a passage over in the 20th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew in which the Lord Jesus speaks about his death. It's one of the famous passages, and you know it, because its climactic statement is one of the great texts on the meaning of the death of Christ: “Even though the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.” But in the preceding context, before that Matthew chapter 20 and verse 28, we read in the 23rd verse, “And he saith unto them, ‘Ye shall drink indeed of my cup and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with. But to sit on my right hand and on my left is not mine to give; but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared by my Father.’” So he speaks there of a baptism that he is to be baptized with.

Now that baptism is clearly his death, and I suggest to you that if the apostles had not come to understand the significance of his baptism until that time, it was at that moment that the Lord Jesus revealed to them the true theological significance of his baptism.

The baptism is the second of the crises in our Lord’s life, if we may call his birth the first. And it is narrated in all four of the Gospels, from which we gather that the early church thought a great deal about the baptism, and thought a great deal about the fact that John the Baptist was the one who had performed this act.

In between there lie the many years which we call the hidden years. The Lord Jesus had been born some time around 6 B.C., so it was now 26 A.D., and while there has been an account of an event that happened when he was 12 years old (to which we shall refer in just a moment), most of those years between his infancy and the time of his manifestation to Israel are passed over in Holy Scripture.

They create for us a lot of questions, and these are not questions over which we have a great deal of difficulty, but they are questions which arise out of curiosity. Most of us, I’m sure, have a great deal of confidence in the fact that the Lord Jesus lived a perfectly sinless, holy, obedient and submissive life in the years that intervened between the time of his infancy, the brief time at which he came to the city of Jerusalem when he was 12 years of age, and then when he manifested himself to Israel in the beginning of his public ministry at the baptism.

The hints that we have of the life of the Lord in the meantime are hints that only yield to us a whisper of the obedience that undoubtedly characterized his life. Let me, for just a few moments, recount some of the significant things that one may gain, not only from the New Testament but from the things that we know about life around him at that time. We have read the passage from Luke chapter 2 in which the details of his infancy are recorded. He was circumcised as all males in Israel were to be. He was then presented in the Temple, and after that he began life’s progress from immature holiness to mature holiness.

The Epistle of the Hebrews speaks about the fact that the Lord Jesus learned obedience by the things which he suffered. He entered into the experience of obedience. Now the Scriptures are very careful. They do not say he learned to obey as if there was a time he did not obey, but by virtue of the discipline of those years he learned to obey. Rather, the Scriptures say he “learned obedience”

in the sense that he experienced obedience, and through the experience of obedience throughout the years of his life, he came to the place that the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews calls “his perfection.” And having become perfected, he became the author of salvation to all who call upon him. So the life of our Lord Jesus Christ was a life of growth, from immaturity—not sinfulness—from immaturity to perfect maturity in the things that may be called obedience.

His childhood, we have already read from Luke chapter 2, was characterized by physical development; he grew in stature. It was characterized by mental development; he grew in wisdom. And it was characterized by spiritual development, for he grew in wisdom and in favor with God and men.

When he was 12 years old, he was brought to the city of Jerusalem, for that which may anticipate a bar-mitzvah kind of service, but he came, he entered into the Temple, and informal questions were passed back and forth between our Lord and the leaders that were there. And he surprised them with his probing questions and the pellucid answers that came from him. Now I think it was a very appropriate thing that it should be manifested at that time he had been instructed properly as any good Jew would have been in the things of the Lord. And through his own study of the Holy Scriptures, he amazed those who were the leaders in the Word of God.

I do not think our Lord Jesus came to that time of questioning with the idea that he would try to stump the experts. It was not that at all. It was the case of a person who was characterized by the kind of humility that characterizes God, and there he shared with them the things that God the Holy Spirit had taught him.

His youth was characterized by, we might gather from the clauses there, by the fact that he was a favorite with both men and God. We must remember that the Lord Jesus, so far as we can tell, was never offensive on account of his person. He probably has been the most offensive man who has ever come to live among human beings. But the offensiveness of the Lord Jesus is to be traced entirely to his teaching. It was not his personality. It was not that he was the kind of person who normally stirred up others. But it was the teaching that caused **men** to react against him. He was a

favorite among the youth, undoubtedly. He was a favorite with the adults. He had the perfect balance of the kind of holiness that characterizes a true servant of God and the love that should also characterize a true servant of God. He was the God-man. A mystery it is true, but no problem.

When we think about his land and his home and his kin, we are sometimes inclined, I think, to put our Lord Jesus into the wrong background. We must not think, for example, that when he lived in Nazareth, he lived in a kind of area which we would have called “the sticks.” Nazareth was not that kind of place. It was a small place, but it was not like the places we call the sticks. It was not like Arkansas, for example. [Laughter] And it was surely not like Ft. Worth [more laughter]. It was a place where all of the roads from, the primary road from the north to the south passed right through Nazareth, and nearby passed the road from the east to the west.

In addition, the Romans maintained a military garrison there, so that this was no backwater in the history of those ancient times—the city or the village of Nazareth. As a matter of fact, if you had lived in Nazareth, you would have had a very good idea of what was happening in the whole of the world. The Romans, for example, in their coins, depicted the leaders of their empire and the great events that were transpiring. This was characteristic of the Roman coins. And many of those coins had been found in the area of Nazareth, but they were scattered all over the ancient world, and so they, as the inhabitants of that little village looked at those Roman coins, they could tell what was happening in the world by asking a few simple questions. And we know, for example, that the Lord Jesus was a person who was interested in coins. He took one once and said, “Whose image and superscription are upon it?” So we must not think our Lord Jesus was brought up in a kind of backwater of human history. That is not true.

Furthermore, he had a bustling family life. Through Joseph he had relatives in the south and also through Mary. He also had relatives in the north, so that, as you know, he was related to the Apostle John. He was also related to John the Baptist. He was connected with the royal line, the line of Judah; he was also connected with the priestly line. So you can see that through his relatives and

through his contact with what was happening in the land that he was no stranger to the great events of human history.

As far as his occupation is concerned, not a great deal is said in Holy Scripture. In fact, recently, I just read an article in which a man contended that it is not even certain that our Lord was a carpenter. But we do have a statement in Mark chapter 6 and verse 3 which does seem to suggest that our Lord Jesus did do some of the work of a carpenter. For we read in Mark chapter 6 and verse 3, “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joseph and of Judas and Simon?” And so what he did, then was to tread the path of daily duty and dependence upon God.

We don’t have any details of the things which transpired as he was carrying out his occupation, but we can be sure from what follows that his life was as sensitive as a shadow, that it was as selfless as a shadow in the purest sense, and that his life was characterized by an obedience to God that is as obedient as a shadow. We know that he was submissive to his parents from the statement that we have read in Luke chapter 2. That was one of the great tests that was placed upon him. And he went down to Nazareth, and he was placed in submission to his mother and his father.

His physical appearance has always interested us. There is no description in the Word of God of the Lord Jesus, and so consequently, all types of representations have been made. Some have pictured him as big and strong, and others have pictured him as a kind of person who was like the Jewish people that we know today. We only have some hints from ancient times of what he must or may have looked like. We do know that the Rabbis had definite standards for the outward appearance of the proper Jew, and particularly for a teacher. They could criticize very harshly if the standards were not met. But we have no record that they ever scorned the physical appearance of the Lord Jesus. He measured up to their standards, in other words.

And one of them was that the reflection of the divine presence could only descend upon a man of tall and powerful stature. In the light of this it would seem likely that the Lord Jesus was a person of powerful stature, and that he also had a reasonable height. I doubt very much that he could have played linebacker for the Dallas Cowboys [laughter] or for the Pittsburgh Steelers, for that

matter, as some of our popular speakers might have suggested from time to time, but it's evident that he was a man's man. And this is, I think, confirmed by the fact that if you will look in the Gospels and read of the accounts of the journeys that the Lord Jesus took over that land on foot, he must have been a true man's man. But what he looked like, we do not know.

Now this raises a question which I know is a rather tender question with some people. And I hope I won't upset you, but I also hope that what I say will have some influence upon you. There are lots of you, no doubt, who have pictures of the Lord Jesus all over your house. And I have not been in many of your homes yet, and so you have plenty of time to take them down [laughter], but this raises a rather interesting question.

Thomas Carlyle said a long time ago that men never think of painting the face of Christ until they lose the impression of him upon their hearts. I'm not at all sure that it is a good thing for a biblical Christian to have a picture of Jesus Christ. Now I know what you might say. You might say to me the same thing that Martin Luther said, “If I have a picture of Christ in my heart, why not one upon canvass? Now that makes good sense until I reply to you—at least I think it does—the picture in your heart is capable of change and improvement as through the study of the Holy Scriptures you learn other things about our Lord Jesus. But the picture that you put in a frame isn't capable of any change or improvement. That picture upon canvass is fixed and it holds to the old conceptions which we ought to outgrow.

And one of the things that we should remember about our Lord Jesus Christ, and about God for that matter, for these remarks of mine pertain ultimately to the question of idols. One of the characteristic things about our Lord Jesus, about our great triune God is his incorruptibility. And there is no possible way for us to ever to represent by a thing the incorruptibility of our God. Consequently all pictures, all idols, fail to do justice to the character of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now we have one picture in Scripture of the Lord, and it is in Revelation chapter 1. That picture is a picture in vision form.

Let me make one final comment about his knowledge and understanding. How did our Lord become instructed in the things that evidently made up his knowledge? Well we know that the Jews were amazed at the knowledge of the Lord Jesus. When he spoke, they said, “How knoweth this man letters, never having learned?” And that word, *grammata*, is the word that is used by Festus with reference to Paul when he says, “Paul, much learning has made thee mad.” So it is evident that they looked at the Lord Jesus, they heard him, and as they heard him, they became convinced that he knew letters, that is, he had learning. But at the same time they did not know the source of it. So evidently, our Lord Jesus had not gone through the same training that normal individuals went through in the secondary levels.

I am quite sure that Joseph took him upon his lap and began to teach him as all Jewish fathers were supposed to do when he was a little infant. Incidentally, in Judaism—and I think this is more scriptural—in Judaism, the children were taught by their fathers and not by their mothers. It is our responsibility, men, to be sure that we engage in the instruction of our children. One of the saddest things in evangelicalism today is the fact that in the home the instruction of the children—in Christian homes, I mean—in evangelical Christian homes the instruction of the children is left to the female member of the family, the mother.

Now the mother should know the truth, but she should also be taught by her husband. And her husband should have the grasp of Holy Scripture that makes him, truly, the spiritual head of the home. And if I were you, and you were unmarried, and you were a young, beautiful girl, I would look around for a man for my husband who would be spiritual head of my house and who would also instruct my children in the things of God.

Joseph instructed our Lord Jesus, undoubtedly, in the things of God since he was an infant. He pointed him to the Holy Scriptures as the source of truth, and the Lord Jesus took to that. And he began to study the Scriptures for himself. And probably he is the greatest illustration of the truth that the secret of the Lord is with those who fear him, and he will show them his covenant.

The Lord Jesus, then, was instructed by Joseph and the Torah, and in the Old Testament he became a student of the Word of God, day by day in the Old Testament Messianic passages it is suggested that God awakened him and taught him the Scriptures. And the result was he came to the knowledge and understanding that caused the Jewish people to see in him a man with an education. He undoubtedly was able to speak Aramaic. He was undoubtedly able to speak Greek, and we know that he could read Hebrew, because that he did in the synagogue in Nazareth.

But now there comes the time when, at the carpenter’s bench, word comes to the Lord Jesus that there is a man who is out ministering the Word of God, a man with a strange garment, but who is calling upon Israel to repent for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand. Word comes to him that this man is not a teacher like the other kinds of teachers that Israel has been having recently. He’s not a mumblor of dead men’s ideas like the scribes and the Pharisees and the Sadducees. He is not a person who goes around saying the same old things that have been said.

He is not a courtier-like orator, such as might have come out of Jerusalem and Judaea, for in Jerusalem is where the cultured Jews lived. This man came off of the desert, it was said, and he came with such a vital and convicting ministry that hundreds of people were streaming out from Jerusalem and Judaea to be baptized by him in the Jordan. It’s evident that the Lord Jesus recognized in this ministry of John the Baptist, as it came to him, the voice of prophecy. Now, after 400 years, the voice of prophecy which had been silent has begun to speak again.

So, he put down his carpenter’s tools and he left in order to be baptized by John. He traveled the distance from the northern part of the land down to the southern part of the land, and finally he comes to John to the Jordan and stands in the line of those who are to be baptized by the great Baptist. But as the Lord Jesus comes to John the Baptist, there suddenly—as this rude, strong, man of rock who had smitten the consciousness of many of the Israelites—there suddenly comes to him, as he gazes upon the face of our Lord Jesus, the conviction that the one who stands before him is a man who should be baptizing him, rather than he baptizing him.

And so John speaks out. He tries to prevent him. He tries to hinder him. The text, the tense of the Greek word is a conative [use of the] tense which suggests that he tried to prevent the Lord Jesus from being baptized. He who had smitten many a conscience had his own conscience smitten by this majestic, pure man of sorrows.

But the Lord Jesus replies, John, “Permit it to be so now, for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness.” The reply of the Lord Jesus is evidently directed toward the purpose of his Messianic ministry. John, it is the purpose of God that we fulfill all of the things that are set forth in Holy Scripture for us. And even the king must demonstrate by the act of baptism his own heart preparation for the kingdom that he is to bring. These, incidentally, are the first words that the Lord Jesus speaks in the Gospel of Matthew: “Permit it to be so now, for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness.” And then John permitted him to be baptized. And immediately, things began to happen.

“And Jesus, when he was baptized went up straightway out of the water, and lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending upon him like a dove and lighting upon him.” That was the visible act. The dove from heaven that descends and lights upon him.

Now there is a message, of course, in this, related to the character of the dove. The vision that he saw of the Spirit, like a dove, was intended to demonstrate the fact that he was the ideal Israelite, for the dove was the symbol of the Nation Israel. And furthermore, the dove was the symbol of sacrifice; it was the bird of sacrifice. And so what we have here, then, is in vision form the statement that the Lord Jesus is the ideal Israelite, and his ministry is to characterized by sacrifice. It’s evident that what is meant here is that he is the representative Israelite. In a moment, words will be spoken that indicate that he is the elect Israelite.

You see, all that we’re building up to here is the full-fledged teaching of the Apostle Paul that the Lord Jesus is the last Adam and the representative man to whom if we are related and saved and to whom, if we are not related, we are lost forevermore.

And then God himself takes up the activity of the herald. John had been heralding all over the land: “Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand.” Now God himself says, John, step aside. I will become the preacher, and God himself takes the herald’s office and says, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.” Now, remember that at the baptism of the Lord Jesus, the sonship that he enjoyed was not revealed to him for the first time, there. It was confirmed there, and he was installed in his Messianic office, but this was not the time when he became a Son. The purpose of these words from heaven is that they form a kind of coronation formula of the suffering servant of Jehovah.

Now it’s important for me to say a couple of sentences here, and I hope that you will get what I want to say. We don’t have time to explain it in detail. These words that came from heaven, “this is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased,” would have struck responsive cords in the heart and mind of anyone who is a student of the Bible. Now if you’ve been listening and reading this text, and this has not struck some responsive cord in you, it is because you do not yet know the Scriptures well enough.

This is my beloved Son. That expression is taken from Psalm 2 and verse 7 in which in that great Messianic Psalm we read: “Thou art my son, this day have I begotten thee.” So this is a statement from the messianic Psalm of the King which speaks of his messianic rule. Furthermore, the next words, this is my son, my beloved one in whom I am well-pleased, these are words that are taken from the 42nd chapter and the 1st verse of the prophecy of Isaiah, in which we read, “Behold, my servant whom I uphold, mine elect—elect and beloved were synonyms—beloved, mine elect, in whom my soul delighted.”

So what God has done, in this word that come from heaven, is take a phrase from the 2nd Psalm which speaks of him as the messianic king, and then a phrase from the 42nd chapter of the book of Isaiah in which the first of the great servant songs is given, which reach their climax in Isaiah 53, in which the servant of Jehovah suffers vicariously, and as a penal satisfaction for the sins

of sinners. And God has put the two together. It is just as plain as if he were to say, he is the king and it is his task to suffer and die. This is my beloved in whom I am well-pleased.

Now some ask the question, what about those hidden years? Was it possible that at some point the Lord Jesus had some thought that was not scriptural? Is it really true that we can say he was the sinless Son of God? Well now this statement at the beginning of our Lord’s ministry, from the Father in heaven, sets the seal of perfection upon the hidden years. He says, this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased. So we have no question about those years which have intervened about which we know nothing.

Incidentally, this statement, “this is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased,” does not really mean, primarily, “this is my beloved Son in whom I am *delighted*.” But the meaning of the Greek word is, rather, this is my Son in whom and upon whom my pleasure rests, or **on** whom my plan for the salvation of both Israel and the Gentiles is centered. So what it means then is not, I’m very pleased with him, I’m happy over him. It means he is the one in whom I am going to accomplish my purposes. It is a word that has to do with the plan and purpose of God.

Well now, then, let’s ask as we close our message this morning, what is the theological significance of the baptism. It is an enigma to people. If you attend many of our Baptist churches, and many of our independent churches, and many of our Methodist churches perhaps—any of the churches in which there is a stress upon water baptism (and there ought to be that)—you will frequently find people saying, in order to exhort them to come to believe in Jesus Christ and to be baptized in water, “We want you to follow the Lord in baptism.”

It’s a very striking thing that that expression to follow the Lord in baptism is absent from the New Testament. There is so far as we can tell no justification whatsoever that the baptism of an individual believer—who in that baptism confesses his faith in Jesus Christ—there is no reason whatsoever for relating that to the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ. The only parallel between the two is the fact of baptism. That is all.

What does this baptism mean? Well first of all, it means that the Lord Jesus is identified with the Nation Israel. It is his positive submission to the kingdom program which he himself is inaugurating and bringing to its conclusion. It is his confession that he, as the king in heart, is prepared for the coming of the kingdom. There are no negative acts of sin or thoughts of sin for him to confess, but he makes a positive declaration of his submission to the will of God as any Israelite should have done through the ministry of the forerunner, John the Baptist.

Second, it is his inauguration into his messianic office. The Spirit coming upon him is the sign and the seal of the messianic era. In Isaiah chapter 42 verse 1 and in Isaiah chapter 61 verse 1 it is stated, concerning the messianic ministry of the Messiah, that it would be characterized by the possession of the Holy Spirit. In Isaiah chapter 42, God says, in the first of the prophecies, “I have given my Spirit upon him.” It is his enduement with power for the carrying out of his Messianic task. All of his preaching, all of his carrying out of miracles, and finally his act of redemption upon the cross are carried out under the direction of the Holy Spirit of God.

Incidentally, of course, all of our acts and all of our lives are to be carried out under the direction of the Holy Spirit of God.

And finally, it is the illustration of the goal of his ministry. The fact that the Lord Jesus went down into the water and came out of the water is a vivid representation, a kind of mirror of the event of the cross where he went into the waters of baptism. And the fact that later on he calls the suffering of the cross his baptism is striking confirmation of the fact that right here, at the beginning of his ministry, in the light of the voice from heaven, he’s the suffering servant of Jehovah. He goes down into the water and comes out of the water as if to say the great ministry of the Messiah is his suffering and his death.

May I just say one final, ethical word? I remember reading a cartoon in the *Wall Street Journal* many years ago of two ladies who were standing beside a long and beautiful automobile, the front tire of which was as flat of a tire as I have ever seen. And they were standing out in very elegant clothes, and they had very elegant coiffures, and one is standing by the side of the other one and saying, “I

know the theory of changing one.” And I think it’s important, always, in the ministry of the Word of God that we do ask the ethical question—I do not say practical because, as you know, I think all theology is practical, more practical than the ethics, and more fundamental.

But I want you to notice the words the Lord Jesus spoke when he said in verse 14, “I have need to be”—which John said—“I have need to be baptized by thee, and comest thou to me?” These words are a kind of summary of the divine initiative of the good news. Will we ever get over the fact that it is Lord Jesus who has made the first move in coming to us? We must never forget that all the work of God is the work of a God who takes the initiative.

Claude Montefiore was a well-known Jewish scholar. He once said that he set himself to discover if there was anything **really** new in the teaching of the Lord Jesus, something which no Jewish prophet or rabbi had said before him. He said he studied the writing of the New Testament, and finally he came to the conclusion that there was one thing that was distinctive in the teaching of the Lord Jesus. And it was the picture of the good shepherd going out in to the wilderness in search of the lost sheep. For him God had been seeking the ones who had turned to him. But he said the idea of a God, who as a shepherd, went out into the wilderness to seek lost sheep was a “new figure, and one of the new excellencies of the gospel.”

Now I would disagree with Professor Montefiore, because if you read the Bible the story of the divine initiative is found on the first pages of the book of Genesis. For there we read that when Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, that God came down into the garden and said, “Adam, where art thou?” And so from the beginning of Genesis chapter 3 all the way through to “the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which is lost,” we have the story of a God who seeks those who are not in fellowship with him. But I would agree with Montefiore that it is most assuredly and emphatically one of the glorious excellencies of the gospel of the Lord Jesus.

So I say to you this morning, do you know this person whom to know is life eternal? Have you any sense of the initiative of God coming to you, revealing his Son as the suffering servant of Jehovah who has accomplished a redemption for sinners? And have you, by the Holy Spirit, been

brought to the sense of your own sin? And have you come for redemption to the Son of God? May God in his wonderful, effectual, distinguishing grace seek you out and bring you to him. May we stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] We are grateful, Lord, for these incidents in the life of our Lord Jesus which so beautifully unfold the great principles with which Thou dost deal with us.

We thank Thee that Thou has sought us. We did not seek Thee. We would not have sought Thee. And we thank Thee, too, that Thou has sought us through the ministry of the Lord Jesus which is completely adequate for all of our needs. We praise Thee that redemption comes through him, that guidance comes through him, that true spiritual joy comes through him, and we thank Thee that a safe and rewarding destiny awaits the saved.

O Father, if there is someone in this auditorium who has not yet come to Christ, we sense, O God that there is, may the Holy Spirit work in their hearts through effectual grace, to the creation of life and faith, and the possession of hope through the redemption.

Now may grace, mercy and peace go with the saints.

For Christ's sake. Amen.