

MATTHEW 3:13–17. (EHV)

Then Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized by John at the Jordan. But John tried to stop him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, **“Let it be so now, because it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness.”** Then John let him. After Jesus was baptized, he immediately went up out of the water. Suddenly, the heavens were opened for him! He saw the Spirit of God, descending like a dove and landing on him, and a voice out of the heavens said, “This is my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with him.”

Today we commemorate the baptism of Jesus. This gives us an opportunity to talk about one of the most important, and one of the most debated, subjects in Christianity today—baptism. For roughly the first 1500 years after Christ’s ascension, the practice of baptism was relatively uniform in the Christian church. But ever since the time of the Reformation, it has been an occasion of debate and division.

So let’s use this opportunity to take a closer look at what the Bible says about Jesus’s baptism, and also what it says about our own.

1.

Jesus came to be baptized by John the Baptist at the Jordan River. There was of course nothing special or holy about the Jordan River, in and of itself, and Jesus’s being baptized there did nothing to make that river special, in and of itself. John used that location simply because it was a prominent and dependable source of water. Sometimes people will get baptized or even rebaptized in the Jordan River today, if they take a trip to the Holy Land, because they think their baptism will somehow be more special that way. But what makes baptism special is not the source or location of the water, but God’s word and institution.

Luke tells us that Jesus came to be baptized around age thirty, and that in and of itself causes people attack infant baptism. But that is not a valid argument. Jesus lived in the transition period between the Old and New Testament. Baptism had not yet been instituted when he was born. God’s covenant of circumcision was still in force, so Jesus was circumcised, not baptized, when he was a week old. Plus, most of those who use Jesus’s baptismal age to attack infant baptism were themselves baptized long before they turned thirty years old.

But by the time he turned thirty, his relative John the Baptist had begun baptizing by the Holy Spirit’s guidance, and Jesus was about to begin his public ministry which would culminate in his winning of forgiveness and salvation on the cross. So he came to John and asked to be baptized.

John understandably tried to stop him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?” Everyone whom John had baptized before this was a sinner in need of forgiveness, and John knew that he too was a sinner in need of forgiveness, and that Jesus was the only non-sinner on earth. If anything, he thought, Jesus should baptize him, not the other way around.

But listen to Jesus’s answer: “Let it be so now, because it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Notice that Jesus doesn’t say it is necessary—not for him, since he was the sinless Son of God—but he does say that it is proper for the fulfilling of all righteousness. Since the Holy Spirit not only forgives sins, but also gives strength to obey God’s will and lead a godly

life through baptism, it would not have been proper for Jesus *not* to make use of that divine power available to him in baptism, especially since Jesus was not only true God, but also true man, and the devil would be tempting him in earnest once he began his ministry.

So John consented and baptized him. And if anyone doubts that baptism has power, look at what happens immediately after Jesus's baptism: "Suddenly, the heavens were opened for him! He saw the Spirit of God, descending like a dove and landing on him, and a voice out of the heavens said, 'This is my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with him.'" The apostle Peter describes what happened this way in Acts chapter 10: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power." And he did so precisely through baptism.

Baptism clearly had power for Jesus and benefitted him. He was now fully equipped to begin his teaching, healing, and saving ministry.

2.

But it didn't just have power for Jesus and didn't just benefit him. The Bible is clear in many places that it also has power for us and benefits us. In many ways, the same thing that happened in Jesus's baptism is what happens in ours.

First, though, we should answer the question: If baptism isn't just for Christians who are thirty years old, then who is it for? The apostle Peter answers that most concisely in Acts chapter 2, when he says that God's promises in baptism are for adults who repent and believe the gospel of Jesus and for their children. No age restrictions are given anywhere in the New Testament. In fact, we are told on a couple different occasions that the apostles baptized entire households. And again, it bears repeating that the regular practice in the Christian church up until the time of the Reformation was to baptize not only adults who converted to Christianity, but also their children soon after they were born. To cite one example, a pastor named Cyprian wrote around 252 AD that he and sixty-five other pastors unanimously agreed that baptism ought not to be withheld from anyone born of man, no matter how young.

So what exactly does baptism do for us? Why is it something we should not withhold from anyone who desires it or from any Christian's children? Again, the apostle Peter says it most clearly in 1 Peter 3:21 when he says, "Baptism saves you." As I said before, it is not the mere water that saves us; it is God's word and institution that is connected with the water that gives baptism its power. And we all need saving no matter how young, because Jesus himself says that sinful flesh gives birth to sinful flesh and that therefore no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit, namely baptism (John 3:5-6).

To draw a comparison: Think of how in the Garden of Eden, God told Adam, "Do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You will surely die" (Gen. 2:17). The devil then told Eve, "Go ahead and eat from the tree. You will not surely die" (Gen. 3:1-5), and he tried to explain away God's prohibition. The devil said the opposite of what God said. So too Peter, an apostle called and appointed by God's Son, could not be more clear or straightforward when he says, "Baptism saves you." So when people say, "No, baptism does not save you," and try to explain away Peter's words, it should be clear, in that instance, that the devil is really the one speaking.

The apostle Paul reinforces Peter's words when he says in Galatians that in baptism we were clothed with Christ and given faith in him (Gal. 3:26-27).

But God doesn't just forgive our sins in baptism. He also gives us power over sin and the devil, power to lead a God-pleasing life. Paul tells us that in Romans 6, when he writes that through baptism we are no longer slaves to sin. This is an extremely comforting thought for a Christian, because there are many times throughout Christians' lives when temptations plague them, and we sometimes feel helpless against them. But Paul reminds us that, if we were baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we are in fact able to say no to the devil and resist temptation with God's power.

I like to think of these two aspects of baptism as the morning and evening power of baptism. In the morning, I can say, "I am baptized into Christ. I have been given God's own power over the devil and temptation. Today I will strive to live to God's glory." And in the evening when I look back over the day and see how often I failed to make use of that power and gave into temptation in thought, word, and action, I can say, "I am baptized into Christ. I have been washed clean of all my sins through the blood of Christ and am God's beloved child with whom he is well pleased, for Jesus's sake." My head can then hit the pillow with a good conscience, and I can wake up in the morning with fresh strength to renew the battle against the devil and sin.

The late theologian Erdmann Neumeister sums up well baptism's power and blessings in a hymn that he wrote. Someone once described his hymn as a child standing next to his adult protector shouting down the neighborhood bully, the bully in this case being the devil. Listen to two stanzas of his hymn:

God's own child, I gladly say it:
I am baptized into Christ!
He, because I could not pay it,
Gave my full redemption price.
Do I need earth's treasures many?
I have one worth more than any
That brought me salvation free,
Lasting to eternity!

Satan, hear this proclamation:
I am baptized into Christ!
Drop your ugly accusation;
I am not so soon enticed.
Now that to the font I've traveled,
All your might has come unraveled,
And, against your tyranny,
God, my Lord, unites with me! (*Christian Worship Supplement 737*)

Baptism had power for Jesus, and it has power and blessings for us. Thanks be to God for that power and those eternal blessings, through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen.