

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER FIVE

MATTHEW 3:13-17

THESE few verses reveal the relation of the King to heaven, as they tell the story of His attestation and anointing.

The paragraph commences with the word “**then**,” which connects it with what has preceded, and reminds us that these events took place in a time of general consciousness of sin, and of that great moral movement throughout the whole region consequent upon the ministry of John the Baptist. “**Then**,” the King came out of seclusion to manifest Himself to men. The voice had cried in the wilderness, and the way of the Lord was thus made ready, and His paths made straight. At the set time, the King came from privacy into publicity. From the quiet seclusion of the years spent in Nazareth, He came to inaugurate His work and assume His office.

In these few verses there are three matters for our consideration:

- The baptism of the King;
- His anointing;
- The Divine word concerning Him.

Notice that it is carefully stated that He came “**to be baptized**.” His coming was of set purpose and for a special reason. Considering the note of John’s message, and the meaning of his ministry, this action on the part of Jesus at once arrests attention and arouses inquiry.

John had been preaching repentance, and his baptism was the baptism of repentance. All men had crowded to him the men of the city, of Judaea, of the wayside, and of the whole region of Jordan. Among the rest, Jesus of Nazareth set His face towards the place where the prophet’s voice was heard and the prophet’s baptism was being administered. He set His face, moreover, not as one of a curious multitude going to listen and observe, but for the special purpose of being baptized. We ask with wonder and amazement, Why should He be baptized with the baptism of repentance? That is the question to which we are to attempt to find an answer.

I. In looking at the baptism let us first notice its place in the life of Jesus

Forgetting His office, which is the supreme matter in this Gospel; turning our attention from the fact that He is King, anointed of God from eternity for this work, we will simply look at Him as the Man as He has appeared before us in the story of His genealogy and birth.

The life of Jesus was absolutely sinless. If He were not sinless, then we have no Gospel. All the value of His dying depends upon the virtue of His living.

Why, then, did the Sinless submit to a baptism of repentance? John looked into the face of this one Man, among all other men coming to his baptism; and with the keen, quick insight of the truly inspired seer, he saw the difference. He had been baptizing many men as they had pressed to him, and as he looked upon their faces he had seen in all of them the evidences of anxiety for repentance. But when this Man came to him, One among a crowd, so like them that the crowd did not distinguish Him, there was yet a difference. John said, “**There standeth one among you, whom ye know no.**” And then John looked at Him and said, “**I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?**” John, looking into His face, became conscious of the absolute perfection and sinless spotlessness of this Man. He was amazed and arrested; he felt as if he dare not lay his hands upon that Man to immerse Him in the waters of the Jordan.

So far as the human life of Jesus is concerned, John was perfectly right in that feeling. There was no place for John’s baptism in the life of Jesus; He had nothing to repent of, no sin to be put away, the putting away of which was symbolized in this ablution in water. If Jesus was simply living out a human life to consummation, which would henceforth be pattern and ideal only, then that baptism was out of place, having neither value nor meaning.

Then we must go further if we are to understand the meaning of the baptism of Jesus. If it did not occupy a place in the life of Jesus, did it occupy a place in the mission of the King? The question suggests the answer. When John was reluctant, and felt he could not lay his hands upon Jesus to baptize Him, Jesus looked at him and said, “**Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness**” that was John and Himself “**Thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness**” thus it becometh you to act with Me, and Me to act with you for the fulfillment of righteousness.

In that statement we find the meaning. The supreme element in the baptism of Jesus was the identification of the Sinless with the sinner.

He Who had no sin to repent of, took His place among those who had sin to repent of. He Who was sinless, went down into the baptism that was the portion of the sinner.

In Isaiah 53 we read, “**He was numbered with the transgressors.**”

There, in baptism as in incarnation and birth, and finally and for consummation, in the mystery of His Passion, we see the King identifying Himself with the people over whom He is to reign, in the fact of their deepest need, and direst failure. This chapter of Isaiah is the one in which the picture of the Servant of God finds its culminating glory.

The prophecy of the forerunner, which was fulfilled in the ministry of John, is found in chapter 40. In chapter 42 is recorded the beginning of the new movement, “**Behold My Servant,**” and from there onwards, **the Servant of the Lord** is presented.

In chapter 53 we see the Servant of the Lord rejected, bruised, cast out; the suffering Messiah, the King that men will not have. Towards its close we have the story of His Person, and of His ultimate victory, and in verse 11 we find these words, **“He shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied. By his knowledge shall my righteous Servant justify many; for He shall bear their iniquities.”**

These words, **“My righteous Servant [shall] justify many,”** are the explanation of the meaning of Jesus when He said to John, **“Thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.”**

By identification with them in sin and suffering **“He bare the sin of many.”** He identified Himself with them in their sins, and **“was numbered with the transgressors;”** and therefore **“By his knowledge shall my righteous Servant justify many.”**

His knowledge of Himself is His first-hand knowledge (see John 2:24, 25), and so is knowledge of the need, knowledge of the remedy, and consent to all such knowledge is involved. **“He shall bear their iniquities.”**

The King was facing the problem of obtaining His Kingdom, and He faced first the sin of man. He submitted to the baptism of John, indicating by this symbolic action His identification of Himself with His people in their sin, in order that He may put that sin away, and build and establish the Kingdom of God, and so fulfil all righteousness.

His going down into the waters of baptism was a consent and a prophecy.

- It was a consent to the only method by which the King could save from sin;
- It uttered the prophecy of that final baptism towards which His face was set through all the days of public ministry the baptism of His Passion.

Jesus referred to personal baptism only twice subsequently. Both Matthew and Mark tell the story of some office-seeking disciples who asked to sit one on the right hand, and the other on the left in His Kingdom. And He looked at them and said, **“Are ye able to drink the cup that I shall drink of? or to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”**

Perhaps they thought He was speaking of that past baptism in water, for they said, **“We are able.”**

We know He was looking on to that other baptism of which the first baptism was the foreshadowing and the prophecy the Passion Baptism. That was His great baptism.

Only on one other occasion did He make reference to His own personal baptism. In that wonderful soliloquy of His recorded by Luke, when, surrounded by His own disciples and oppressed, He broke out into these words, **“I am come to send fire on the earth; and what will I, if it be already kindled? But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!”**

John baptized in water. Jesus came to baptize with fire; but He could not baptize with fire, until He Himself had been baptized in the whelming waters of death.

Thus the King is seen commencing His public ministry.

There lie behind Him the quiet years of seclusion and preparation, the years in which He has done the Will of God in the commonplace. Now the great crisis has come. He will presently enunciate the laws of His Kingdom, personally exhibit the benefits of that Kingdom; and enforce the claims of His Kingship. He knows that the culminating work will be the Cross; that these multitudes, baptized of John, will reject Him. He knows that He cannot win them by His example and by preaching, but only by the way of His dying.

He knows the issue of sin. These sinners on the banks of the Jordan are making necessary His death - death in its profoundest sense; and as He watches them going down to those waters, He goes with them, and in that whelming in the Jordan He typifies and prophesies that death-whelming through which He, the Innocent, will presently pass in order to fulfil all righteousness, to cancel sin, to banish it, to make it not to be; that He may build His Kingdom on the foundations of righteousness, and “bring forth the topstone with shoutings of Grace.”

By His knowledge as Isaiah said long before by His knowledge of the need, and of the real meaning of sin; by His knowledge of the way by which men may be redeemed, His soul consents to an identification that shall issue in death, the supreme character of which shall be expressed by the terrible words, “**The pains of hell gat hold upon Me.**” And as He goes down into these waters of baptism He consents to that mission, and formally commits Himself to the cause of man, for man’s saving.

This baptism of Jesus has no application to us.

We rob this passage of all its significance when we say that as Jesus was baptized, therefore we ought to be baptized. Let us not take hold of this great and marvellous passage, and use it in a small and unworthy way. We have something to do with this baptism of Jesus, but it is a baptism that we cannot be baptized with - save by identification through His grace. “**Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of; and with the baptism that I am baptized withal shall ye be baptized.**” That was a word of infinite love.

There are two applications of the great baptism that of judgment and of death, and that of life and of fire. We share only in that of life and fire. That, He can only bestow upon us by the way of judgment and of death; by the mystery of His Cross. Thus He fulfilled all righteousness. By His baptism He committed Himself to men, and to the purposes of God; consented at the beginning of His public ministry to God’s method for the saving of men.

II. Now let us turn to that which immediately followed the baptism

“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.”

There is little doubt that none saw this descent of the Spirit save Jesus and John. What was the meaning of this anointing, in the life of Jesus? Jesus did not now for the first time receive the Holy Spirit. There was a permanent relation between Jesus and the Spirit of God. He was, in a sense in which none other ever has been or can be, born of the Holy Ghost; His development had been under the control of the Spirit of God.

When He came to baptism, He was a Man of the Spirit of God, as all men might have been, had there been no sin. Jesus was a natural Man; not as Paul uses the word, not in the theological sense, but in the simpler sense that lies behind the theological sense. We are told that the natural man is the sinner, and there are present senses in which that is true; but God's ideal for a man is that he should live in perpetual communion with the Spirit of God. That is truly natural life. The natural life of the ideal man is supernatural. The whole life of Jesus was dominated by the Spirit of God. He willed, and thought, and lived under the Spirit's power, and illumination, and impulse.

Therefore without question this was a special anointing of Jesus as He entered upon His public ministry.

The Spirit of God never appears under the figure of a dove anywhere save here. The Spirit of God never manifested Himself in this form before. We have no right to pray that the Spirit may descend on us as a dove. It descended on Him in this outward, and visible, and symbolic fashion, and on Him alone.

It has been said by Puritan writers that the dove is among the birds what the lamb is among the beasts a symbol of great gentleness and sweetness. Jesus used the figure of a dove in that application in those remarkable words when He said to His disciples that they were to be **“wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.”** The dove and the lamb are gentle and harmless in their character; and they are therefore also types of sacrifice. Jesus was led **“as a lamb . . . to the slaughter, and as a sheep that before its shearers is dumb”** so was He.

The Spirit therefore came upon Him as a dove. The Book of Leviticus depicts this strange yet wonderful rite of Hebraism which typified and shadowed sacrifice. In the great sin-offerings men brought offerings graded, as to value, according to their social position. A man who could afford it brought a bullock, another would offer a lamb, and the poorest brought a dove. It is interesting to remember that when Mary brought Jesus up to the Temple, her offering was a dove. The dove therefore is the bird that signifies patience, gentleness, harmlessness; and is the type of sacrifice possible to the lowliest of the people.

We must put ourselves back into Hebrew thinking to understand these things, and their spiritual significances.

Matthew wrote his Gospel specifically for the Jew.

When the Hebrew heard of a dove, or of a lamb, he always thought of a sacrifice for sin. The coming of the Spirit as a bird of sacrifice for sin for the lowliest was the equipment of Jesus for the carrying out of the deepest purpose of sacrifice.

He had just consented to death in His whelming in the waters, and the Spirit of God fell upon Him as a dove. The bird of sacrifice for sin in the ancient economy rested in holy gentleness upon Him, Who is God's one, perfect, final Sacrifice for sin. The dove is the emblem of weakness; but the Spirit of God in the form of a dove is an emblem of power in gentleness Deity submissive to sacrifice for the salvation of men.

This was an anointing for death, for atonement. It was not simply an anointing for preaching, but for living in order to dying. He had consented to death; and Heaven crowned Him with power for that death. **“Christ . . . through the eternal Spirit, offered Himself without blemish unto God;”** and when the Spirit came as a dove, it was for that crowning and that purpose.

The King as a man is energized by God for dealing with that which is fundamentally wrong in the Kingdom, and setting it right. God clothes Himself with man that He may proceed to the redemption of the lost race; and the Son is enwrapped in the power of the Spirit's anointing, and crowned with the dove-like form. So the King faces the conflict, already conquering in the glory of the victory that is to be.

III. Finally we listen to the attestation

The Voice is heard saying:

“This is My Beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased.”

We must interpret that Divine affirmation by the second Psalm, in which we see the anointing of the Son, and the King, **“upon My holy hill of Zion.”** Therein We hear the decree of God:

“The Lord hath said unto Me, Thou art My Son; This day have I begotten Thee.”

That is one of the most glorious references to the Son of God as the reigning King that the Old Testament Scriptures contain. God's King is to ask for the nations, and possess them with the heathen, and hold them for an inheritance.

“Thou art My Son.”

The thought of the Scriptures that He was a Son runs through the old Hebrew prophecies, and ritual, and thinking.

Now at last, on the banks of the Jordan, God says, **“This is My . . . Son.”** This is the Son of man, but He is **“My . . . Son,”** Whose advent the prophets foretold. Men have been waiting and looking for His appearing; calling to the watchers on the mountains, and asking, **“What of the night?”** They have wondered at the delay of His coming, and have cried out through the days, Come quickly! **“This is My . . . Son.”** So God marks out the King.

But God declares another thing concerning Him.

“In Whom I am well pleased.”

This declaration flashes its light back on those hidden years of Nazareth. We have no chronicle of those years. There is an almost complete silence from the time He was twelve years of age to His thirtieth year. It is now at thirty years of age we see Him on the banks of the Jordan, spotless, and sinless, and ready for sacrifice.

One's mind goes necessarily back to the old economy, and we see the priest examining the sacrifice, which must be without blemish. Is this Man without blemish? God says "**I am well pleased.**"

He sets the seal of perfection upon the hidden years. We want to know no more. We ask for no details; it is enough.

In Nazareth He has pleased God as a Man; He has done what no other did, or could do, since man fell by sin. And so the light is flashed upon the past, and shows its perfection.

But there is a further value.

Said Jesus, "**Therefore doth the Father love Me, because I lay down My life.**" And when God said, "**I am well pleased,**" it was a declaration of the Divine complacency with the act of baptism, which indicated perfect union with God in the purpose of salvation, even by the way of the Cross of death.

There was the most perfect unity of purpose and of spirit between the Father and the Son through all the process of redemption. Smitten? Yes. Afflicted? Yes. Bruised? Yes. Because of righteousness and holiness? Yes. But, "**In all their affliction**" even in the affliction of the Cross "**He was afflicted,**" not merely as Man, but One with God Himself working for salvation.

"**Therefore doth the Father love Me**" because of this accomplishment.

And as He sets His face toward the Cross, in perfect union with the Will of God, God breaks the silence and says, "**I am well pleased.**"

Thus:

- In baptism He assumed responsibility for sinning men;
- By the anointing of the Spirit He was crowned and empowered;
- By the Divine Voice He was attested God's King, set upon the holy hill of Zion.

Let us close with the words of the Psalmist:

**"Be wise now therefore, O ye kings:
Be instructed, ye judges of the earth.
Serve the LORD with fear,
And rejoice with trembling.**

**Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and
ye perish in the way,
when His wrath is kindled but a little.
Blessed are all they that put their
trust in Him.”**

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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