

The Baptism of Our Lord, A ✕ D 2009

Matthew 3:13-17 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

In the name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 What does Baptism do? It works the forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare. Christ our Lord says, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved." Repent and be baptized, every one of you, preached St. Peter, for the forgiveness of sins. St. Paul writes, "We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." Forgiveness of sins, rescue from death and the devil, and eternal salvation: those are the gifts baptism bestows.

2 You have been baptized. You have received forgiveness of sins, rescue from death and the devil, and eternal salvation. But even having been baptized, you might grow to despise your baptism. How? Two ways. You might despise your baptism by underestimating its worth. You might neglect to thank God for the gifts delivered in baptism. You might feel the need to do something—give your life to Jesus or pray a prayer of salvation—fully to accomplish your salvation. You might doubt that God would work through something so simple as water. You might also despise your baptism by underestimating the power of your sinful flesh. If you suppose God will save you through baptism while you reject the repentance for your sins that baptism delivers, you've underestimated the power of your sinful flesh. If you suppose God will save you through baptism—as through some magic trinket that works just because you have it—while you reject the faith that baptism delivers, you've underestimated the power of your sinful flesh. If you suppose God will save you through Baptism while you spend a lifetime despising His other means of grace, you've underestimated the power of your sinful flesh. Baptism saves you because through faith, you receive the forgiveness of sins, rescue from death and the devil, and eternal salvation. Repent of thinking baptism is so ineffective that more must be done. And repent of thinking that baptism will save you apart from the repentance and faith it delivers to you.

3 When you encounter John the Baptist in today's Gospel reading, he's been spending his time in the verses immediately preceding today's periscope blasting away at sinners. Pharisees, tax collectors, soldiers, King Herod, and everyone in-between were objects of John's fierce Law preaching. Repent; the kingdom of Heaven is at hand. And many of the people responded by being baptized by John in the Jordan and by confessing their sins. And then Jesus came to John for this baptism for sinners.

4 John is understandably confused. "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" You are the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, why would You submit to a baptism for sinners? You are the One coming after me, the One whose sandals I am not worthy to touch, the One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, the One who comes with winnowing fork in hand to clear the threshing floor and to burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire, and do You come to me to be baptized in the Jordan? You are the Christ, the long-awaited Savior of Israel, the One to judge the just and the wicked, and do You come to submit to a baptism for the wicked? You are the Lord, whose very presence caused me to worship while I was in my mother Elizabeth's womb, and You—worthy of the worship of everyone here—won't permit me to bow down in worship but implore me to baptize You? You are He whose name means "He saves His people from their sins," and do you come to be saved from sins?

5 "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness," answered Jesus. And John consented. Jesus' baptism fulfills all righteous. It's part of the fulfillment of His name. The great exchange continues. He was born the perfect union of God and man—fully human and fully divine—born with your flesh. He was circumcised to place Him under God's Law, so that He could take your place under the Law. And now, at His baptism, He continues to take your place. When the Lord goes down to the waters of the Jordan, He takes His place among sinners, joins Himself with sinners at a baptism for sinners.

6 The great exchange, begun at His birth, confirmed at His baptism, culminated in Jerusalem. In the Jordan, Jesus stood numbered with sinners. If John preached a baptism for sinners, then Jesus came for that baptism. He Himself was sinless, but He was the greatest sinner ever because He took your sinfulness—all of humanity's sinfulness—upon Himself. In the Jordan, Jesus stood in the place of every sinner ever. And on the cross, Jesus died in the place of every sinner ever. There, the exchange is completed. He endured the wrath of God so that sinners might receive God's mercy and favor. He suffered hell, separation from God, so that sinners might receive salvation, eternal union with God in paradise.

7 “And when Jesus was baptized, immediately, He went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on Him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’” The Baptism of Jesus made holy the otherwise ordinary waters of Baptism. Because Jesus went down into the waters of the Jordan, water is different. So at Holy Baptism, we pray, “through the Baptism in the Jordan of Your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, You sanctified and instituted all waters to be a blessed flood and a lavish washing away of sin.”

8 In Holy Baptism, you stand in the water with Jesus. Standing with Jesus in the water of Holy Baptism, Heaven is opened to you. All the merit of Jesus righteousness is credited to you, washed onto you through these holy waters. Heaven stands opened to you, and you have the promise of eternal salvation. In the waters of Holy Baptism, the Holy Spirit descended upon you and delivered to you the gifts of faith and the forgiveness of sins. The same Holy Spirit continues to work within you, keeping you firm in repentance, displaying the proof of His work inside you through the outward mortification of the flesh, through your outer good works. To all those in the water of Holy Baptism, the Heavenly Father boasts, “This is my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased.”

9 Yes, you, beloved, through the waters of Holy Baptism, are a child of God. Even if you have despised your baptism, it doesn’t change the fact that you are a child of God. You may always return with confidence to the water of Baptism, you may always trust in the death of Christ, the benefits of which God delivered to you in Holy Baptism. Heaven stands opened to you, child of God. Forgiveness of sins, rescue from death and the devil, and eternal salvation are your heritage, the gifts delivered to you in these waters.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
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