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Why Was Jesus Baptized?

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I learned and believed, and still believe, Jesus was baptized to identify with the ministry of John the Baptist. John came to prepare the nation of Israel for the arrival of their King. Before a king visited roads had to be cleared, smoothed and cleaned. The Baptist challenged people to prepare for the King by cleaning their hearts and minds of sin and turning to God. John preached in the power of the Spirit and sparked a national revival. The King's baptism showed his support for John's ministry.

A Prophecy of Another Baptism

But look deeper and you'll see the Lord's baptism served as a prophecy of the other baptism he would undergo.

After Jesus came out of the water he spoke only twice of his baptism--not his baptism by John in water, but his future baptism in death. When the Lord's disciples, James and John, along with their mother, asked Jesus if the two of them could sit at his right and left hand in the kingdom, he answered, “You don’t know what you are asking . . . Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” (Mark 10:38).

Thinking Jesus referred to his previous baptism in the Jordan, they assured him they could share his baptism. But Jesus wasn't looking at the past but the future--his Passion. The King told them they would indeed be baptized with his baptism--speaking of their future martyrdom. But he also told them he lacked the authority to grant them seats of honor in the kingdom of God.

The only other time Jesus referred to his baptism occurred in Luke 12:50 where he said, "I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!" Again, Jesus looked forward to his baptism of death.

When the King submitted to the baptism of John was he acting prophetically? Was he identifying with his future baptism? Was he committing himself to the purpose of God? The three uses of the word "baptism" appear to say so. But let's look even deeper.

An Anointing for Public Ministry

In Matthew 3:16-17 "A voice from heaven said, “You’re My beloved Son, in You I’m well pleased.” [And] “This is My beloved Son, Who brings Me great joy.”"

Jesus did not receive the Holy Spirit at this moment. He possessed and operated under the power of the Spirit from his conception. This was an anointing for public ministry. Not only did this appearance of the Spirit as a dove prove his identity to John the Baptist, it also revealed the nature of his ministry.

A Sacrifice for the Poor

Only here is the Holy Spirit revealed as a dove. A gentle and harmless bird that also served as a sacrifice. Hebrew sin-offerings were graded as to their value and according to the financial means of those offering them. A man of means brought a bullock, a man with less brought a lamb, the poorest brought a dove (Leviticus 14). Joseph and Mary brought "a pair of doves" (Luke 2:24).

After the dove descended on Jesus a voice from heaven declared, "A voice from heaven said, “You’re My beloved Son, in You I’m well pleased.” [And] “This is My beloved Son, Who brings Me great joy.”" (Matthew 3:17).

A Flawless Sacrifice

According to Jewish law, every animal sacrifice must be flawless (Leviticus 22:21 and other verses). After thirty years of life, the Father looked on Jesus and declared his pleasure. Jesus was a flawless sacrifice.

Upon seeing Jesus, John the Baptist declared, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29).

At the baptism of Jesus we see the Lamb of God--a sacrifice for those of means.

At the baptism of Jesus we see the dove of God--a sacrifice for the poor.

At the baptism of Jesus by John with water we see the King identifying with his future baptism by death.