

Last week, we finished our short trek through the Old Testament looking at the exile Daniel as he spent a night in the lions’ den. We saw how that miraculous event pointed ahead to Jesus’ rest in the tomb. Today, we begin the second half of our ten weeks and look at the New Testament, the high point of human history. This is when God’s promised Savior was finally born and came into His world to begin setting His creation right again.

But the world Jesus entered was a lot different from the one in which Daniel lived some 500 years earlier. First, Jerusalem was no longer a deserted wasteland. As we read in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the exiled Jews were allowed to return and rebuild Jerusalem. A second temple was built where the first had stood, and worship and sacrifice were restored.

The time between the Old & New Testaments was filled with turmoil—political, cultural, and religious turmoil. In 63 BC, the mighty Roman empire claimed rule over the land of Israel. About sixty years later, the time was right for God to fulfill His ancient promise to Adam and Eve.

So, God sent an angel to a virgin named Mary: “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:31–33).

God’s Son was miraculously conceived in the virgin Mary. When you and I were conceived, our parents handed down their sinful nature to us, the sinful nature originally passed from Adam and Eve to their offspring and passed down from generation to generation. But since Mary was a virgin, Jesus was not contaminated with our sinful nature. Because Jesus was a true, full human being, He was able to submit Himself under the Law as our Substitute—earning heaven for us by His life of perfect obedience. His humanity also enabled Him to take the punishment for our sins upon Himself and suffer and die as our Substitute.

When Mary became pregnant, she was betrothed to a man named Joseph. Betrothal was like a cross between our engagement and wedding.

Like an engaged couple, they lived apart and did not have intimate relations until their wedding banquet. Like a wedded couple, Joseph and Mary were legally husband and wife. During their betrothal, Joseph found Mary was pregnant. Matthew tells us Joseph's reaction: "Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." . . . When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him" (Matthew 1:19-21, 24).

Luke tells us how Jesus came to be born in Bethlehem instead of Mary's town of Nazareth: "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered... Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:1, 4-7).

That fulfilled a prophecy by the prophet Micah that a ruler would come out of Bethlehem whose origins are from of old, from everlasting. Jesus likely would have been raised in Bethlehem and known as Jesus of Bethlehem if wise men, or magi, from the east had not come. Following a special star, they brought precious gifts to the child who had been born King of the Jews. When paranoid King Herod learned of this, he sought to destroy the Christ Child. God warned Joseph in a dream, and Joseph took Mary and Jesus by night and escaped to Egypt. After Herod's death, they returned to raise Jesus in Nazareth. That's why Jesus is known as Jesus of Nazareth.

As He grew, Jesus learned Joseph's trade, that of a carpenter. He did that work through His early adult years and knew what it was to labor and work with His hands.

When Jesus was about thirty, it was time for Him to begin His public ministry. The Holy Spirit prompted Him to go down to the Jordan River where John the Baptist was going about his ministry. God had raised up John to prepare the Jews for their Savior's coming. John warned the Jews of their sin and their need of a Savior, baptized them to wash away their sins, and told them the King was among them, the Kingdom of God was at hand.

When Jesus came to him to be baptized, John tried to prevent Him—knowing that Jesus had no sins to wash away. But Jesus assured him this was God's plan, so John consented and baptized Him.

The Baptism of our Lord was an extremely important part of God's plan. But it was not an isolated event in Jesus' life. It was connected to His coming sacrifice on the cross. Twice when speaking to His disciples, Jesus connected His Baptism with the cross.

The first came when two of His twelve disciples, James and his brother John, asked to sit at Jesus' right hand and His left hand in His kingdom. The Twelve and many of Jesus' followers expected Him to establish a glorious earthly kingdom, a golden age like the reign of King David that would last forever. Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (Mark 10:38)

What cup was Jesus talking about? What future baptism since John had already baptized Him by this time?

Just hours before His arrest, Jesus prayed to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Remove this cup from Me. Yet not what I will, but what You will" (Mark 14:36).

The cup and baptism Jesus mentioned to James and John were one and the same—His bitter sufferings and death on the cross.

That point was repeated the second time Jesus mentioned a future baptism, "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is My distress until it is accomplished!" (Luke 12:50)

We cannot understand Jesus' Baptism properly unless we see it connected to His suffering and death on the cross. John the Baptist helps us here. After baptizing Jesus, while John was standing with his disciples

by the Jordan River, he saw Jesus passing by. He pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!" (Jn 1:29)

In Jesus' Baptism and ours, God made a great exchange. Jesus entered that water spotless, sinless, and pure. We entered it covered with sin. In that water, Christ took our sins and guilt upon Himself. We came out of the water spotless and pure. He came out carrying our sins, and He carried those sins to the cross where He completed His Baptism and ours by suffering the punishment we deserve in our place, satisfying God's wrath and forever destroying our sins. Since Jesus purified the waters of Baptism forever, we come out of that water spotless and pure, wearing Jesus' holiness like a spotless white robe.

Just like we can never separate Jesus' Baptism from His cross, we can't separate our own Baptism from His cross, either. The Apostle Paul makes that clear in Romans 6, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His" (Romans 6:3-5). Yes, the cross and the empty tomb are ours in Jesus Christ.

Another thing about Jesus' Baptism. Matthew shares what happened right after Jesus had been baptized and was coming up out of the water: "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." (Matthew 3:16-17)

The descent of the Holy Spirit at Jesus' Baptism is the reason we call Jesus the Christ. *Christ* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *Messiah*, both of which mean "Anointed One." When Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit, God the Father was equipping Him to carry on His ministry and take away the sins of all humanity.

At our Baptism, the Holy Spirit descended upon us as well making our bodies His own temple. He lives in us and with us creating and sustaining our faith through His Word and Sacraments that we may be connected to

Jesus Christ and live with Him forever. Each of us is an anointed one, a little Christ or Christian.

And one final thing happened when our Lord Jesus was baptized. A voice from heaven declared, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

God the Father declared His approval of every thought, word, and deed of Jesus Christ, His Son, through His entire earthly life. And in Baptism, God has credited that perfect, spotless life to each of us. Through faith, God's words are true for us too: "This is My beloved son, My beloved daughter, with whom I am well pleased for Jesus' sake."

We look forward to the day when our King, Jesus Christ, will return and forever remove sin and all its devastating effects, including death, from us and from all His creation forever. Then we will live with Him in joy and peace forever. Amen.