

Part 4: Death in Our Bones

Tyler Velin | Matthew 3:13-17

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"Watch out for that first step, it's a doozie." That's what Ned Ryerson says in "Groundhog Day," to Phil Connors after he walked off a curb only to find himself knee deep in a slush filled pothole.

This time of year we ourselves are no strangers to that feeling. We know what it's like to step off a sidewalk or down out of our car only to find ourselves wet with muck.

As we have been studying the incarnation of Jesus Christ this Advent season—and as we resume our series in Luke next week, beginning the events of the cross—we are attempting to wrap our minds around the muck, slush and cold filth that Jesus stepped into in order to save us.

We began our Advent series focusing on Mark's account of Jesus' baptism and I've found it fitting to finish focusing on Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism. Far more than a fresh washing, Jesus' baptism would have wet his soul with all the cruel realities Phil experienced in that pothole. His baptism symbolized the beginning and the end of Jesus' ministry here on earth.

The baptism we enjoy as believers is robed in beautiful life because the baptism that Jesus took upon himself to save us was laced with the blood of the cross. But as we've been discovered, Jesus didn't accidentally step into this mess. He wasn't surprised at the cost or the chill of it. Instead, he knew all that it would entail. He knew the cold realities it demanded and yet he stepped down from heaven into our world to in order to save those who hope in him.

We often say there is nothing in all the world like Christianity, because there's no one in the world like Jesus. Every other religion has a god who is distant from us, or heroes who are like us. But only the Christian God bridges the purity of heaven and the mess of man by bearing the cost of that divide himself.

I hope you've realized as we've worked through this series that a close study of Jesus' incarnation is a two-for-one. On one hand we learn about the impeccable wonder of God. Yet on the other hand we get a close glimpse at the reality of humanity. The incarnation teaches us about God and man because Jesus as the God-man is the only one who can restore what sin has broken.

Today, we focus on the pinnacle of this redemptive work: the cross of Jesus. This is what is displayed in the baptism of Jesus.

Our main point today is this: **Jesus was born to die so that the dead may live.** From Matthew 3 we are going to focus on three points: First, in looking at Jesus' baptism in the Jordan we see **The Weight of Water** which demanded his second baptism on the cross. That is our second point: **The Burden of Blood.** Lastly, as a point of application we will see **The Levity of Life** that these works made possible for us.

To begin, let's focus on **The Weight of Water**. Whether you're new to the Bible or not, I imagine there's a level of ordinary-ness to the passage we just read today. It's just a baptism. Christians are baptized. Jesus was baptized. What's the big deal?

But I want us to notice two issues in this text. First, we will see John's resistance to baptize Jesus, and Jesus' reason for baptism.

So first, let's look at **John's Resistance**.

If you remember back in the beginning of our Luke study, John (who was Jesus' cousin) was born before Jesus as a prophet to announce the birth of Jesus. He was to "prepare the way of the Lord." Central to this preparatory task was the command to any faithful Jew to be baptized.

This is the context of what's been going on in Matthew. He tells us: (**Matthew 3:1**) "In those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" He goes on to say **6**, "and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins."

But, this immediate call to be baptized was couched in something future yet to come. **Matthew 3:11**, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

So here we have a basic framework for how people understood John's baptism. It symbolized three realities: realization, repentance, and renewal. People were to realize they were sinful, they were to turn from that sin by repentance, and they were to submit themselves to a symbol of renewal in baptism.

Christian baptism today is very similar to this with a single big distinction. John called people to respond this way in light of him who would come. Jesus commands his disciples to baptize this way because he has come. Why should you be baptized if you believe in Jesus? Because Jesus tells us to, and because baptism symbolizes those key realities: we have realized we are sinful, we have repented and turned to Christ, and now we walk in the renewal of the Spirit being baptized in his name and into his church.

For John, and for the church today, baptism not only marks off God's people—but it makes a statement about the quality of God's people. Though they are new, they don't come that way. They come to the water of baptism, they come to faith, because they are dirty and stained in sin.

That's why John was so resistant to Jesus' request. Matthew tells us in **vs. 14**, "John would have prevented him [from being baptized] saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'"

This whole series we've focused on the humiliation of the incarnation. When you're at the grocery store we often see tabloids trying to scandalize celebrities or politicians by showing them do things below their status. Here's Tom Cruise with his hair messed up eating a hot-pocket. Here's Taylor Swift in sweatpants picking up her dry-cleaning.

These portraits are scandalous because it captures the unbecomingness of people who live below their status. There's an out-of-placeness to it which seems to tarnish the otherwise glorious nature of our heroes.

For John, it was already outrageous that God would be born as a man. But here he's nearly reached the end of it. Here comes Jesus. The one who John just said is God's Messiah. The one who is mightier than John. The one who will baptize with Spirit and Fire. The one whose gym socks John is not even worthy to carry.

And on top of all of that, Jesus comes to John and asks to be baptized. And Matthew tells us, John would have prevented him. The force of the Greek verb is a strong one. In basketball we would say John boxed him out, he went Charles Barkley on Jesus. He is attempting to completely hinder Jesus from being baptized.

Why? Because it's below him. Jesus has no sin. Jesus is God himself in the flesh. He has no need to repent, he has nothing to realize about himself, and he himself is the one who will renew all things. John worries that if Jesus submits himself to it that people will think less of him. He'll be on the cover of the tabloids the next morning. John, knowing Jesus' true identity instead says, "I shouldn't baptize you, you should baptize me! I'm a sinner too! I need what you will bring."

If we, like John, truly understood the glory of God and the beauty of Jesus we too would prevent him from doing many things. We would defend his honor. We would refuse to see him made low.

But look at what Jesus said to John: **(Matthew 3:15)**, "But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.'"

Here we see *Jesus' Reason*.

Notice how Jesus doesn't argue with John's logic. But instead he argues with John's timeline. He says, "You're right. But right now, now is the time for this baptism." Now was the time for God to be made low.

Athanasius, writing in the fourth century, wrote of the difficulties of evangelism in his day. The co-workers and neighbors he shared the gospel with understood power. They thought that if God were to come, that he would take the form of something powerful like they saw power. He said many asked, "Why didn't he appear in nobler part of creation, or some nobler instrument, as the sun or moon or stars or fire or air..."? Why did he come as a mere human being?

Maybe you've asked yourself, or you've shared the gospel with someone who expressed a similar question in our own cultural expectations. Why didn't Jesus come with more political power? Why didn't he just tell everyone to love and accept everyone? Why didn't he fix the earth and stay so that we could all see his splendor? Athanasius says to those who would ask, "Let them know that the Lord came not to be put on display but to heal." He says nothing in all creation had gone astray in their understanding about God except humans. The skies proclaim his glory. But the human heart is sick and blind. And because our sickness prohibited us from seeing God in his great creation, like the sun or sea, he took on flesh so that those who couldn't see him in invisible power might behold him in visible weakness.

In other words, Jesus came so that God might be at eye-level with those who refuse to look up. That's the divine condescension we've been talking about. It's the scandal that got John's attention, and Lord willing, it should get ours as well.

The reason Jesus gives for such an unfitting baptism was what? For the fulfilling of righteousness. What does that mean? Righteousness, to put it simply, is rightness—it's where everything is put back where it should be.

When Jesus turns to John and says, "Let us fulfill all righteousness," he's in essence saying, "These people have come to you to be baptized in hope that they will be forgiven and cleansed. Let's start that process. I have come to you not because I'm sinful, but because I have come as a substitute for the sinful. I have come so that their baptism might be true."

Leon Morris says this, "**Jesus might well have been up there in front standing with John and calling on sinners to repent. Instead he was down there with the sinners, affirming his solidarity with them, making himself one with them in the process of the salvation that he would in due course accomplish.**"

Jesus was going to make things right. But it was not for his righteousness he was baptized, it was for ours. He was going to make purification for the sinner possible. Renewal for the dirty a reality. And this baptism was him signing his name on the dotted line. He would be the guarantor of the righteousness we all needed.

Knowing what this meant, the weight of this water was more than we could ever imagine.

Earlier this year, the Titan submersible imploded deep in the ocean. The pressure that crushed the sub was 400 atmospheres of pressure. The internet told me that's the equivalent of the weight of 37 adult elephants standing on your head. Under the pressure of that water, it took a mere 20 milliseconds for the submersible to be crushed beyond recognition.

But the weight of this water in the Jordan, was weightier. For Jesus knew that he would accomplish this salvation of sinners not by water, but by blood. This water marked him as the one who would bear the sins of the whole world. For God's people to be full of righteousness, Jesus had to be crushed.

This is our second point this morning. **The Burden of Blood.**

Long after Jesus is baptized by John he says this to his disciples in **Luke 12:50**: "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished."

So if Jesus was already baptized by John, what is the baptism he's here distressed over? It's the cross. Jesus' baptism in the waters of the Jordan was the down payment on his baptism on the cross in Jerusalem. That cross, that baptism by blood, was a sort of anti-Jordan moment. It embraced all the opposites of this scene in Matthew 3.

In Matthew 3, Jesus is washed by clean water, bathed in the presence of the Spirit as a dove, and affirmed by the pleasure of the Father: "You are my son, with whom I am well pleased." But on the cross, he is bathed in blood, experiences a forsakenness, and experiences a unique displeasure.

Regarding the pleasure of God, notice what Isaiah prophesied concerning the suffering servant of the Lord in **Isaiah 53:10**, "Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand."

Now, the Hebrew word translated “will of the Lord,” in the opening and closing parts of that verse is actually the same Hebrew word for “delight” or “pleasure.” So the pleasure of the Father in Matthew 3 at Jesus baptism, is also connected to the pleasure of God in Isaiah 53 to crush the Son on the cross. The will and pleasure of God would prosper in the hand of the Lord’s Messiah how? By making an offering for guilt.

Now you’ll notice in Isaiah 53:10 that the servant is crushed, yet he sees his offspring and prolongs his days. This is why Jesus is calling John to join him in fulfilling all righteousness. Jesus knows the cross is costly, he knows it will crush him. But what does he see on the cross? What motivates him so much so that the author of Hebrews says, “For the joy set before him” Jesus endured the cross?

Jesus went to the cross because he knew that on that cross, as he closed his eyes in death, he would see his offspring. He would see and save all who would come to him in faith. This was the pleasure of the Father, the Spirit and the Son. It pleased the Triune God so much that the son willingly accepted this crushing as a substitute so that in him the guilty would be made righteous. Where the baptism marked the pleasure of God in Jesus’ life, the cross marked the pleasure of God in Jesus’ atoning death.

Regarding the presence, look at what Jesus says as he's dying and quoting from Psalm 22, **Mark 15:34**, "'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabacthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"

From the presence of the dove, to a cry of dereliction. This is how low Jesus' baptism goes. On the cross, as Peter says, "he bore our sin in his body." For the eternal Son who knew only the joy of pleasure in eternity, only the unity of sinless fellowship in his life, on the cross was forsaken in his human nature because of your sin that he took.

When we realize our sins, we can turn to the Father and repent. He takes away our reproach. But for Jesus, there was no repentance. He could not turn to his Father for repentance. He chose to die without the relational relief of repentance so that all those who feel forsaken might turn and know they are loved and forgiven. By his wounds you have been healed.

The starting point for the gospel is the love of the Father. For God so loved the world he sent his son. The cross shows us what God loves most—his perfect son and those he created in his own image. The cross also shows us what God hates most—the sinful corruption of humanity.

But because of love, God acted. Martin Luther said it this way: **"The love of God does not first discover but creates what is pleasing to it."**

In other words, if we had to clean up our own lives, if we needed to wash ourselves so that God would discover us as loveable again—we would never be able to do it. But because God loved sinners, he would show his love for us by recreating us by grace to be objects of his pleasure. He goes on to say, **"Therefore sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive."**

Jesus has not come to bear the shame of the cross in hopes that you might prove yourself worthy of love. Jesus endured the cross because all those who come to him are loved. God creates life through death because Jesus was born to die for sinners.

Jesus goes from water to blood, from the dove to dereliction, from pleasure in life to pleasure in death because it pleased God to save his people by being made low for them. John Calvin says it this way, **"In short, since neither as God alone could he feel death, nor as man alone could he overcome it, he coupled human nature with divine that to atone for sin he might submit the weakness of the one to death; and that, wrestling with death by the power of the other nature, he might win victory for us."**

Church, here is your victory. Because Jesus prayed, "Why have you forsaken me," none of the Lord's saints ever have to. This is truly the Lord's Prayer. For no one who knows the Father will ever pray this except for the Son who died in our place.

That doesn't mean we won't at times feel like that. Paul himself says in Romans 8 that sometimes we will feel like sheep led to the slaughter. But because Jesus took the full forsaking and full punishment of our sins in our place, and rose again victoriously—we know that we will never be forsaken even in death.

This is our last point and application this morning: **Levity in Life.**

Anyone who comes to faith in Jesus, anyone who is baptized into the work of his baptism, passes through the veil of infinite weight and now we walk in new life. Levity, and lightness of life.

Notice Jesus' final prayer in the book of Luke and hold in tension all we know about Jesus: **Luke 23:46**, "Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!'"

Now I want us to sit under the staggering weight of this. We all have a natural fear of death. Even the most bold among us admit that though we don't fear death, it's the dying bit that we are uncomfortable with.

And here was Jesus who existed eternally in his divine nature, but who now was facing something new: death. His body and his human nature would die. It would cease to live after a painful final moment. In that moment the only comfort he had was to commit his spirit to the Father.

No one wants to be the guy who jumps first. But Jesus had to be. We want to follow the guy who made it. Jesus wasn't afforded that luxury. He had no mediator. He had no substitute. He had no pattern or resurrection life. He had no promise of eternity besides his own word. But he had faith in the Father and in the Spirit—so he entrusted himself to them.

Dear church, if Jesus entrusted himself in the face of death to his Father, how much more ought we to. One early church pastor said that when Jesus committed his spirit to the Father, "He bestowed on us courage in the face of death," saying, "those are the words of a brave heart."

He's right. Because Jesus took our death on the cross, the death we have yet to fear is nothing. Luther calls it "a kinder-death," a child's death. But we must be responsible then to live in the same hope Jesus awarded for us. We must, in the face of the unknown pain of what is to come—entrust ourselves to God.

But because the tomb is empty, our hope is not. We know Jesus' death has purchased for us life. So when death does come, when our bodies are pressed, commit your spirit to God. Trust him. When sin and temptation seem to strangle any hope in life and it seems you cannot go on—commit your spirit to

him. For we have been baptized into his death so that we too might walk in newness of life. As Christians, we never know how alive we are until we are called to die.

After Jesus talked with John, Matthew tells us, “he consented.” We too must consent. We must get out of our own way and trust Jesus. To consent and trust Jesus in the face of the unknown wave of physical death or spiritual temptation is only to consent by looking back at what Jesus has already won. He’s won it all. He’s proved himself faithful.

The incarnation is the heart of the human hope and the very heart of God. It stands not only as the gateway into God’s pleasure, but it is the crown jewel of it. The Father and Spirit were pleased to gaze at the beauty of the Son in his role, and so too ought we to be. This stays with us much longer than the Christmas season.

I want to close with an extended quote from the author Dorothy Sayer as she talks about the beauty of the gospel.

“So that is the outline of the official story—the tale of the time when God was the underdog and got beaten, when he submitted to the conditions he had laid down and became a man like the men he had made, and the men he had made broke him and killed him. This is the dogma we find so dull -- this terrifying drama of which God is the victim and the hero...if this is dull, what, in Heaven’s name, is worthy to be called exciting?...We may call that doctrine exhilarating, or we may call it devastating; we may call it revelation, or we may call it rubbish; but if we call it dull, then words have no meaning at all. That God should play the tyrant over man is the usual dreary record of human futility; but that man should play the tyrant over God and find him a better man than himself is an astonishing drama indeed. Any journalist, hearing of it for the first time, would recognize it as news; those who did it for the first time actually called it news, and good news at that.”