

Underdogs

“Why Did John Baptize Jesus?”

Matthew 3, Luke 12, Mark 10

Small Group Plan

He must become greater; I must become less. — John 3:30

John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

— Mark 1:4-5

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

— Matthew 3:13-15

John may have been the first, but he was certainly not the last to raise the question. Why was Jesus baptized? And we can understand John’s reluctance. He was baptizing for repentance and forgiveness of sins (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:4). What sin of Jesus’ needed forgiveness? What correction was required in his life?

For centuries the classic answers have proved helpful. Jesus wanted to identify with sinners. He wanted to set an example of obedience. But still, John’s question nags.

Jesus knew the aim of John’s mission. He knew the purpose of John’s baptism. He knew what kind of people came to the river. They swarmed the banks of the Jordan wounded by greed, diseased with lust, infected by selfishness, covered with the sores of human failure. All of them ... except Jesus.

Imagine how that day at the Jordan could have gone. As the only one free of sin, the human plague, Jesus could have remained above the whole sinful scene. Imagine him, standing high on the hills surrounding the Jordan valley, separate and distinct from the human failure below. He could even have made an announcement: “*You are gathered down there because you are infected with failure. I stand up here because I am free of failure. You should be like me.*” Nothing would be truer or less helpful to those infected by the human plague.

In fact, such an announcement could more easily have been made from heaven. Why stand at the edge of the lowest point on earth when you can stand at the highest place in existence? Why be born into a peasant family when your Father owns the universe? Why shield your true identity in order to grow up in obscurity? Why? Because the ultimate human plague requires the ultimate hero.

Today's heroes commit themselves to the victims of misery. They risk their own health, but they take the necessary precautions. They seek a solution, but they pray for personal protection. And no one expects their search for a solution to require more than an understandable risk.

Not so with the ultimate human plague. Jesus knew that his commitment was more than risky. The only precaution he could take was to refuse the mission. He knew that the only solution for the human plague was for him to take upon himself the sin disease of others ... intentionally.

So, he climbed down from his high point. He joined the mass of failure-infected people in the Jordan valley. He submitted to a rite of cleansing reserved for the terminally infected. And it shook John. It was so unusual, so unheard of, for even the greatest of heroes, that John "tried to deter him."

John was the forerunner. He had announced Jesus' coming. He knew of his power and his mission. But he never expected this. In fact, no one had really counted the cost of the human plague. No one had looked that far ahead ... except Jesus.

Driven by love and compassion, Jesus went to the root of our disease. He aimed at the source of all misery. His baptism was a personal and public commitment, not to research and treat the human plague, but to contract it and thereby heal it.

It was a difficult and courageous choice. This is why the Father immediately affirmed Jesus' decision: "*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased*" (Matthew 3:17). This is also why Satan immediately attacked his decision. "*If you are the Son ...*" (Matthew 4:1-11).

So, why was Jesus baptized? So that John could identify the Christ? Yes. So that Jesus could identify with the human race? Absolutely. To set an example of obedience? Of course. But, more than this, in a very real sense, Jesus **was** baptized for the forgiveness of sins ... but not his own. His baptism was his decision to go to the Cross, the only permanent solution for human failure.

He began his ministry with an unavoidable baptism. He ended it with an undeserved crucifixion. It was his deliberate choice. He was moving into the heart of the human plague as the ultimate hero.

OPEN IT / INTRODUCE IT ...

- When were you baptized?
- What do you remember about it?

LOOK AT IT / STUDY IT ...

— BEGINNING WITH A COMMITMENT —

Matthew 3:13-17

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented. ¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

- Why did John struggle and almost refuse to baptize Jesus?
- Even though he had committed no personal sin, Jesus still asked John to baptize him. Why?
- Think through the three parts of God’s message to Jesus (v. 17). How did each part help him?

— STRUGGLING ALONG THE WAY —

Luke 12:49-50

⁴⁹ “I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!”

- Jesus makes this statement in the middle of his journey to Jerusalem.
- He mentions a “baptism” in his future. To what is he referring?
- Why is he “constrained” (NIV) “troubled” (NCV) “suffering” (CEV) “strained” (Philips) until this future baptism is accomplished?

— APPROACHING THE END —

Mark 10:35-38

³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” ³⁶ “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked. ³⁷ They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.” ³⁸ “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”

- For Jesus the terms “*cup*” and “*baptism*” refer to the same thing.
- What future event is he describing and how does “*the cup*” Jesus must drink add meaning to “*the baptism*” he must undergo?
- What is keeping James and John from understanding Jesus? What is distracting and blinding them?

USE IT / APPLY IT ...

- How does Jesus’ baptism help us understand our own better?
- Why are people baptized today? Why were you baptized?
- How is baptism our re-enactment of the cross of Jesus (Romans 6:1-7)?
- Close in prayer thanking God for the privilege of joining Jesus in his death, burial and resurrection.