
Making Sense of Jesus - Jesus' Baptism

BOB HEERSPINK

Jesus; everyone knows of him, but does everyone give the same answer about who he really is? Many religions can agree that he lived, and even that he was a very great man, but is that really enough? As we read more of Matthew's account of Jesus and his life, he reveals more information about Jesus' identity. So, who is Jesus? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. Dave, when I taught a class a while back to high school and college students with regard to who is Jesus, I spent a fair amount of time digging into what other religions think of Christ; and what really surprised me was how positive most religions feel about Jesus. They like the guy.

DAVE BAST

Well, almost everybody does. You know, what is not to like, from at least the popular picture of Jesus: Loving, gentle, wise, compassionate, arms wide open accepting everybody; sort of an apostle of tolerance before his day.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; but most religions would see Jesus as a really great, ethical guy. I mean, he embodies even the central ethical teachings of their own religion.

DAVE BAST

Yes; but I think they do so by reading the New Testament selectively.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, they clip out a lot of verses.

DAVE BAST

A lot of people have been doing that for a long time. In fact, it is one of the things that modern critical scholarship has done with respect to the New Testament. Now there is a backlash against that, I am glad to say, today; but for a long time critics have been saying: Look, this Jesus the Savior as we see in the New Testament, that cannot be what he was really like. We need to dig back and find the historical Jesus.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; Paul created the Jesus that we know. Well, it is interesting, if you go to scripture itself and look at how people reacted to Jesus during his own lifetime, not everybody was so excited about who he was. Even his own family, when they heard of his claims and they heard his teaching, there is a verse where it says they came to take him away because they said: You know, he's got to be off his rocker.

DAVE BAST

Well, we have been looking at scripture, and we have been looking at Matthew's Gospel through the weeks of Advent to see who does he say Jesus is, because right from the outset, beginning with the genealogy, Matthew's purpose is to help us see who Jesus really is. He wants to reveal his true identity; and we need to take it as a package. There is a very famous passage from C. S. Lewis's book: *Mere Christianity*, where he says that a man who said the kinds of things Jesus said would not be a great teacher or even a good man; he would either be a liar or a lunatic or the devil from hell, on the level of someone who says he is a poached egg; and then Lewis goes on to make the point: Jesus did not leave open to us the option of thinking of him merely as a good teacher. He did not intend to.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; I've been reading some of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writings, and he makes the very same point. He says: Unless you take seriously his claims that relate to... You know, the names we have been talking about: Emmanuel, Jesus... We have unpacked those on this program. Unless you take those names at face value, you don't really take them seriously. Then you have to write him off like his own family was tempted to write him off at the very beginning of his ministry.

DAVE BAST

Well, one of things, Bob, that has always struck me about the Gospels is that they are all testimony about Jesus coming to us from his followers; and to say: Well, I accept this part of the testimony, but not that; I accept the part where they talk about how loving Jesus was or how accepting of sinners; but I don't accept the part that says he is the Savior: Jesus Savior from our sins or Emmanuel God with us – the God/man; no, I don't accept that; that is crazy Christian talk, but I accept the other. Well, how can you believe any of it if you don't believe all of it?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

You see what I am saying?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

It is coming from the same source, so I think if we are going to have a realistic appraisal of who Jesus is, we have to take the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament at face value and listen to what they say.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; and I think also, Dave, if you look at the Gospel testimony, you find that God himself knew we would struggle with these questions, and that is why I think right up front in Jesus' ministry he put an event in Jesus' life that was going to drive a stake in the ground and say: This is who Jesus is. It is not just who Jesus *thinks* he is, but the Lord says... God says: I am going to give you clear signs that demonstrate that who he claims to be is reality.

DAVE BAST

So, in other words, it is not just what the disciples thought about him or even what Jesus thought or claimed about himself; it is what God said about him – what God revealed.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; because there have been thousands of people running around the world saying: I am the messiah, follow me. I will save you. But what does God say about those supposed messiahs? That is why a passage like you find in Matthew 3 that talks about the baptism of Jesus, which is a passage we often...

DAVE BAST

Kind of skip over, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Kind of skip over, it is not that important.

DAVE BAST

We hit the Christmas stuff in Matthew 1 and 2, and then we get on into the Sermon on the Mount.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right, the good stuff; but the baptism story is really... it has been described as God's revelation, his *epiphany*, which is a word for revealing or appearance of who Jesus really is; and I would like to read those verses a minute and then we can talk about them.

3:13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John, ¹⁴but John tried to deter him saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?" ¹⁵Jesus replied, "Let it be so now. It is proper for me to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. ¹⁶As 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. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased."

DAVE BAST

Now, there is an important word in that story that didn't come through in the version that we just read, but it is in verse 13, which says that Jesus made his *appearance* at the Jordan to be baptized, right?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and that is that word that gives us the idea of epiphany; that this is a big deal; that this is, not just Jesus showing up at the riverside, but this is the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry.

DAVE BAST

In other words, to coin a phrase, we might say it is a term "pregnant with meaning." There is more there than just: Hey, here I am. It carries the overtones of God revealing Jesus' identity in this event.

BOB HEERSPINK

And anyone who is standing there by the shore watching this all unfold would say: Wow, this isn't Jesus just making claims; there is something happening here that is really announcing who Jesus is.

DAVE BAST

But, you know, I don't know about you, Bob; I don't know that I have ever preached explicitly on the baptism of Jesus because I have always struggled with it a little bit because it is a baptism for repentance. What is going on here? He didn't have anything to repent of, did he? So maybe we need to talk about that after we take a break.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Hi; welcome back. You are listening to *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

Bob, I just raised the question at the end of the last segment about why Jesus had to be baptized. Why do it at all? It is a baptism for repentance, and I would like to hear what you think about that.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, your question is John's question. I mean, he asked the same thing. He said: Why are you here, Jesus? I baptize for repentance; you are coming to clean house; with spirit and fire you are going to baptize, so what are you doing here?

DAVE BAST

You know, John said: I am not even worthy to untie his sandal. So it must have shocked him when Jesus suddenly shows up and appears and says: Here, baptize me, too; and frankly, I kind of struggle with that, you know, if I have been teaching this passage or preaching on it. It is not quite easy to explain.

BOB HEERSPINK

No; you have to kind of make a little jump, I think, in terms of what is going on here; but the clue that Jesus gives is when he says: I need to be baptized to fulfill all righteousness; and I think Jesus is saying: Look, for me to fulfill my ministry, this going down into the waters and receiving *your* baptism, John, is an important part of that.

DAVE BAST

It reminds me just now what you said of that great Philippians 2 passage, where it says he humbled himself and took the form of a servant. He kind of went down, down, down, down; including going down into the waters, but doing it for us, not for himself, because he is identifying with us. He first becomes one of us and then he becomes one *with* us in our sin.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you see, I think he is really giving us a sign here of the name Emmanuel – God with us; and he is with us, not just when things are really going well, but he is down in the waters with us right at that point when we are saying in John's baptism: Hey, I've messed up. I am a sinner. I need forgiveness.

DAVE BAST

I like that idea of him coming alongside and saying... I mean, I can imagine him saying to me: Dave, you know what? I know you can't do this. You sin, you repent, but you don't really repent because you keep going back to the same old sins over and over. I'll tell you what, I am going to do it for you. I will repent for you; not for myself; I don't need to; but for you I will do it perfectly and I will obey for you and I will die for you, you know, at each step. That is a wonderful thought.

BOB HEERSPINK

I am reminded of the story of the young monk who commits a grievous sin and he goes to his superior and he confesses, and the monk says: I really cannot come into worship because I have so messed up; and the priest said – his superior: I will put my arm around you; we will walk in together, and no one will know who really was the sinner, you or me.

DAVE BAST

I wonder if, in our tradition, we make too little of the importance of baptism. You know, here is Jesus undertaking it himself. He commands later on at the end of Gospel: Go and baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit... now, obviously there is a difference between Christian baptism and John's baptism, but the act of baptism – this physical act – do you see that as being significant?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I think sometimes we make Christianity so spiritual that we push to the boundaries those physical signs that speak to us, whether it is the Lord's Supper or baptism, but we need those kinds of physical signs to grab hold of simply because we are the kind of person we are. When I think about Jesus with us in baptism, I just think this speaks so much to me because I tend to see Jesus as way up there, and how could I approach Jesus? I think this speaks into our prayer life: Can you really speak to Jesus, and is he right there beside you when you talk about the way you messed up – the way you are a sinner? This episode says: You sure can because even before you went to him, he went down into the waters for you.

DAVE BAST

So, in a sense, Jesus' baptism is him identifying with us even in our sin, repenting for us, even when we can't or don't; but *our* baptism is identifying us with him, then. It is kind of, in a sense, incorporating us into him. Does that make sense?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, but even being incorporated by God into him, because I believe baptism isn't just what we do; it is a sign of what God is doing for us. It is always grace coming at us in Jesus.

DAVE BAST

God takes the initiative there, too. I like that. I also like the details, getting back to the Matthew story. There is something bigger here than just what Jesus is doing; and again, it is back to what God is saying here, which is the point we want to pick up when we return; but first, let's break just briefly.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

We're back. This is *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. The baptism of Jesus – it really is an announcement of who Christ is; it really reveals his identity; and that is what is happening, Dave, in this passage, because as I look at the baptism and these miraculous happenings around it, well, I've got to tell you, I've done a lot of baptisms, but nothing like this has ever happened when I performed a baptism.

DAVE BAST

It is almost as though John the Baptist fades into the background. You would think he would be the main character because he is the one doing the baptizing, but he sort of disappears and we see God there; and very significantly, I think, we see the three persons of the triune God – God as we believe him to truly be in his being; so the Father speaks, Jesus is in the water, and the Spirit descends in the form of a dove.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; when we talk about being triune believers – believers in the Trinity – I think this is one of the clearest passages that establishes that, because all of the persons of the Trinity are right there at the same time.

DAVE BAST

Yes, listen to it. I will just read it again: ¹⁶As soon as Jesus was baptized – so there is Jesus...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

The Son of God – at that moment heaven was opened and the Spirit of God descending like a dove, alighted on him, ¹⁷and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased."

BOB HEERSPINK

There are the three Persons. Now, if you look at that passage, Dave... The dove... Why is the Spirit like a dove? It doesn't say it *is* a dove. The Spirit comes...

DAVE BAST

It is a symbol.

BOB HEERSPINK

Like a dove, yes. Why a dove?

DAVE BAST

Well, you know, I think that is an interesting question. A dove symbolizes peace, life; it was a dove, wasn't it, that came back with the sprig of olive in its mouth with Noah at the Ark? There is a sort of gentleness about the Spirit, I think. It is true he is also symbolized as fire in the New Testament; and those two maybe show the sides of his nature. God the Holy Spirit brings cleansing. He is the Holy Spirit – there is fire; but he also works gently upon us. Someone once said that God woos us where he could command. I think that the dove symbolizes the way that he works in our own lives and hearts.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I think it shows the way... it hints at the way the Spirit is going to work through Jesus' life. I think it is a hint to even John the Baptist, who is saying: Hey, the Spirit comes and fire is going to burn up all evil in the world; well, there is another side.

DAVE BAST

Right; it is not just get rid of all the evildoers, you know. To hell with them, which was a little bit of John's, maybe, desire; and also the wind, you know. There is a third image that is used in the Gospels for the Spirit: The wind blows where it will – and a gentle wind primarily, I think – so the Spirit's work is really to bear witness to Jesus and to draw us toward him, and a dove is a wonderful symbol of how gently he usually does that. He doesn't coerce us; he doesn't sort of overcome us – overpower us – so that we are just nothing. There is a way in which we participate, too. He points to Christ, he brings faith to life, but we also have to believe.

BOB HEERSPINK

And then you have the voice. You know, it is very interesting; the heavens have been silent, as it were, for four hundred years. There has been four hundred years where there hasn't been a prophet in Israel; and now, the voice speaks and it is the very voice of God; it is not even a prophet here; although John the Baptist has already come; but now the Father speaks and he speaks specifically of Jesus.

DAVE BAST

This is an extremely rare event in the Bible, when the voice of God is audibly heard; at least in the New Testament there are only two or three occasions when it happens, and this is the first – this is the beginning – where God himself – God the Father – bears witness to the Son, and he says... what is significant is not just, "This is my Son," but, "I am well pleased with him."

BOB HEERSPINK

Right. Now, if you look at the words that the Father speaks, he really brings together two Bible verses – two passages; one from Psalm 2:7...

DAVE BAST

One of the favorite Psalms of all the New Testament writers.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; it is a coronation psalm. It is a psalm about the King – about the Messiah; but then he weaves that text with Isaiah 42:1, and that is a text about the Servant of God – the *Suffering* Servant of God; and what I find so interesting is those two verses Jewish folks in the First Century did *not* bring together. I mean, there was the Messiah and there was the Suffering Servant of God, but the two were not one; and now the voice of the Father says: In the Person that is standing before you, both of those identities is fulfilled.

DAVE BAST

So, let me just make sure I have this straight here; the first part of what the Father says: This is my Son; comes from Psalm 2...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

The second part: With him I am well pleased; comes from Isaiah 42...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

And they are being put together here in a way that none of the Old Testament prophets foresaw?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; because no one really expected in the First Century that the Messiah, this kingly figure, was going to suffer; would even die. John the Baptist is thinking of this triumphant Messiah. He is going to clean house; and it is almost like the Father now – well, he is saying it to all of us, but also to John: Hey John; get it straight. The direction this Messiah's life is going to take is not what you expect.

DAVE BAST

Well, that was the hardest thing for all of the people in Jesus' day, including his own disciples, to accept and to believe; that Jesus was the Messiah, yes, they could believe that because look at this revelation at his baptism, and then later on the miracles and the great things that he would do. Those closest to him were the first to confess: You are the Christ. You are the Messiah; but then, even Peter said: No, wait a minute. You cannot go to the cross; because Jesus starts talking about suffering and going to the cross, and Peter says: No, no, no; that is not what the Messiah does. So they all had trouble with this – John the Baptist and the disciples, too.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I think we have to bring it down, Dave, to our own lives. What does that really mean?

DAVE BAST

We have trouble with it, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

We have problems with it. I have problems with it; you know, I want a glorious king. I am stunned by a suffering savior, and to say that this is the way the Savior has completed his work because of me – because of the way I have messed up – that is humbling.

DAVE BAST

What does it mean to be a follower of a crucified Messiah; and one, moreover, who says: If you want to be my disciple, you must deny yourself, take up your cross daily and follow me. That is not a message that we take to naturally.

BOB HEERSPINK

But if this is really the revelation of Jesus' ministry, if this is really, hey, this is the big public event that kicks off Jesus' whole work, we have to take it seriously. We have to put this at the center of our faith as believers and say: I need to affirm Jesus as both my King and the one who suffered and died for me.

DAVE BAST

I think so; and I think that we can take comfort from this beautiful fact, as we brought out earlier, that Jesus identifies with us. He repents for us and with us. He goes to the cross for us and dies for us, but that means on the flipside, we need to identify with him and we need to walk with him. The cross comes before the crown. That is what the Christian life is about.

BOB HEERSPINK

And you look up and the heavens are open, and they are open because the Spirit comes down; but now we can ascend, as it were, by the grace of God into the Father's presence. What a phenomenal promise that is. Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join in on the conversation.

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