

Introduction

- Greetings.
- Last week, we began with the second leg of our series on the Holy Spirit, moving from his work in the OT to His work in the life of Christ.
- We began by looking at the role that the Spirit played in the incarnation, that moment in time where God became man.
- My hope is that you came away from that message with a deeper sense of appreciation for the magnificence of what took place when the Father said “Go,” the Spirit formed, and the Son condescended to assume His humanity.
- We made several assumptions about what transpired, not on the basis of the text itself, but on the basis of some insights from modern science and Orthodox Christian doctrines that have developed over the history of the church, mostly in response to heretical teachings that have emerged.
- There is no value in restating those here. Suffice to say that as it pertains to our focus for the series, the very incarnation of the Son of God depended on the Spirit playing a very particular role — something for which we should be eternally thankful.
- Today, we come to the second standout event, where we see the Spirit of God interacting with the Son.
- That event is the baptism of Jesus.

- As I was reading through the different accounts of the baptism of Jesus, it was clear that they all tell the same story.
 - John the Baptist came as a witness, a herald, a forerunner of Christ. God had impressed upon him the understanding that the kingdom of heaven was fast approaching. As a consequence, John was calling people to prepare for the coming of the Lord by renewing their faith in God. The way that they could do this was by repenting and being baptised.
 - Large crowds from Jerusalem and the surrounding areas were coming to him, confessing their sins, and receiving baptism in the Jordan river. As such, John's baptism was understood to be a baptism of repentance.
 - Jesus makes what scholars believe to be at least a two-day journey from Nazareth, in Galilee, to Al-Maghtas, Jordan, to be baptised by John. This suggests that this was no chance encounter but that Jesus came intentionally.
 - John objects, but Jesus insists, and He is baptised.
 - As He comes up out of the water, the heavens part and the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove and comes to rest on Him.
 - At the same time, the Father speaks from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."
 - This is the baptism of Jesus in broad brush strokes. As with creation, and as with the incarnation, we see all three members of the trinity represented, signalling that this is an event of immense significance.
- That said, as I was preparing, I began to notice that while there is an astonishing congruity between each of these accounts, there are also unique standout features in each of the gospels that teach us something about the role that the Spirit is playing at this particular point in Jesus' life.

- As such, I would like us to take a fresh look at each of the accounts of the baptism of Jesus, and as we do, I would like to highlight what I see the Spirit doing in each.

1. Mark (Action): The Spirit Rends

Mark 1:9–11 NKJV

⁹ It came to pass in those days *that* Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And immediately, coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove. ¹¹ Then a voice came from heaven, “You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

- While the translation I am using describes the heavens as “parting,” some more literal translations would render the original Greek as a “tearing open” of the heavens.
- This is the key feature in this account.
- While the other gospels make use of derivatives of a root word which simply means “to open,” Mark uses is the word *schizomenous*. It literally means to tear apart, to split, cleave or rend.
- The impact of his choice of wording is dramatic and far reaching, for two reasons.
 - Firstly, this is an echo of [Is 64:1-5](#)

Isaiah 64:1–3 NKJV

¹ Oh, that You would rend the heavens! That You would come down! That the mountains might shake at Your presence— ² As fire burns brushwood, As fire causes water to boil— To make Your name known to Your adversaries, *That* the nations may tremble at Your presence! ³ When You did awesome things

for which we did not look, You came down, The mountains shook at Your presence.

Isaiah 64:4–5 NKJV

⁴ For since the beginning of the world *Men* have not heard nor perceived by the ear, Nor has the eye seen any God besides You, Who acts for the one who waits for Him. ⁵ You meet him who rejoices and does righteousness, *Who* remembers You in Your ways. You are indeed angry, for we have sinned— In these ways we continue; And we need to be saved.

- Without saying so, Mark is saying that this is the long-awaited intervention that Isaiah prayer for. This is the Spirit, signalling the long-awaited breaking in of God into our physical world to deal with adversaries and to save His people.
- But Mark's choice of wording is significant for a second reason: it links this account with what happens in [Mark 15:38](#), where the same word is used.

Mark 15:37–38 NKJV

³⁷ And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed His last. ³⁸ Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

- Without saying so, Mark is saying that this is the One who will deal with the barriers between God and man, once and for all.
- And so, in Mark, the Spirit is portrayed as coming as a powerful, dynamic force.
- He is physically breaking into a world dominated by the forces of darkness to communicate something about the person upon Whom He rests.
- In Mark, the baptism narrative is very short and serves almost as a launching pad for what was to follow.

- In the very next verse (verse 12), we read that the Spirit *drove* Him into the wilderness, where He would be tempted by Satan. Once again, this driving is a forceful act.
- So, from a Markan perspective, the baptism of Jesus serves as a platform from which the Spirit deploys the Son immediately into warfare against His ancient adversary.
- This brings us to the gospel of Matthew.

2. Matthew (Reason): The Spirit Endorses

Matthew 3:13–15 NKJV

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ And John *tried to* prevent Him, saying, “I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?” ¹⁵ But Jesus answered and said to him, “Permit *it to be so* now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he allowed Him.

Matthew 3:16–17 NKJV

¹⁶ When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. ¹⁷ And suddenly a voice *came* from heaven, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

- When Jesus approaches John to be baptised, John hesitates, saying,
- “I need to be baptised by you, and you are coming to me?”
- John perceives that Jesus does not belong in a river of repentance.
- How does he perceive this?
- It is not that God gives John some special insight in advance. As we will see when we get to the baptismal account in the fourth gospel, John the Baptist,

on the day after he had baptised Jesus, testifies that until the Spirit descended upon Jesus after He had been baptised, he did not know that Jesus was the Lamb of God.

- So how is it that in this account, as Jesus is yet approaching the baptismal waters, that John perceives that Jesus does not belong in a river of repentance?
- I believe the answer to that question lies in the fact that these two men were cousins and that they knew each other well.
- You see, their mothers — Mary and Elizabeth — are described in Luke as kinswomen or as relatives. And while some would argue that this does not mean anything, the way in which these women interacted with each other suggests that they were more than just distant relatives.
 - When Gabriel tells Mary that Elizabeth is pregnant, she makes a journey from Nazareth to a city situated in the hill country of Judah. She is estimated to have travelled somewhere between 130 and 160 kilometres. To make that journey in that context will have taken her about a week. This wasn't something a young pregnant woman would do casually or for a distant acquaintance.
 - Additionally, Mary seemed to have enjoyed a certain level of freedom in going to visit Elizabeth. Not only did she simply get up and go. Luke says that she stayed there for about 3 months before returning home. Spending that length of time in another household reflects an established, welcoming bond. Mary was received not just as a guest, but as immediate family.
- It is not beyond the realm of possibility that they would occasionally visit together and that Jesus and John grew up knowing each other quite well. At the very least, I expect they will have made some attempt to connect on their annual pilgrimages.

- So how is it that in this account, as Jesus is yet approaching the baptismal waters, that John perceives that Jesus does not belong in a river of repentance?
- In my view, over years of family connection, John had come to know Jesus' character. He had never detected a single trace of sin in Him. And now, standing in the river, John looks at his righteous relative and says, "You don't belong in a river of repentance. If anyone is getting baptised here, it should be me!"
- This sets the stage for the key feature in this account.
- The key feature is Jesus motivating His baptism on the grounds that it would be "fitting for the fulfilment of all righteousness."
- No other gospel makes mention of this requirement.
- But what precisely does Jesus mean?
- It cannot mean that Jesus was about to be baptised for His own benefit. He was not about to confess sin in pursuit of righteousness for himself — He was sinless and already righteous.
- As I have engaged scholars and applied my own mind, it seems to me that there is significance in the words "fulfil" and "righteousness." If fulfilment pertains to prophecy and righteousness pertains to the satisfaction of the legal demands of a holy God, then Jesus is making a silent public declaration. He is saying,
 - I am the One of whom Isaiah spoke in [Isaiah 42:1](#)

Isaiah 42:1 NKJV

¹ “Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, My Elect One *in whom* My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles.

- Not only is He making a silent public declaration, He is engaging in a silent prophetic enactment.
 - His stepping into the water symbolises solidarity. Jesus is associating in the most intimate of ways with humankind. He is saying, “I am the Second Adam.”
 - The baptism itself symbolises death, burial, and resurrection. Jesus is enacting in the physical realm what He will achieve for us in the spiritual realm.
 - He will die in our place, but will also rise victorious, satisfying the demands of a holy God and securing righteousness for all who would call upon His name.
- So, from a Matthean perspective, the Spirit is resting upon the Righteous Servant who is actively fulfilling all the requirements of righteousness as a sign of approval.
- It is a heavenly endorsement, an affirmation that the silent things Jesus is saying by what He is doing are true.
- This brings us to the gospel of Luke.

3. Luke (Identity): The Spirit Inaugurates

Luke 3:21–22 NKJV

²¹ When all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also was baptized; and while He prayed, the heaven was opened. ²² And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from heaven which said, “You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased.”

- The key feature in Luke's account is not simply that the Spirit descends, but that He does so "in body form, like a dove," and that He does so "while Jesus is praying."
- The emphasis on His "taking up of a bodily form" and doing so "as Jesus was praying" is unique to the gospel of Luke.
- This emphasis is significant because it makes a typological connection with another dove.
- In [Genesis 8](#), after God had judged the world with a flood, He "makes a wind pass over the earth" so that the waters subside. This is not a localised wind. It is a global phenomenon. I am not sure about you, but I have never heard of a wind of this magnitude before. It sounds like a work of the Spirit of God.
- Anyway, when the ark came to rest, Noah sends out a dove to check if the waters had receded enough for them to disembark. After one or two tries, the dove returned with a freshly plucked olive leaf in her mouth.
- This helped Noah to know that God's wrath had ceased; the judgment was over and a new reality had just been inaugurated.
- In [Luke 3](#), Jesus steps into water, which, like the waters of the flood, symbolised judgment. As we have just seen in the previous gospel, the baptism symbolises death and burial.
- The Spirit descends upon Him, signalling that this is the True Noah, the One Who will satisfy the wrath of a holy God for good, the One Who carries us through the waters of judgment and Who will usher in a new reality.
- But notice that this gospel also adds a unique detail missing from the other accounts.
- The heavens are opened and the Spirit descends "while He prayed."

- In fact, Luke consistently links prayer with the presence of the Spirit. In praying, our perfect example, the Second Adam, demonstrates for us the appropriate state of receptivity for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. And He continued to emphasise and demonstrate the importance of prayer for His entire ministry.
- Friends, we can go through this series on the Spirit of God, learn all about Him, but unless we follow the example of Jesus and posture ourselves appropriately, we can come out the other side unchanged!
- As Jesus demonstrates, we absolutely must be a people committed to prayer.
- And so, by descending on Him in bodily form, as a dove, the Spirit anoints and inaugurates this True Noah, this prayerful Second Adam, into His public office.
- This brings us to the final gospel.

4. John (Application): The Spirit Abides

John 1:29–31 NKJV

²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is He of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.’ ³¹ I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water.”

John 1:32–34 NKJV

³² And John bore witness, saying, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. ³³ I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴ And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.”

- John's gospel is unique in that we do not read of the baptism of Jesus but of John's testimony regarding the baptism of Jesus the day after it had taken place.
- A key feature in this account is that John identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.
- So, what does it mean that Jesus was the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world?
- God is holy and He demands payment for sin.
- In terms of the OT Mosaic system, the lamb — and most notably the Passover Lamb — served as sacrificial substitute for the sins of humans. When the lamb was offered, the person making the sacrifice would find a lamb without spot or blemish, lay his hand on the animal's head, symbolising a transfer of guilt.
- The lamb would then be sacrificed and God would accept this sacrifice as a substitute so that the guilt that comes from the sin of the person making the sacrifice did not rest with them. The lamb would essentially bear the guilt and punishment on behalf of another, freeing them from their burdens.
- The trouble with this system is that someone could make an offering one minute, walk down the street, sin again, and need to go make another offering. But this flaw was by design. God used it as a temporary solution to demonstrate the need for a more comprehensive, permanent solution.
- Animals could never fully and permanently atone for the sins of humans. The only permanent solution was for a human to pay the price for the sin of humans. Not only that, the human paying the price needed to be qualified to do so. That qualification was that He should be without spot or blemish, that is, sinless. Since no man has ever been sinless, God Himself needed to

become a man, live a sinless life, and then do what the OT lamb could only foreshadow — not just take away the current sins of one person but the sins of the entire world, once and for all.

- Now scholars get themselves all tangled in a knot trying to understand how John knew this to be true of Jesus.
 - The Jews anticipated the coming of a Messiah who would be a warrior-king, like David. They expected that He would overthrow the Roman empire and bring religious renewal.
 - While a few OT passages hinted that the Messiah would suffer, suffering was not anticipated as a central component of His ministry.
 - John was not expecting a suffering Messiah!
- So how did John know?
- For me, John's striking insights are quite obviously intricately connected to the events of the previous day, when the Spirit of God came to rest upon Jesus.
- You cannot stand so close to two members of the holy trinity and not come away with some insight.
- Friends, this was a Spirit-empowered revelation, a prophetic pronouncement like those that the prophets had made in the OT. They didn't always understand what they were saying. Often, their prophecies were steeped in symbolism. But the extent to which the prophet understood what he was saying wasn't the point. The prophecy wasn't for the prophet. The prophecy was for the hearers. And today, the prophecy is still for the hearers of these words of John — for you and me.
- Hear the words of John, as it echoes through the centuries,
- “Behold! The Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world.”

- But apart from identifying Jesus as the Lamb of God, John is unique in that he is the only gospel writer who emphasises (twice) that Spirit not only came to rest on Jesus but also “remained” on Him.
- As we have seen in our series so far, in the OT, the Spirit came upon prophets, priests and kings temporarily, for the accomplishment of specific tasks, and then He departed again.
- Upon Jesus, however, He takes up a permanent, abiding residence.
- There is significance to the ordering of these symbolic images.
- Jesus receives the abiding presence of the Spirit at the Jordan so that through His sacrifice as the Lamb of God at the cross, He would become the Spirit-baptiser, making it possible for the Spirit to take up residence within all flesh, as per the prophetic pronouncement of Joel.

Conclusion

- Just as God does something by what He says, He also says things by what He does.
- The baptism of Jesus is a premier example of this.
- Here, the Son of God says something by acting in obedience.
- The Spirit says something as well. He is saying that
 - The time has come for heaven to invade this world, which has for too long been under the oppression and dark influences of the evil one.
 - This is the One who fulfils all righteousness for us.
 - This is the True Noah who will bring an end to judgment and usher in a new reality, ultimately bringing us eternal rest.

- This is the Lamb of God, Who not only takes away the sin of the world, but Who, through His great work, makes it possible for the Spirit to take up residence within every man, woman and child who calls upon the name of the Lord.

Joel 2:28-29 NKJV

²⁸ “And it shall come to pass afterward

That I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh;

Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,

Your old men shall dream dreams,

Your young men shall see visions.

²⁹ And also on *My* menservants and on *My* maidservants

I will pour out My Spirit in those days.

- At His baptism, the Spirit affirms, “The is the One who will make that happen!”