

The Significance of His Baptism

T. Austin-Sparks:

Reading: Luke 3:21-22; 4:1-12.

This section of Luke which we have read contains all the principles and elements of what we have been occupied with in this series of meditations - that is, the significance of Christ. Here we have the significance of Christ as the presenting to God of a manhood, a humanity, which, being according to God's mind, has given back to it the opened heaven which was lost by the first man; the restoration of the face of God which was turned away from Adam and his race because of the kind of man that he became through disobedience. That, in a sentence or two, is the significance of Christ.

Now Luke, as all Bible students know, is peculiarly the Gospel of the representation of Christ as the Son of Man. This Gospel is a record of the life, works and words of the Son of Man, given without any spiritual interpretation - just the record. It is the only Gospel which has a preface. Luke says that he took pains to ascertain the truth of all the things that he was about to write. The spiritual interpretation came later. It waited upon two things: firstly, the coming of the Holy Spirit as the interpreter, secondly, Spirit-indwelt people to whom He could interpret. In this record, then, we have no spiritual interpretation, but from the vantage-ground of our now having the Spirit and the interpretation in the later New Testament, we are able to see the spiritual principles which are here.

THE MEANING OF BAPTISM

I must condense very much into a short space, so let us come to this matter of Christ's baptism, and reiterate what is probably well-known to most. It is necessary to our purpose that we should first of all be reminded of the meaning of baptism itself. Baptism is not peculiarly or exclusively a Christian ordinance. There was a Jewish baptism by water, and when John came baptizing, he was not doing anything strange so far as Israel was concerned. They were very familiar with it as a kind of 'nationalization' ordinance, when a Gentile wanted to embrace the Jewish faith, just as Christians are baptized. In the pagan world baptism was also known - not of water but of fire. The basic significance in Jewish, Christian or pagan world is the same, but for the Christian it is so much deeper and more meaningful. With the Jew, baptism simply meant that the man died to his old racial connections as a Gentile, and rose to become in effect a Jew, a member of another race. With the pagan, the baptism of fire or 'making their sons to pass through the fire' - you remember that phrase in the Old Testament - was simply a passing as into death, with the destruction of an old connection, an old system, and an initiation into something altogether new. In Christian baptism, the same ideas are present, but with this extra, that this baptism speaks of the utter depravity of man. Pagans would not admit that, and the Jews would not admit that. But Christian baptism testifies to the utter depravity of man, his hopelessness before God; it says that he is by God utterly rejected, unacceptable, and that if there is to be any hope at all he must die and rise again. It must be a death and a burial, signifying the complete passing out of that man, as to all that he himself is and as to all that with which, by nature in Adam, he is connected. Man's depravity calls for - not repairs, but death and burial.

That gives tremendous and wonderful significance to the baptism of Jesus.

He who knew no sin, in whom there were no seeds of depravity; He who was the Son of God, who held the title in His own rights to be equal with God, and was equal with God; He who was with the Father in glory, as He prayed, "Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was" (John 17:5); HE came and identified Himself with man, in his utter depravity and God-rejection. When He came to Jordan to be baptized, it was a most wonderful thing that happened - that He, being such as He was, should take the place, in death, of one completely cast out by God, buried from His sight, put away as being wholly unacceptable to the eyes of God, identifying Himself with sinful man.

It is small wonder that John the Baptist, the 'baptizer', demurred when He came to be baptized. John would have forbidden Him. "I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?" (Matt. 3:14). John could not understand this - because God had spoken to John, God had intimated to John that the Messiah was in the vicinity. John knew that he was the forerunner, that he was fulfilling the prophecies concerning himself as the opener of the door to the Christ, and he had the intimation that this was He; and he stood back aghast that such a One should wish to take this place. "Ye offspring of vipers", John was saying - 'you serpents' brood, fleeing from the oncoming fire of judgment, trying to get into the water for your escape!' That is how John viewed those who came to be baptized. And then Jesus came on that ground. How marvellous is the condescension of our Lord Jesus! How far down He has gone for our salvation! How utterly He has touched the depths for our sin and sinfulness! Can He do more?

CHRIST'S BAPTISM NOT FOR HIMSELF

And then John's great declaration afterward. "Behold, the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). That is a confirmation of his apprehension of the significance of Christ: he saw that this Man was not dying for His own sin; He was not being baptized because He Himself was a sinner. He was doing it for the sin of the world. This was all a rehearsal of the Cross which was coming later, and surely this in itself speaks to us - could anything speak more forcibly than this? - of that great feature of God's Man, heaven's Man, the Man who will get the open heaven, the Man who will have the face of God - that wonderful feature of His humility. Yes, He took the form of a man, was "found in fashion as a man" (Phil. 2:7-8) - a true man; His was true humanity.

CHRIST IDENTIFIED IN HEAVEN BUT NOT RECOGNIZED ON EARTH

There seems a paradox here, almost a contradiction, but here it is. There was nothing on the outside at all to indicate that Jesus was different from any other man. John said, "I knew him not" (John 1:31,33). This is strange, is it not? He must have heard of Jesus. Their mothers were kinswomen, and had had a joyful time together a few months before John's birth, on the occasion of the annunciation to Mary; and all that had happened right up through the thirty years must have been knowledge to John of Jesus. But he had not met Him, he did not know Him personally. He says: "I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize in water, he said unto me, Upon whomsoever thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and abiding upon him, the same is he that baptizeth in the Holy Spirit. And I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God" (John 1:33-34). He was identified by heaven but not recognized on earth. He was so like other men on the outside - true man; and yet how different inside - what a different humanity is there! "I knew him not."

THE LORD JESUS A MAN OF MUCH PRAYER

"Jesus... having been baptized, and praying" (Luke 3:21). I am glad Luke put that in there - "and praying". What is prayer? Prayer has many aspects, but I suppose the one which stands out most clearly and governs all other prayer is supplication. It is the act and attitude of a suppliant asking. Here He has become so truly one with us in our humanity as to be in our place of suppliants - that is, altogether dependent upon God. People who are most conscious of their need, and most dependent, are the most prayerful people. People who are most self-sufficient are the most prayerless people. The Lord Jesus was a man of much prayer, and He started here in His public life - "and praying".

You see the features of a man according to God's mind. And if WE are really born from above, if we have really apprehended the meaning of passing from one relationship to the other, if it is true that we are in Christ, these will be the features which characterize us. We can tell the measure of our life in Christ by our humility, our meekness, by our readiness and willingness to come right down and have no reputation, by our prayerfulness expressive of our dependence. This is the man expressed, not only in the individual, but corporately - by companies representing the whole Church, of which we were speaking earlier in this series. If they have any measure of Christ, they will be very humble people, not at all self-important. They will be consciously very dependent upon the Lord, and therefore very prayerful people.

HEAVEN OPENED TO CHRIST AFTER HIS BAPTISM

We have seen the baptism of Jesus and its meaning, giving the significance to Him as Son of Man. Then came the open heaven. The heaven was opened, showing us the kind of man who inherits the open heaven, the face of God, the recognition and acknowledgment of God. This is the kind of man - the man who has died, the man who has been buried, the man who has risen again on the other side. That is the man of the open heaven.

And then there was the Spirit as in the form of a dove coming and resting upon Him. The Holy Spirit is not given primarily as power to make us something. Oh, how we clamour for power, and therefore crave for the baptism of the Holy Spirit in order that we may have power - meaning that we may be a success, that our work may be a success. The Holy Spirit is really given to us because we shall never get on at all without Him. In our union with the Man who went down into death, declaring man's hopeless condition, we are, as He was, utterly dependent upon a power that is not in ourselves and of ourselves. That is the meaning of the gift, or the baptism, of the Holy Spirit.

A NEW POSITION TESTED

If that wants proving, the next step proves it. Before it can be said, "And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit", and began to preach effectively, it has to be said that in the Spirit He went into the wilderness to have the whole of His new position tested.

I wish Christians recognized the meaning of this wilderness interlude. 'Receive the Holy Spirit and then go and get on with it - begin today!?' Oh no! Receive the Holy Spirit, and then have the whole basis of your life in God put to the test and proved, and THEN go and get on with the work - but not until then. It works like that in principle, even if it does not seem to be like that. The Lord keeps to His law. The baptism of the Spirit was to be the basis of His new life - it was to be entire dependence upon God. I am not away from the Scriptures over this, for He depended upon the Holy Spirit for everything from this time onwards. "If I by the Spirit of God cast out demons..." (Matt. 12:28). Everything was by the Spirit. We will not stay to prove that.

So this next step - the temptation in the wilderness - was basically a testing as to the position taken by Him and as to what that position involved. We can never take a position with God and not be severely tested as to the position we have taken. He had taken a position, He had come over to occupy certain ground, and now He was going to be tested as to that new position.

AN ASSAULT UPON FAITH

First of all, it was the ground of the relationship with God that had been declared in His baptism, in His figurative resurrection. "Thou art my beloved Son" (Mark 1:11). That is a relationship with God declared. Now then: "If thou art the Son..." You see the question projected in relation to the ground of His relationship with God, the subtlety of this 'if' - "If thou art the Son". The subtlety of it was of this kind: 'Do something about it - prove it by doing something!' You see the subtlety. Supposing your greatest friend said something to you of assurance, and then someone came along and said, 'Well, you had better prove that by doing something!' Where is your friend? What is your relationship to your friend? You have not fully trusted him, you really have not accepted his word, if you are going to put it to the test in some way. So the subtlety of the serpent in the 'if' was: 'Do something about it, prove it - put it to the proof and do something about it!' To do something about it is to accept a question in it.

But the man of the open heaven will stand on this ground: 'God has said it, and that is enough. No proof is called for; God has said it.' "It is written..." That is the man who has the open heaven: the man who, even when circumstances and conditions are very difficult and adverse (for God's Word stands related to trial, to affliction, to adversity) - the man who stands firmly on the declaration: 'God has said I shall not perish; God has said I shall not die; God has said, and God is faithful.' That is not easy. Do not think that this was just play-acting. This was a terrible ordeal through which the Son of Man went. It was the very devil in person. The mere proximity of evil spirits is bad enough - quite enough to bring your spirit under, to make you feel terrible; but to have the very devil himself, in person, making direct assault upon you, under the most trying conditions of physical and mental exhaustion - what do we know about that? It was very real. But, in the reality of it, this Son of Man, for the sake of a whole race that was to come - His seed - took this position: 'God has said - that is enough!' It is upon basic faith that the assault is made; upon the faith that is basic to everything which is to follow.

THE BASIS OF THE TEMPTATION

So we find that His mission is immediately in view. "He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and he entered... into the synagogue on the Sabbath day" (Luke 4:16), and the roll was delivered to Him, and He opened it at Isaiah 61, and began to read: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach..." And then the subjects of His preaching, the message, His work, His mission, His proclamation, His utterance, were all here in view, and Satan was out to destroy that ministry, that mission, to destroy that utterance, that proclamation, and to silence Him.

Now, if you look back to the first chapter of this Gospel by Luke, you have a wonderful parable and example of this very thing. You have the story of the announcement to the father of John the Baptist, the announcement of his birth. Zacharias, the priest, a man holding a high and influential position, is representative of the nation, the priestly nation; the whole nation is embodied in Zacharias. The angel Gabriel came and spoke of the birth of John the Baptist, which was a natural impossibility. We will not stay with all the details, but the upshot was that Zacharias handed back the question to Gabriel: 'How shall this be? I am an old man, my wife is old - how shall this be?' It was a doubt. Now see the force of the reply of Gabriel: "I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God". 'Do you know who you are talking to, questioning? You are challenging the very authority of heaven, the very ability of heaven to do as it will.' This was an act of unbelief in the face of heaven and heaven's highest

messenger. "I am Gabriel": it was a severe rebuke. 'Now then, Zacharias, it will be, but this shall be a sign - for a season you will be dumb, not able to speak; your ministry will be suspended through unbelief.' And he was a type of the whole nation. Israel has lost its ministry and its message to the world for the whole of this dispensation. Israel is dumb as the messenger of God to the nations throughout this whole dispensation. It has nothing to say to the world from God. Why? Because of its unbelief.

Now Satan was working on that line, on that principle, with the Son of Man. If only he could get Him to entertain a doubt as to this Sonship, as to the Father's expressed attestation - "Thou art my beloved Son"; if he could get Him to entertain a doubt, by doing something to try and prove it; then he had silenced Him, robbed Him of His ministry. You know quite well that you have no power in ministry, whatever you may say, if there is a question in your heart, if there is not a complete faith in God in your heart. If Satan can bring in any unbelief, any question about God, your ministry is crippled. Satan was after this great ministry - "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach..." That is the basis of the temptation.

THE FORM OF THE TEMPTATION

The form of the temptation was threefold. Whether you take it in Luke's order or Matthew's, it does not matter. I prefer to take it in the order in Matthew. I will do that now simply because I think it is the spiritual order. That is no aspersion upon Luke. He had his own way of writing for his own purpose. He was recording just facts as he collected them.

(1) An Attack upon His Body

First of all, the assault was made upon His body, and the question which arose in principle - I am not going to stay with it, I just mention it and pass on - the question which arose in principle was: Was this Man ready to present His body "a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God"? Was He prepared for His body to be utterly at God's disposal, and not held for His own personal interest, benefit, convenience? That is why Paul says, "I beseech you..., brethren, ...to present your bodies..." (Rom. 12:1). The devil has a great desire to get hold of our bodies. They are our media for expressing what is inside. If he can capture the medium he has captured a lot. You know all that comes later on by interpretation of the Holy Spirit. "Know ye not that ye are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" (1 Cor. 3:16). "Present your bodies." It was an attack upon His body, to get Him to let in unbelief and doubt and fear because of the physical consequences of the course that He was taking. That carries very much with it.

(2) An Attack upon His Soul

In the next place, in Matthew's order, it was an attack upon His soul. The devil took Him to the pinnacle of the temple and said, "Cast yourself down"; and, trying to enforce or reinforce his temptation, he even comes over to Christ's ground - "It is written". Christ has said that; Satan is trying to capture the situation by using the enemy's means, the enemy's ground. "Cast yourself down." What is this? Well - 'Do something to realize your ambition in a quick way. You have come to get a following, you have come to win men, you have come on a mission; now then, secure the success of your mission, get this following by doing something wonderful, something miraculous! Nothing will happen to you: you will come down from the pinnacle safely, whereas anyone else would be dashed to pieces!' 'Here is a quick way to success. Realize your ambitions by some expediency, by some policy.'

Oh, the curse of policy in the world! "Is it politic? Will it get success? Will this expedient achieve our end quickly?" That is the soul of the fallen man, the soul of the old Adam. We are all there. This is not something subjective. This is true of us all in Adam. We do not like the long-drawn-out road of patient waiting to see God vindicating, while everything is against us, the road which seems to have no turning. Trust in God? Oh, let us do something to accelerate! It is said of Philip Brooks of Boston that he was walking up and down his study one day, seeming very heavy and perplexed. A friend came in and asked, 'What is the matter?' 'Oh,' said Brooks, 'I am in a hurry and God isn't!' Do something to make God come into your stride! - that is the soul, and it really is crucifixion to the soul to refuse anything and everything like that.

(3) An Attack upon His Spirit

And then the attack upon His spirit: "If thou wilt... worship me." "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). When we come to worship, that which comes forth from our spirit is a spiritual thing. So, through the body and through the soul, the enemy was seeking to strike at the innermost man in his relationship with God in spirit, because it is by spirit that we are joined to the Lord. "He that is joined

unto the Lord is one spirit" (1 Cor. 6:17). Satan's thought is: 'Oh, to cut in there!' That is the form of the temptation.

THE VICTORY

Just a word as to the victory. The victory of the Son of Man was threefold: over the flesh, over the world, over the devil - a threefold victory through faith, maintained faith, stolid faith under the most trying and adverse conditions. This is the man that has opened heaven; this is the man who has the face of God. This is the Spirit of Sonship. This is the order of mankind that God has set His heart upon; this is the kind that Jesus Christ has come to beget through the travail of His soul.

WHAT OUR BAPTISM MEANS

Finally, the application. It was by His baptism that He effected it all, that He took the ground and held it and secured it before God right through. It was through His baptism that He was attested, accredited and established as the Son, as God's representative Man, as "the firstborn among many brethren". But then we may open the later New Testament, and on the day of Pentecost we hear the Apostle crying, "Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you" (Acts 2:38). I am not going to give an exposition on the subject of baptism, but I want to say this, that our baptism is our means of declaring that we stand on the ground of this Man. We have died to one manhood, one mankind; we have ceased, voluntarily, to have a life in that relationship. In our innermost being a severance has taken place, a circumcision inwardly of the heart has taken place, and we have passed out from all that, by way of a grave; and now we occupy, in Christ risen, the ground of another order, another man, another kind; we are alive unto God.

That is what we mean when we are baptized. We have said, earlier, that baptism as an ordinance effects nothing: but baptism is the New Testament means given for declaring a fact which exists, and the poignant point of this is that every man and woman of Adam has been baptized, all the sinners in the world today have been baptized. I do not mean that they have gone into a baptismal pool or been sprinkled. I mean that, in the baptism - the death - of Christ, the whole world was taken and given the chance of a new relationship, had it provided for them, carried out for them, effected on their behalf; and if every man and woman in the whole creation is lost, it will not be because they were not redeemed, but because they have not accepted their redemption, they have not taken the place which Christ has secured for them. Our invitation, our call, our beseeching, our entreaty, is that men will come into the thing which God has done for them in Christ. They are there, but they have to declare that they are there before it is made good for them. Our baptism is the testimony to the fact that we are on this ground of the new man, and that, accordingly, heaven is open for us, the face of God is turned towards us in Christ - a new creation, "accepted in the beloved" (Eph. 1:6), on the ground of this heavenly Man.

That is the significance of Christ. Oh, if you have gone that way, if you have given that testimony, keep the meaning ever in view. I so often meet Christians who have at some time borne that testimony: they have had it explained, they have accepted and believed it, and have been baptized; but oh, how they are living to the old man, how they are influenced and actuated by the old man's interests, how their soul is still mastered by worldly ambitions! I often feel like asking: Were you baptized? What did you mean? Have you really apprehended your death in Christ's death? Have you apprehended the meaning of the other side - that you are alive unto God, and only alive unto God, and you have no life other than unto God? Have you? If not I am not surprised that you are not enjoying the open heaven, the face of God, the glorious presence and power of the Holy Spirit, victory over Satan, over the world, over the self-life. You have got to keep this ever as a living reality before you.

May the Lord Himself put His seal to this word, by making us men and women after this kind, even according to Christ.