

Crying Out to the God of Providence

Joel R. Beeke

Scripture Reading: Acts 4

Text: Acts 4:23–37

Dear friends, for several decades, we have seen our nation pushing God, prayer, and righteousness out of the public square. Under the pretense of secularism and pluralism, powerful forces in our culture have made the Christian religion unwelcome in science, public schools, and the halls of government. We were told that it was all in the name of promoting tolerance. But the veneer is cracking, and underneath we discover a brutal intolerance for the things of God.

We now face the very real possibility that we will be forced to choose between obedience to our God and obedience to our government. We desire to give our obedience to the government and serve as its best citizens, for the governing powers are ordained by God (Rom. 13:1). But it may be that Christians will soon have to choose between remaining silent about the tragic perversion of homosexuality and going to jail. Christian preachers may have to choose between proclaiming that Christ is the only way to God and being charged with a hate crime. Christian organizations may have to choose between paying for abortions and services against their consciences and paying large fines. And when we face such choices, then we must say with the apostles, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

We can act courageously because our God is in control. We have been studying the doctrine of providence recently. Our Belgic Confession teaches us that “God, after He had created all things, did not forsake them, or give them up to fortune or chance, but that He rules and governs them according to His holy will, so that nothing happens in this world without His appointment; nevertheless, God is neither the author of, nor can be charged with, the sins which are committed.”¹

In this message I want to consider the question of what our faith in providence calls us to do in times like this. What does the doctrine of providence teach us to do when we face the threat of opposition and suffering for our witness to Christ? What difference does it make for us to know that our God upholds and governs the heaven and the earth and all that is in them by His eternal counsel and providence?²

In the Book of Acts, we find an example of the apostolic church in just such a situation. The apostles were carrying out their commission to preach Christ and work miracles of healing in His name. When they healed a man born without the ability to walk, it opened a door for them to preach to thousands of people (Acts 3). The priests and rulers had them arrested and brought before them. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, boldly told them that all this has been done in the name of Jesus Christ: “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The council commanded them to stop preaching about the name of Christ and threatened them with dire consequences. They released them, and the apostles returned to the church.

What did the apostolic church do in the face of these threats? What should we do? In Acts 4:23–37 we find the answer to our question: *When the church faces opposition, we must lift up our prayers to the God of providence.* They prayed. Acts 4:24 says, “And when

1. Belgic Confession, Article 13.

2. Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 26.

they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord.” How did they pray? They prayed with urgency and emotion: “they lifted up their voice.”³ They also prayed with unity: “with one accord.” Calvin said that the apostles met with the church “that they might arm themselves with prayer against the furious threatenings of their enemies; and thus must the children of God do, one must prick forward another, and they must join hand in hand, that they may vanquish the common adversary fighting under Christ’s banner.”⁴

What did they pray? First, they lifted up prayers of praise. Second, they lifted up prayers for power, and we see how those prayers were answered by God. So let us study this text and learn how we must join together to lift up our prayers to the God of providence.

We Lift Up Prayers of Praise

One of the most fascinating things about their prayer was that they did not begin by asking God for anything. They knew that they faced the immediate danger of being imprisoned, beaten, robbed of their possessions, and even killed. If I were in this situation my mouth would probably be overflowing with cries for God to intervene. But they started with praise. They started by glorifying God for who He is and what He has done. In fact, over two-thirds of their prayer as Luke records it consisted of praise. They did not rush through a quick word of praise to get to what they really thought was important, asking God for help. They dwelt upon praising God. Surely this is one effect of faith in God’s providence. We do not need to panic as if God were asleep and cry

3. “Lift the voice” (*airō* [or *epairō*] *phōnēn*) appears several times with “and wept” (LXX Judg. 2:4; 21:2; Ruth 1:9, 14; 1 Sam. 24:16; 2 Sam. 3:32; 13:36). It can also describe the roaring of the seas (LXX Ps. 92[93]:3) and the cry of lepers to Jesus for healing (Luke 17:13).

4. John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Henry Beveridge (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 1:181.

out, “Carest thou not that we perish?” (Mark 4:38). No, we may pray in the calm assurance that He is still in control.

As we look at their praises in Acts 4:24–28, we see that they lifted up praises of God’s supremacy, God’s Son, and God’s sovereignty.

Praise of God’s Supremacy

Verse 24 tells us that the first thing they prayed was, “Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is.” The term “Lord” is not the usual word used in Greek but a specific word meaning the master of a household who rules over servants and slaves, or a king who rules with absolute power.⁵ God’s kingdom is nothing less than “heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is,” for He “made” them and rules them with total authority. All things are His servants (Ps. 119:90–91).

Calvin said, “If we want our faith to be strong, we must consider God’s power when praying and mention the promises which we rely on.... We cannot have confidence in God as we ought unless we are firmly convinced that he disposes all things in accordance with his will so that all creatures are subject to him. That stems from the fact that he created all things.”⁶

When men begin to act like dictators and tyrants, threatening God’s people with penalties for their fidelity to their God, then we must begin by praising the One who is the only true Sovereign, and that over all creation. Even if we are beaten, thrown into prison, and locked up in stocks, let us, like Paul and Silas, learn to sing praises to God (Acts 16:25).

The early church constantly sang the Psalms (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), and it may be that they had Psalm 146 in mind when they prayed:

5. Greek *despotēs*. Cf. Luke 2:29; 1 Tim. 6:1, 2; 2 Tim. 2:21; Titus 2:9; 1 Peter 2:18.

6. John Calvin, *Sermons on the Acts of the Apostles, Chapters 1–7*, trans. Rob Roy McGregor (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2008), 163–64.

Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish. Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the LORD his God: which made heaven, and earth, the sea, and all that therein is: which keepeth truth for ever: which executeth judgment for the oppressed: which giveth food to the hungry. The LORD looseth the prisoners (Ps. 146:3–7).

What comfort there is for us to remember that men are mere flesh, but God is the eternal spirit who created all things! What peace we can find in His providence! We can sing,

Heav'n and earth the Lord created,
 Seas and all that they contain;
 He delivers from oppression,
 Righteousness He will maintain.⁷

Let us therefore lift up our voices with the praise of God's supremacy.

Praise of God's Son

Acts 4:25–26 tells us that the church continued its praise by quoting Psalm 2, saying, “Who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ.” How good it is to pray the Bible! For the Bible is God's own Word, placed in the “mouth” of His servants who spoke it and wrote it. When we saturate our prayers with God's Word, our minds are lifted up to Christ and our prayers are according to God's will.

When the apostolic church faced opposition, they turned to Psalm 2 and found that God had long before announced that the nations would “rage” against Him. “Kings” and “rulers” fight against the Lord. We should not be surprised at this. On the

7. *The Psalter with Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, Church Order, and Added Chorale Section*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), #400, verse 4 [Ps. 146].

contrary, we should be profoundly grateful whenever any authority stands for what is true and good.

Though all the powers of mankind war against God, it is “vain,” empty, and futile. Psalm 2 tells us that God has established His Christ as the King of kings, and Christ will reign. The Father said to Christ in an unbreakable decree, “Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel” (Ps. 2:8–9).

God’s providence is entirely in the hands of the Mediator (John 17:2). Calvin said, “God will reign in the person of his Son alone.”⁸ Therefore we may rest assured that Christ will conquer and His church will not fail on the earth. Already, Jesus Christ has risen from the death, ascended into heaven, and sits at God’s right hand with all authority in heaven and on earth (Ps. 110:1; Matt. 28:18; Eph. 1:20–21). William Perkins said, “Christ, [as] God and man, after his ascension is advanced to such an estate in which he has fulness of glory, power, majesty, and authority in the presence of his Father and all the saints and holy angels.” His kingdom “spreadeth itself over heaven and earth.”⁹

When we pray for God’s kingdom to come, let us lift our eyes to Jesus Christ and see that God has promised to establish the throne of His Son over all the earth. When the church faces opposition from powerful enemies, let us take time to meditate on the promises and to lift our praises to God. Fixing our eyes upon Jesus and setting our affections upon Him, we will then be able to pray with faith and not out of the fear of man. We can pray, “Thy kingdom come” with the confidence that we are simply asking God to do what He promised—to give the nations to His Son as His inheritance.

8. Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:185; cf. *Sermons on the Acts of the Apostles*, 165.

9. William Perkins, *An Exposition of the Symbole or Creed of the Apostles* (London: Iohn Legatt, 1595), 352.

Praise of God's Sovereignty

The third part of their praises appears in verses 27–28, “For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.” In the darkest hours of the church, God’s will is being done.

There was no darker hour in the history of God’s people than when Jesus died on the cross. It seemed that all of God’s purposes had failed. The very Messiah, the anointed of God, had perished at the hands of cruel and wicked men. They brought Him to trial, condemned Him as a criminal though they knew His innocence, beat Him with brutal violence, nailed Him to the cross, and then mocked Him while He slowly and agonizingly died. If ever there was a time for panic, it seemed that this was it. The apostles hid themselves in great fear that they would be next (John 20:19). Christians in America are also being tempted to hide themselves away in fear of what may be coming next in our country.

When Christ rose from the dead, however, He told His disciples that everything had happened according to God’s plan revealed in Scripture and Christ’s own words (Luke 24:25–27, 44–46). What appeared to be the darkest hour was in fact the most glorious moment in history. God accomplished the redemption of His people. God’s providence ruled over the sins of the authorities and caused them “to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.” God predestined even the wicked acts of sinners (1 Peter 2:8). The vicious and ugly murder of God’s Son had been determined by God before time began (1 Peter 1:19).

The apostolic church grasped hold of this doctrine when they faced dark times and turned it into a prayer of praise. The crucified Christ was not a criminal. Though rejected by men, He was God’s “holy child” whom God had “anointed.” “Child” is the same Greek word used of David in verse 25 and may also

be translated “servant.”¹⁰ It is the very word used in the covenant with David, and also of the suffering servant in Isaiah.¹¹ His death was not a defeat, but the coming of the kingdom promised to David. His crucifixion was God’s will for our salvation (Isa. 53:10–11). Derek Thomas said, “The doctrine of God’s absolute sovereignty is necessary if we are to understand what occurred at Calvary... God was the Author of the cross.”¹²

Can you praise the Lord at the foot of Christ’s cross? You certainly can if you trust that Christ suffered for our sins. But here is a different question. Can you praise the Lord as you take up your cross? You are able insofar as your faith grasps the doctrine of providence. Calvin wrote, “God doth so govern and guide all things by his secret counsel, that he doth bring to pass those things which he hath determined, even by the wicked.”¹³ If we believe that, then we can stand before wicked men, even wicked rulers, and sing God’s praises. The worst thing they can do to us is the best thing God has planned for our good (Rom. 8:28).

In Christ we are more than overcomers. Though rejected by men, we are not criminals. We are God’s children and God’s servants. Our suffering is not a defeat for the kingdom. It is the very means that God has ordained for His kingdom to advance and His eternal weight of glory to come into our lives.

What shall we do when the powers of this world threaten the church? Let us lift our voices in prayer. And let us begin with heart-warming and faith-forming praise. We serve the God of providence, and therefore we can adore Him for His supremacy and sovereignty in His Son. We can sing,

When the needy seek Him, He will mercy show;
Yea, the weak and helpless shall His pity know;

10. Greek *pais*.

11. LXX 1 Chron. 17:4, 17, 23–27; Isa. 41:8–9; 42:1, 19; 43:10; 44:1–2, 21, 26; 45:4; 49:6; 50:10; 52:13.

12. Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts*, Reformed Expositional Commentary (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2011), 110.

13. Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:187.

He will surely save them from oppression's might,
 For their lives are precious in His holy sight.
 Christ shall have dominion over land and sea,
 Earth's remotest regions shall His empire be.¹⁴

We Lift Up Prayers for Power

We have seen that the first response of the church to threats of oppression must be to lift up prayers of praise. We have great cause for praise in God's supremacy, God's Son, and God's sovereignty. We do not stop with praise, however. Acts 4:29 reminds us that we are God's "servants," literally His slaves,¹⁵ who live to do His will. We have commandments to keep and a mission to fulfill. We must not allow the cost of discipleship to deter us from fulfilling the work God gave us to do. The apostles told the ruling council, "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye" (Acts 4:19). We too must keep listening to God's Word and doing God's will as His servants in the world.

We cannot serve God by our own power. Nothing reveals how weak and fragile we are like the opposition of sinners. We must lift up our prayers for power. Let's look at the last part of the church's prayer in Acts 4, and learn how to pray for ourselves.

They opened their petitions with a brief request for protection. Acts 4:29 begins, "And now, Lord, behold their threatenings." This is the only petition the church made for protection against persecution. "Behold" here has the sense of "look upon our painful situation and act out of Thy compassion and love."¹⁶ It is good and right for us to cry out to God for deliverance from those who harm us so that He may be glorified (Isa. 37:16–20). Let us not

14. *The Psalter*, #200, verse 2 [Ps. 72].

15. Greek *doulos*, a different word than that translated "servant" in v. 25.

16. The verb "look upon" (*ephoraō*) has a variety of applications, yet sometimes takes the special connotation of responding to trouble with mercy and compassion (LXX Gen. 16:13; Exod. 2:25; Ps. 30:8 [31:7]; 112[113]:6; 137[138]:6; Luke 1:25; cf. 2 Macc. 7:6; 8:2; 3 Macc. 6:3, 12).

romanticize persecution. It is ugly and evil. The Psalms are full of cries for deliverance from the power of the wicked. God's providence often spares us from suffering in answer to such prayers. Ultimately God will send His Son to deliver us from all evil.

We notice however that the church passed quickly from this concern to prayers for divine power. Verses 29b–30 say, “and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus.” We see here that they prayed for power for the ministry of the Word and power for ministry to the body. In answer to their prayer, verse 31 tells us, “they were all filled with the Holy Ghost.” They had given praise to the Father, grasped the promises about the Son, and now gained the power of the Spirit. Their prayer was truly Trinitarian.

The core of their request was for God to empower them by the Holy Spirit with enlarged spiritual gifts. We no longer live in the apostolic age. We are not apostles and do not have the same spiritual gifts as they did. But this text does call our church to ask God for enlarged power for spiritual gifts of speaking and spiritual gifts of serving. Let's consider each.

Power for Spiritual Gifts of Speaking

First, they prayed for God to grant them “that with all boldness they may speak thy word” (Acts 4:29). Dear congregation, remember that your ministers are flesh and blood. We may feel bold as a lion, but as Peter did we discover all too quickly how easily we can deny our Lord. You must pray for your ministers, that they will preach and witness for Christ boldly.

We carry God's treasures in earthen vessels, and often feel troubled, perplexed, and cast down, experiencing the dying of Jesus in our own bodies (2 Cor. 4:7–10). The Holy Spirit gives us courage to speak, for He is “the Spirit of faith” (2 Cor. 4:13). Luke highlights in verse 8 that the apostle who spoke so boldly to the council was not Peter the man of flesh, but Peter, “filled with the Holy Ghost.” In verse 31 we read that God answered their prayer,

“and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness.”

The word “boldness” refers to being confident, frank, open, and unashamed.¹⁷ We think of Paul, who said in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” But did you know that even Paul needed people to pray for him when he faced opposition? He wrote in Ephesians 6:19–20, “And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.”

Therefore if we would persevere in serving the Lord, we must also seek power for spiritual gifts of speaking. Pray for your preachers to be full of the Spirit.

Charles Spurgeon preached with such power from the Holy Spirit that several thousand people came out to hear him every Sunday for thirty-eight years, and millions have read his sermons with profit. The story is told of how Spurgeon met some enthusiastic visitors to his church and asked them if they wanted to see the church’s power plant. They were far more interested in the preaching, but they followed him anyway. So he took them to a large room where they discovered the prayer meeting of the church. I cannot verify if that story is true, but it is true that his church sought the power of God through united prayer.

Spurgeon recognized this was a notable characteristic of the church, saying,

When I came to New Park Street Chapel, it was a mere handful of people to whom I first preached, yet I could never forget how earnestly they prayed. Sometimes they seemed to plead as though they could really see the Angel of the Covenant [that is, Christ] present with them, and as if they

17. Greek *parrēsia*.

must have a blessing from him. More than once we were so awe-struck with the solemnity of the meeting that we sat silent for some moments while the Lord's Power appeared to overshadow us.¹⁸

O that God would grant us such prayer meetings! Your ministers long to see the prayer meetings full, full of people and full of God's Spirit, for we understand that our powerful preaching in the church begins with powerful praying by the church. It was after they prayed for boldness to speak that we read in Acts 4:33, "And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all." God can give remarkable power to His preachers. Cotton Mather said that Thomas Hooker was a minister of such courage that "while doing his Master's work, [he] would put a king in his pocket."¹⁹ We must seek power for spiritual gifts of speaking, that our ministers may preach boldly when under fire.

Power for Spiritual Gifts of Serving

The church prayed in verse 30 that God would assist the preaching of the Word "by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus." The apostles were commissioned by Christ Jesus to work miracles as they preached the kingdom of God.²⁰ Thus they were praying for God to empower their spiritual gifts in practical ministry as well, to heal the sick and handicapped from their miseries. They could not heal at will; even apostles had to depend on God's power to work a miracle (Acts 3:12). Miracles like this are called "signs and wonders" because God used them to publicly confirm that He sent the apostles (Acts 14:3; Heb. 2:3–4), just as God

18. Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1992), 270–71.

19. Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1702), book 3, 64.

20. Luke 9:1–2; Acts 5:12; 2 Cor. 12:12.

worked miracles through His servant Moses (Ex. 7:3, 9; Deut. 4:34). By healing the bodies of men, God gave visible signs that His redeeming love had come to heal our cursed world and save us from our sins (Isaiah 35; Luke 7:20–23).

God answered their prayer in an extraordinary manner. Verse 31 tells us that “the place was shaken where they were assembled together.” In the Bible, earthquakes are signs that God has come to bless His people with power.²¹ Luke reported that shortly afterwards the Lord struck dead some hypocrites in the church, amazing miracles of healing took place through the apostles, and an angel from God released the apostles from prison (Acts 5:1–20).

However, Acts 4 does not focus on miracles of healing immediately after this prayer.²² Instead, verses 32 to 37 dwell on the practical ministries of love and caring for the poor. This makes perfect sense. They had prayed for God to stretch out His hand and heal the hurting. God filled them with the Spirit, and the church stretched out its hands to care for the widows, orphans, foreigners, handicapped, and poor among them. The church became the hands of the God of providence. They established a fund for the church to serve the practical needs of people. This was not some form of communism imposed by a church authority

21. Earthquakes appear at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19:18), the death and resurrection of Jesus (Matt. 27:54; 28:2), and at the Day of the Lord (Ezek. 38:19–20; Rev. 6:12; etc.).

22. The only possible reference to miracles in Acts 4:31–37 would be “power” in v. 33, “with great power gave the apostles witness.” It seems more likely that the singular “power” (*dunamis*) does not refer to miracles but to the “power” to convict, convert, and comfort souls through witness (Acts 1:8; Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:18, 24; 2:4–5; Eph. 1:19; Col. 1:28–29; 1 Thess. 1:5). Thus Simon J. Kistemaker, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 174. However, miracles are called “powers” (Acts 2:22; 6:8; 8:13; 19:11; Gal. 3:5) or works done by “power” (Acts 3:12; 4:7; 6:8; 8:10; 10:38; 2 Thess. 2:9). So Acts 4:33 could mean that the apostles ministered the Word of Christ accompanied by miracles. Nevertheless, this is not the emphasis of this section.

or political party. It was instead the voluntary sharing of their property as each one had a need.²³

This shows us how we are to pray today. We must pray for power to serve. We are not apostles, nor those on whom the apostles laid their hands. We do not have miraculous gifts. But many of us have practical gifts. If the church in America faces opposition from the powers that be, people will suffer. The church must develop a culture of caring for each other. In that way God's providence will turn persecution into an opportunity to glorify Christ.

Practical works of service are even greater signs to the world than raising the dead.²⁴ Christ said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). The love and diaconal ministry of the church is the most effective method we have on a human level to prove that the gospel is true.

Dear congregation, the charge most frequently made against Christians is that we are arrogant and unloving. What better way to show the beauty of the gospel than to devote ourselves to humble and loving works of service?

We must pray for God's power. It actually takes more supernatural power to produce love and practical service to needy people than it does to work a miracle. Our Lord understood that only supernatural grace can make us love each other sacrificially, and so He prayed that we would be one with each other "that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me" (John 17:23).

Join your prayers to Christ's prayer, and lift up constant requests for power for spiritual gifts of service! Pray that God would cause our love to abound yet more and more (Phil. 1:9).

23. Contrast Qumran, where such community of goods was required. See Kistemaker, *Acts*, 173–74.

24. "Great grace" (v. 33) may mean "much favor," in the sense that the larger Jewish community looked upon the church with much favor because of their Spirit-empowered lives (Acts 2:47; 4:21; 5:13). Kistemaker, *Acts*, 174.

Ask the Lord to make us increase and abound in love toward one another and all men (1 Thess. 3:12). Cry out that the Lord would bless our church with rich and practical spiritual gifts for mercy and service. Pray for our deacons as they administer the funds of the church to care for those in need. In all this, pray for God to stretch out his loving hands through our ministries, and show the world that God has come to set sinful and miserable people free.

Conclusion

What does the doctrine of providence teach us about responding to threats from this world? *When the church faces opposition, we must lift up our prayers to the God of providence.* We must lift up prayers of praise. Praise glorifies God and strengthens our faith and joy. Praise enthrones the Lord as the true Sovereign even as the wicked try to overthrow the kingdom of Christ. We must also lift up prayers for power. The Holy Spirit can give your ministers amazing power to preach the Word even in the face of our enemies. The Holy Spirit can also mobilize the body to serve the poor even while the church is oppressed.

If we would enjoy the Spirit's blessings, we must pray. Do you believe that God reigns? Then show it in your prayers. God forbid that it be said of our congregation, "Ye have not, because ye ask not" (James 4:2). Rather, may our congregation be living proof of Christ's promise, "Ask, and it shall be given you" (Matt. 7:7).

Anchored in the Storm

Dr. Maarten Kuivenhoven

Scripture Reading: Acts 27

Text: Acts 27

Paul could have gone free according to Agrippa. But Paul was still in chains. It was these chains that would be instrumental in bringing him to Rome. Paul had testified of Christ before the Jewish Sanhedrin and Jewish leaders. Now he was headed to testify before Caesar. But the chapter before us seems to indicate otherwise. Paul would encounter a furious storm, shipwreck, and even the possibility of losing his life. How could that lead to the furtherance of the gospel? Perhaps that's a question that you and I face in our current circumstances, both personally and corporately as a church. How do all these difficulties and challenges serve the furtherance of the gospel and the glory of God? Do they not hinder God's work in His world? Perhaps this statement can help us keep this chapter in perspective, and our own lives as well: "We are often *objective-oriented*, but God is *process-oriented*. We just want to get to Rome, but God is even more interested in *how* we get there."¹ So how did Paul get to Rome in the midst of a fierce storm that threatened his life and the cause of the gospel? Paul did so by being anchored in God; the eyes of his heart were turned Godward in confident expectation that God would accomplish His purposes. This storm

1. R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1996), 338.

was used to not only test Paul's resolve, but to show where Paul was anchored. And that's what the storms of life do to us, don't they? The process that God is working out reveals where we are anchored in the voyage of life. And so the theme of this sermon is "Anchored in the Storm" under three headings: first, anchored in divine provision; second, anchored in divine confidence; and third, anchored in divine deliverance.

Anchored in Divine Provision

So what helped Paul as he weathered the storm of his imprisonment and the literal storm on the sea? He was anchored in divine provision. This is evident as Paul sets out on his journey. The first such anchor is the courteous centurion. Luke drops details here and there in this chapter that are so helpful to understand how the Lord provided anchors for Paul to take hold of as he made the arduous journey to Rome. How is the centurion an anchor of God's provision? His name is Julius, as we read in verse 1, a centurion of Augustus's band. Notice how he cares for Paul. In verse 3 we read, "And Julius courteously entreated Paul, and gave him liberty." In other words, he treated Paul kindly and allowed him to visit friends on shore after they landed at Sidon. This centurion is not a mere accessory to the story. He was part of the divine provision for Paul's journey, not just in easing Paul's chains, but his kindness is mentioned as a detail of the man's character. It testifies to God's provision for Paul as His servant made this journey to Rome.

But there's more. There's not only a courteous centurion who helps Paul and treats him with kindness, but Paul also has a close companion Luke mentions. We can almost pass over him as he is embedded in the text, but note in verse 2, "One Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica being with us." Who was this man, Aristarchus? He appears in Acts 19:29 where he was seized by the Ephesian mob as Paul preached against the idolatry of Diana, goddess of the Ephesians. He accompanies Paul in Acts 20:4 on the return leg of his third missionary journey. In the book of

Philemon in verse 24, Paul describes him as his fellow-worker. In Colossians 4:10–11 Paul describes him as his fellow-prisoner from whom he had received much comfort. This companion was part of God's provision for Paul's comfort, along with Luke who speaks in the first-person plural and gives a firsthand account of the journey to Rome. These close companions are there for Paul's comfort and encouragement.

And then there's a caring church that meets Paul on the docks of Sidon. In verse 3 we read that Julius gives Paul liberty to get off the ship "to go to his friends to refresh himself." They had been alerted to the fact that Paul was coming. They met him and served to refresh him with their hospitality, their love, and their spiritual encouragement. Quite literally, these believers at Sidon cared for Paul's needs. That is what the phrase "to refresh himself" means. Paul is not alone in this journey, but in God's kindness he is cared for by a courteous centurion, close companions, and a caring church.

And finally, Paul travels with divine clarity as to what the outcome was going to be in the midst of this voyage on the sea. There was a conflict of sorts that arose when they had arrived at the place called "The Fair Havens" near the city of Lasea. Luke gives a clue as to the time of year that it was, the time of the fast. This was around the Jewish Day of Atonement and in this time of year there was poor sailing weather. Paul knew this and warned the owner of the ship as well as the centurion about what was coming in terms of danger and damage (v. 10). There is this common sense, a clarity of what was at stake, but Paul's clarity was overruled by the ship's owner, as well as the centurion. Paul chides them in verse 21, "Sirs, ye should have hearkened unto me, and not have loosed from Crete, and to have gained this harm and loss." Nevertheless, there is this common sense, we could say, or divine clarity based on what Paul knew to be true regarding the sailing season.

And so we have the anchor of divine provision which God gives to Paul and to which he clings during his stormy voyage

to Rome. What a beautiful anchor of divine provision that we so often pass over! Isn't it true that we become so focused on the circumstances, on the storm, or on the destination that we fail to grasp the divine provision that God gives to battered saints on the voyage of life? Isn't it also true that we fail to be these things to other battered saints because we are so focused on our own destination? This divine provision is both a comfort in the lives of believers and a challenge to fellow saints to be that instrument of kindness, care, and encouragement to one another. It is on this basis that Christ will judge His people: "For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me (Matt. 25:35–36).

Anchored in Divine Confidence

But Paul was also anchored in divine confidence. As they set out from Crete, the south winds blew, and it seemed that all was fair weather for sailing. But in verse 14 we read that a tempestuous wind arose called Euroclydon, a hurricane-force wind from the northeast. What follows in verses 15–19 details the tempest that tossed the ship back and forth. For days they could not see sun or stars. They were lost because the sun and stars were used for navigation. Indeed, in verse 20 we read these mournful words, "And no small tempest lay on us, all hope that we should be saved was then taken away." In the midst of this hopelessness, darkness, storm, what anchor could there be? Paul stands up and chides the ship owner and the centurion for not listening to him. He reassures them that there will be no loss of life, only of the ship (vv. 21–22). He can say this on the basis of the anchor of divine confidence.

First, there is the confidence of *God's presence*. In verse 23 he shares with them the presence of God, the presence of Christ is with him, "For there stood by me this night the angel of God." This is none other than Christ who appeared to him

to reassure him and give him confidence in this storm. We say this is Christ because Paul says that he belongs to Him. This is no mere angel. Although all human hope was lost, the divine presence gives confidence. Notice how Paul describes His presence, “He stood by me.” He was close. He was intimately involved in what was happening. He is no detached God. He is the Master of storms, who stands with His own people in their storms. The divine presence gives confidence and comfort and anchors the believer in the midst of the fiercest storm. That is where we can stand today.

Second, there is the confidence of being *God's possession*. In verse 23, “For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve.” Paul is confident of his identity—he knows “Whose I am and whom I serve”—in the midst of the storm. Are you? His identity is not in his past, his future, or in his present credentials, accomplishments, or job. It is simply “whose I am and whom I serve.” He is Christ's and he serves Christ. This loosens him from fear in the midst of the storm. He is eternally secure in Christ. Nothing will ever change that. What is your only comfort in life and death, in the storms of life? I belong to Jesus and I serve Him. I am His in this storm. He will either keep me safe in the storm or will use the storm to bring me to glory. That is the believer's confidence. I serve Jesus. This storm will either prove that He has more serving for me to do, or my life of service will be changed into eternal praise. This gives confidence, doesn't it? When storms come, what anchors you? Do you have to figure out who you are first, or when the storm comes is this your confidence and comfort—that you belong to Christ and Him alone?

Third, there is the confidence of *God's revelation*. Christ was not silent when He appeared to Paul at night. He spoke to Paul. In verse 24 we read, “Saying, fear not, Paul.” What revelation it is in the moment of greatest need when we hear the voice of Christ saying, “Fear not.” They are words of peace and reassurance. Words that give confidence in the midst of any storm. Fear not. How

many times has the Lord spoken these words to His saints? How we need to hear them again! Fear not. This gives confidence like nothing else. As the winds of the storm increase in volume and the creaking timbers of the ship of life threaten to splinter into a million jagged pieces, yet the voice of the Master speaks, "Fear not!" Is His Word of calm and peace your confidence, believer, in the storms that you face? In the midst of fear, God's revelation is the anchor: "Fear not!"

Fourth, there is the confidence of *God's purpose*. In the midst of the storm, when all hope is lost, when the sun and stars cannot be located to navigate, Paul is confident in God's purpose for his life. In verse 24b we read Christ's words to Paul: "Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar." There is divine necessity and purpose in this statement that helps Paul see through the storm with confidence. He needs to appear before Caesar. That doesn't take away the storm, but it does give renewed perspective in the storm. This is not just the statement, "You will get through this storm because God has a wonderful plan for your life." No, this storm is part of God's purpose to bring Paul before Caesar. Paul was in chains and he would be unjustly imprisoned again in Rome. There is no rose-petal-strewn path for Paul's life. Life would continue to be difficult but he had this unshakeable confidence that God's purpose would be fulfilled in his life. Does that give you perspective in the storms that you face? The fact that God is working out His purpose in your life may not remove the storm, but it gives perspective and confidence. Even this trial is in my Father's hand to refine me, to fulfill His purpose for my life. It stills us to see that God is at work in spite of the difficulty. He is concerned about *how* we get there, remember?

Fifth, there is the confidence of *God's preservation*. In the midst of that storm, Paul heard these words from the end of verse 24: "And lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee." They would be preserved in the storm. They had to go through the storm, but they would be preserved. Isn't that a general principle that holds true for all of life for a believer? We still have to

go through the storms of life, but from the eternal perspective you will be kept. Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

Sixth, there is the confidence of *God's promise*. Listen to how Paul responds in verse 25: "Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me." Paul takes hold of God's promise: "I believe God." And he takes God at His Word: "even as it was told me." That is what faith looks like in the midst of the storm: It leans into God's presence standing with us; it is anchored in being God's possession; it is focused on God's revelation. Faith that is confident in God's purpose is resting in God's preservation. Faith in the storm takes hold of God's promise. Beloved, are you taking hold of God's promise in the midst of the storms of life? Are you anchored in this divine confidence? What do you believe? This is the only way to get through life's storms that you are facing.

Anchored in Divine Deliverance

As Paul is carried through the storm, he is not only anchored in divine confidence; he is also anchored in divine deliverance. This deliverance is seen in three parts. As the ship bobbed on the waves and faced the devastating winds, the shipmen were about to abandon the ship as their fate of death upon the rocks seemed sealed. In verse 30 they attempt to escape via a lifeboat, but then Paul says in verse 31, "Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved." If these men escape, God's promise of preservation would be null and void. Paul took God at His Word and he continued to do so. The lifeboat is severed from the ship and the shipmen stay in the boat to guarantee deliverance. How often don't we want to devise our own deliverance and jump ship in the middle of the storm? In storms, we should certainly use means, but not means that fly in the face of God's promises for deliverance. We cannot live out of two sides of our hearts: trusting in God's promise for deliverance on the one hand and then devising our own way of deliverance on the other. We need to stay in the boat in order to be delivered.

Then, too, there are the practical measures that Paul takes in anticipation of deliverance in God's way and in God's time. Notice what he says in verses 33–34: "This day is the fourteenth day that ye have tarried and continued fasting, having taken nothing. Wherefore I pray you to take some meat: for this is for your health: for there shall not an hair fall from the head of any of you." The final number of people in the boat was 276 souls. That exact number would be saved. Not one lost, not even a hair. There was no despair on Paul's part, but the divine confidence breathed fresh life into the mundane tasks of eating and drinking to strengthen the body for what lay ahead. And notice how Paul takes hold of the promise of deliverance again. He encourages his companions to eat for their health. Then he encourages them with the promise, "For there shall not an hair fall from the head of any of you." There is no room for paralyzing fear, but a preparation and a continuation of life in anticipation of deliverance. How are we doing in this area? Do you put your life on pause because of paralyzing fear, or do you take measures to continue living in anticipation of deliverance, whether now or at the second coming of Christ? We need some of the audacity of faith that Luther showed when he said, "Even if Christ comes tomorrow, I will plant an apple tree today." Storms should not paralyze us, but call us to continue living so that others can be encouraged with the promise of deliverance, even if we live with the tension of not knowing when that deliverance might be.

Finally, the ship is run aground and broken up as the waves shattered the boat. The soldiers want to kill the prisoners so they don't escape, but the centurion intervenes, showing compassion to Paul again in wanting to keep him alive. And deliverance comes for all of them according to the promise. Some swam, and some floated on boards or broken pieces of the ship, but the bottom line is in verse 44: "And so it came to pass that they escaped all safe to land." Paul and his traveling companions were anchored in divine deliverance. They escaped all safe. What an encouragement as we navigate the storms of life. God is there. God is moving all

things for His glory even when we can't see it. That has been the theme lately, hasn't it? God brings storms to test believers and His church. He will bring us to the final destination, but He is more concerned about the process, and in the midst of that process He provides invaluable anchors to take hold of: the anchor of divine provision; the anchor of divine confidence, and the anchor of divine deliverance. Take hold of these anchors and be safe! Amen.

The Baptism of the Lord Jesus Christ

Rev. Bartel Elsbout

Scripture Reading: Matthew 3

Text: John 1:29–34

Beloved, we commemorate annually the extraordinary event in redemption history of the incarnation of the eternal Son of God, the eternal Living Word. Having been conceived in Mary's womb, He was born in Bethlehem's manger under the most shameful circumstances imaginable, thereby highlighting how deeply we have fallen. Created, in Adam, to be God's image-bearers, we have fallen to the level of the beast, and therefore the Savior was born in a stable and laid in a manger.

Jesus's humble birth was the first of a sequence of events referred to as redemption history—the history of Jesus securing complete redemption for His people. In this sermon, we will focus on the next major event in redemption history, the baptism of the Lord Jesus Christ. However, to set the stage for our consideration of this event, let me begin by asking our boys and girls, “What happened to the Lord Jesus since His humble birth?”

Some of you would hopefully answer, “We know that as a twelve-year-old, Jesus went with His parents to Jerusalem, and He also visited the temple.” That is indeed correct. However, what makes this story so unique is that it is the only event recorded between Jesus's birth and the event we will now consider—the day when Jesus, being thirty years old, came to the Jordan River to be

baptized of John. When His parents finally found Him in the temple, Mary was rather upset with Him. However, though Jesus was only twelve years old, He lovingly admonished her, saying, “Wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business?” Already at this young age, He became increasingly conscious of who He was, being reminded in the temple of all that testified of Him. How deeply it must have stirred the holy soul of the young Jesus when He understood with profound insight that every detail of the temple pertained to Him and His Father’s business!

Beloved, His Father’s business brought Jesus to this earth. He came to accomplish His Father’s will regarding the redemption of sinners. Yet, one might ask, “What occurred during the eighteen years that followed His visit to the temple?” All we know is that He lived quietly and almost unnoticed in Nazareth. Inconspicuously He labored with His father, Joseph, in the carpentry trade. What must that have been for the Son of God, who by this time was fully aware of who He was! What must it have been for the Holy One of Israel, for Him who was sinless and pure, to live for thirty years in an environment where everything reminded Him of the fall and of sin and its bitter consequences—to live, so to speak, in the smoke of sin? What a yearning there must have been in Jesus’s holy soul for the day that He could fully accomplish His Father’s business!

That day came when He was thirty years old, for we read in Matthew 3, “Then,” at that precise moment, “cometh Jesus from Galilee.” Mark tells us that He came from the despised village of Nazareth. Even that simple fact added to His humiliation. He made Himself of no reputation even in the place where He dwelt. However, Jesus’s dramatic appearance at the Jordan River marks the moment when He deliberately stepped out of the shadow of obscurity, and purposefully sought out John, who was baptizing with water near the Jordan River.

With God’s help, we will see what a remarkable moment the baptism of Jesus was in the progression of redemption history—a moment as dramatic as His birth, as His sacrifice on the cross, as

His resurrection, and as His ascension. What a crucial and profound moment it was indeed when Jesus came to the Jordan River to be baptized of John!

We will reflect on this event by expounding verses 15 through 17 of Matthew 3:

And Jesus answering said unto him [that is, John], Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness. Then he suffered him. And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: and lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

Thus, we will consider the baptism of the Lord Jesus Christ. First, we will focus on the reason for His baptism, namely to fulfill all righteousness. Second, we will consider the result of His baptism, namely that the heavens were opened unto Him and the Spirit of God descended upon Him. And third, we will address the testimony that followed His baptism when the Father spoke from heaven, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

Let me put it another way by repeating my points as follows. We are going to look at 1) a *willing* Mediator who committed Himself to fulfill all righteousness; 2) a *qualified* Mediator, as the heavens were opened to Him; and 3) an *approved* Mediator because the Father said, “I am well pleased in Him. I approve of Him.”

A Willing Mediator: The Reason for Christ’s Baptism

We will begin by focusing on the reason for Jesus’s baptism. Beloved, please pay careful attention to what I am going to say. Often this passage is interpreted as asserting that Christ here submitted Himself to the sacrament of New Testament baptism, and in so doing modeled believers’ baptism or credobaptism. However, that is decidedly not the case, for the baptismal rite administered

by John was primarily an Old Testament ritual. Though John the Baptist stood on the threshold of the New Testament, and his ministry formed a crucial link between the Old and New Testaments, he was not a minister of the New Testament. Instead, he was the final prophet of the Old Testament, following a long sequence of prophets that had gone before him. The Lord Jesus clearly identified him as such.

In Matthew 11:9–13, we read Christ's testimony regarding John the Baptist:

But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. [And now note verse 13:] For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.

Thus, John was the final prophet in a long sequence of prophets that included, among others, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. However, what distinguished him from all the prophets that had gone before him was that he was the one who had the extraordinary privilege of being the forerunner of the promised Messiah. More importantly, he had the unique privilege of introducing the Messiah to Israel. Furthermore, to grasp the significance of this, we need to understand that the New Testament period does not begin until the veil was rent at Jesus's death. Until then, the Old Testament economy was in full force. Therefore, throughout Christ's entire earthly sojourn, He meticulously fulfilled the obligations of the ceremonial law God had given to Israel.

When considering John's ministry and baptism, we must therefore recognize that the Old Testament administration of the covenant of grace had not yet ended. Though John is commonly and regularly referred to as John the Baptist, he engaged

in a priestly cleansing rite that he would have learned from his father, the priest Zacharias. As a priest, Zacharias would have performed all the Levitical washings¹ stipulated by the ceremonial law. Consequently, Zacharias would have trained his oldest son, John, to fulfill all the responsibilities and rites that belonged to the priesthood.

Given the Old Testament context of his ministry, John was therefore engaging in a Levitical cleansing ritual that all the Jews would have recognized. This ritual communicated to them visibly and tangibly what John was proclaiming: they were impure sinners who needed to repent of their sins. Thus, his baptism perfectly matched his message and is appropriately designated as “the baptism of repentance.”

Of course, as he was administering this baptismal rite, John was also proclaiming the Christ whose forerunner he was and who would be the perfect fulfillment of what his baptism symbolized. Later, when the multitudes heard Christ, they would remember John’s testimony regarding Christ, saying, “All things that John spake of this man were true” (John 10:41).

However, in the specific context of John baptizing Jesus, we must recognize that he was administering an Old Testament rite of purification *as the son of a priest*. This explains why we read four times in John 1 that he did not baptize *in* water but rather *with* water, for the priests baptized by sprinkling and pouring. Thus, rather than administering the sacrament of New Testament baptism, John performed an Old Testament rite of purification, and his baptism would have been recognized as such by all the Israelites who came to the Jordan River.

We need to point out here that Christ did not institute the sacrament of New Testament baptism until just before His

1. We know that the book of Hebrews designates as *baptisms* (Heb. 6:2) all the ceremonial purification rites mandated by the ceremonial law. *In this text*, the apostle uses the noun *baptismos*, a derivative of the verb *baptizo* (to baptize). Used in that context, *baptizo* is also descriptive of all the Old Testament rites of ceremonial purification and cleansing.

ascension when He commanded His disciples to go forth into all the world and to baptize “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matt. 28:19). Consequently, it was not until the day of Pentecost that the New Testament sacrament of baptism was administered for the first time.

This explains what is recorded in Acts 19:1–5. There we read that when Paul meets some disciples, he asks them whether they had received the Holy Ghost, to which they replied, “We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost.” Paul responds by asking, “Unto what then were ye baptized?” In other words, “If you have been baptized as disciples, how can you be ignorant of the Holy Ghost?” After all, if they had received Christian baptism, they would have been baptized “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” When these disciples answered, “Unto John’s baptism,” Paul did not say, “Well, then you are baptized already.” Instead, we read that he baptized them, for John’s baptism was not New Testament baptism.

Let me repeat, John’s baptism was an Old Testament purification rite performed by the eldest son of a priest. It was a rite of purification that entirely belonged to the Old Testament administration of the covenant of grace, and his baptism was a continuation of it. John’s ministry was setting the stage for the introduction of the Mediator of the covenant of grace and its New Testament administration.

Beloved, this is highly significant because unless we understand the nature and purpose of John’s baptism, we will not understand the significance of what happened when John baptized Jesus. We will not understand why Jesus purposefully left Nazareth and intentionally came to the Jordan River. He did not merely do so because He wanted to endorse John’s ministry and baptism. Instead, He came because He knew what many others did not know, namely that John was a legitimate priest who was authorized to administer the baptismal (purification) rites mandated by the ceremonial law.

That explains why we also read in John 1 that John the Baptist was visited by what could be called the “credentials committee.” This committee consisted of men sent by the Pharisees and Levites who asked John, “Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet?” In other words, “What right do you have to engage in this purification rite? What right do you have to be baptizing? What makes your baptism legitimate?” It was not so much John’s preaching that alarmed them, but rather his baptism. His message and ministry pointed to what Ezekiel had prophesied regarding the Messiah (Ezek. 36:25; 37:23).

Therefore, they first asked him whether he was “that Christ,” to which he responded, “No, I am not.” Why did they ask that question? For the simple reason that it is prophesied in Isaiah 52 that when the Messiah would come, He would sprinkle the nations; that is, He would baptize the nations. When he told them that he was not the Christ, they asked him, “Then art thou Elias?” for John resembled Elijah by wearing the same garment. John replied, “No, I’m not Elias.” “Art thou then that prophet of Deuteronomy 18?” they ask, and John answers, “No, I am not that prophet.” In exasperation they finally ask, “Well, who are you, then?” John replies by quoting Isaiah 40:3, a passage quoted in both Matthew and John, “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness; I have been sent to prepare the way for the Messiah.”

This official delegation came to examine him because only Priests and Levites could legitimately engage in what he was doing. They may not have known what Jesus knew, namely, that John was the son of a priest, and thus a priest himself.

However, Jesus was fully cognizant of that fact. It was precisely for that reason that Jesus sought out John, for we have here arrived at the moment when Christ will officially accept His full responsibility as the Messiah, and especially the duties and ultimate consequences of His priesthood.

As the Author of the Old Testament, Jesus knew perfectly what the law required of Him formally and officially to begin His

public ministry as God's Anointed One—as the Messiah and the Christ. He knew that He had to be thirty years old, and therefore had waited until this time. Second, He knew He had to undergo the rite of purification. He had to undergo the ritual of cleansing as prescribed in Numbers 8:7. Third, He knew that He had to be anointed. These three requirements had to be met.

Why did these requirements have to be met for one who would enter the Levitical priesthood? Priests and Levites had to realize that, in and of themselves, they were unclean in God's sight, and therefore unfit for their office. However, as humbling as this ceremonial ritual was on the one hand, God thereby also communicated to sinful and yet chosen men that, by their submission to being ceremonially washed and anointed, He would give them what He required of them in the exercise of their office.

That requirement of the ceremonial law is the exact reason why Jesus sought out John at this precise moment, and why it is remarkably recorded in John 1:31, "And I knew Him not." John, of course, knew Jesus, for they grew up together. Though John learned from his mother who Jesus was, he did not yet fully understand what it meant that Jesus was the Messiah. What he says, therefore, is highly significant: "but that He [i.e., Jesus, the Messiah] should be made manifest to Israel, *therefore* am I come baptizing with water." In other words, "The express purpose of my baptism is that He (Jesus, the Messiah) might be manifest. The preeminent purpose of my baptism is to introduce the Messiah to Israel—and thus the commencement of an entirely new era." That, and that alone, is the reason why Jesus so deliberately and purposefully sought out John to be baptized of him.

We then read that John forbade him, saying, "I have need to be baptized of thee and comest thou to me?" Oh, he knew enough about Jesus to know that He was pure and holy, and therefore he exclaimed, "Thou comest to me? I am the impure one, and Thou art the Pure One. Thou art not in need of the pardon of sin. Then why art Thou asking me to administer this rite of cleansing?"

Then follows Jesus's extraordinary response to John's persistent protest. When we read that John forbade Him, we need to recognize that the Greek original uses the imperfect tense, which means that John repeatedly stated that he could not baptize Jesus. Jesus then replied, "Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." He is saying, "John, cease and desist! As Mediator, I must submit Myself to this purification rite. I must submit Myself to the requirements of God's law. I cannot officially begin My ministry unless I submit Myself to that which the law requires."

Therefore, the baptism of the Lord Jesus is nothing less than His formal inauguration as the Messiah. Of course, He was the Messiah since His birth, but here He formally begins His *public* ministry. It was that awareness that prompted Him to utter the remarkable words, "...for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." Here, the term "righteousness" encompasses all that God requires in His Word, and specifically what He requires in His law, including the ceremonial law. To these requirements, He willingly submitted Himself as the divinely appointed Mediator. That is why this was a dramatic and profoundly important moment in redemption history, for here the Lord Jesus formally began His public ministry as God's Anointed One, the Messiah.²

2. I recognize that my premise that John's baptism is not New Testament baptism contradicts the view of several eminent expositors of Scripture. Particularly John Calvin has stated emphatically that John's baptism is identical to the baptism of the apostles, and thus to Christian baptism. With a sense of trepidation, and yet firmly, I disagree with that conclusion.

In support of my conclusion, I wish to quote what the magisterial Puritan theologian, John Owen, writes about the baptism of Christ, pointing out that Christ received the baptism of the Spirit without measure:

And this collation of extraordinary gifts for the discharge of his prophetic office was at his baptism, Matt. iii. 17. They were not bestowed on the Head of the church, nor are any gifts of the same nature in general bestowed on any of his members, but for use, exercise, and improvement. And that they were then collated appears; for,

Here we behold Christ as a Priest who indeed was without blemish. As you may know, the ceremonial law of the Old Testament required a priest to be without blemish, and a man with some physical blemish would therefore be disqualified to serve.

1. Then did he receive the *visible pledge* which confirmed him in, and testified unto others his calling of God to, the exercise of his *office*; for then” the Spirit of God descended like a dove, and lighted upon him: and lo a voice came from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased,” Matt. iii. 16, 17. Hereby was he “sealed of God the Father,” John vi. 27, in that visible pledge of his vocation, setting the great seal of heaven to his commission. And this also was to be a testimony unto others, that they might own him in his office, now he had undertaken to discharge it, chap. i. 33.

2. He now entered on his public ministry, and wholly *gave himself up* unto his work, for before, he did only occasionally manifest the presence of God with him, somewhat to prepare the minds of men to attend unto his ministry, as when he filled them with astonishment at his discourses with the doctors in the temple, Luke ii. 46, 47. And although it is probable that he might be acted by the Spirit in and unto many such extraordinary actions during his course of a private life, yet the fulness of gifts for his work he received not until the time of his baptism, and, therefore, before that he gave not himself up wholly unto his public ministry.

3. Immediately hereon it is said that *he was “full of the Holy Ghost,”* Luke iv. 1. Before, he was said to “wax strong in spirit,” chap. ii. 40, “continually filling;” but now he is “full of the Holy Ghost.” He was actually possessed of and furnished with all that fulness of spiritual gifts which were any way needful for him or useful unto him, or which human nature is capable of receiving. With respect hereunto doth the evangelist [Baptist?] use that expression, John iii. 34, “For God giveth not the Spirit by measure,” That it is the Lord Jesus Christ who is here intended, unto whom the Spirit is thus given, is evident from the context, although it be not express[ed] in the text. He is spoken of, and is the subject of the whole discourse: Verse 31, “He that cometh from above is above all: he that cometh from heaven is above all.” None doubts but that this is a description of the person of Christ (*The Works of John Owen*, 3:171–72).

My initial recognition that John’s baptism is not New Testament baptism has arisen in no small measure from reading chapter 8 (Johannic Baptism) of Duane E. Spencer’s book, *Holy Baptism: Word Keys Which Unlock the Covenant* (Tyler Texas: Geneva Ministries, 1984), 77–86.

However, Jesus was truly without blemish, not only outwardly but also inwardly. Yet He willingly submitted Himself to a purification rite that communicated the opposite, namely, moral impurity.

Thus, what do we immediately notice here? As Jesus publicly accepted His responsibilities as the Messiah, and as He consciously began the trajectory that would bring Him to the cross, He emptied Himself and made Himself of no reputation (Phil. 2:7). Willingly He divested Himself of all of His glory, and submitted Himself as Mediator to the requirements of His Father's law.

Here we have a striking illustration of what Paul speaks about in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "He who knew no sin was made sin." Why? "So that we," who know no righteousness, as the Scot Hugh Martin so beautifully says, "might be made the righteousness of God in Him." That is why Jesus consciously emptied Himself of His glory and made Himself of no reputation. That is why He said lovingly and firmly to John, "Suffer it to be so now, because I must fulfill all righteousness. It becomes Me as the Messiah to fulfill all righteousness. I have come to accomplish My Father's business." What an extraordinary moment! Here the holy and sinless Jesus submits Himself to a rite that implied sin and uncleanness, doing so as the willing Mediator and Substitute of His people.

Beloved, here we have, therefore, a profound example of Christ's active obedience as Mediator, and we need to understand that His active obedience is as important as His passive obedience. His passive obedience refers to His suffering obedience—the obedience He accomplished on the cross. However, here we have an example of Christ's active obedience, for He actively and willingly submitted Himself to the requirements of God's law.

Dear believer, had He not done this, He could not have saved you. To save you, not only did He have to die on the cross and be a sacrifice for your sin, but in order to be your complete Mediator and Savior He also had to fulfill all righteousness. Consequently, He actively obeyed God's law perfectly and flawlessly during His

entire sojourn on earth. Jesus summarizes all of this when He says to John, "...for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness."

This explains why Jesus, shortly thereafter, said in His opening statement in the Sermon on the Mount, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets. I have not come to destroy but to fulfill. One jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law till all be fulfilled" (Matt. 5:18), "for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." All of it!

This is precisely what Psalm 40:8 communicates and is repeated in the book of Hebrews: "I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart." That is what Jesus did here. He showed His delight in doing His Father's will, in doing His Father's business, and in doing His Father's bidding publicly. What a beautiful illustration and affirmation we have here of His willingness to be the Mediator and Savior of sinners! To put it simply, dear believer, He knew that in order to save you nothing could be lacking. He knew that His mediatorial obedience had to be perfect and complete. It had to be all-encompassing; it had to be comprehensive. As Mediator, He had to fulfill *all* righteousness because we have absolutely none. Simply put, we are void of *all* righteousness. Thus, dear believer, since you have no righteousness whatsoever, and are spiritually and morally bankrupt, He had to fulfill *all* righteousness on your behalf.

This Messiah, this willing Mediator, is precisely the Savior that you and I need. This is the Savior who is revealed to us in the gospel; a Mediator who at this sacred moment pledged with an everlasting commitment to fulfill all righteousness. In so doing, He was setting the stage for what would happen later at the cross, for had He failed in His active obedience, if there would have been one flaw and if He would have failed in but one instance, it would have disqualified Him. However, thanks be to God, He did fulfill all righteousness. Earlier, He had already demonstrated His perfect active obedience as a twelve-year-old boy when He willingly honored His parents and thereby actively obeyed the fifth commandment.

During the first thirty years of Jesus's life, when He quietly lived in Nazareth, He had already been fulfilling all righteousness by living a sinless life. However, now He accepts His responsibilities as Mediator publicly. At this crucial moment in redemption history, He begins His public ministry as a priest. Therefore, He says later in Luke 12:50 (and think about how important these words are), "But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!"—that is, till it be finished. In these words, He is referring to the baptism of God's wrath; that is, when God's wrath would be poured out upon Him on the cross. Remarkably, He said that He longed for that overwhelming moment. "How am I straitened," He said, "till it be accomplished!" He said, so to speak, "I cannot wait until I can finish my Father's business because that is why I have come forth."

Thus, the ultimate outcome of Christ's active and passive obedience is that we may know today that, as Mediator, He has truly fulfilled all righteousness. Therefore, when Jesus came out of the wilderness after having been tempted for forty days, John (who now knew who Jesus was) said to the multitude, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). As God's appointed forerunner of the Messiah, he now formally introduced Him to the nation of Israel.

A Qualified Mediator: The Result of Christ's Baptism

What happened after Jesus forcefully declared, "for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness?" We read, "And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him." Here we not only observe a willing and obedient Mediator, but now we may see that He is also a qualified Mediator because the heavens were not merely opened, but rather they were opened unto *Him!*

Luke 3:21 provides us with additional insight regarding this moment. We read, "Now when all the people were baptized, it came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and praying, the

heaven was opened.” Thus, as the heavens were opened to Him, He was praying. Or perhaps we could say that while He was praying, while He lifted His eyes heavenward, the heavens were opened. That begs the question, “What was Jesus praying?” Though we are not told what He was praying, we may surmise to some extent what He was praying since the heavens were opened to Him while praying. How deeply conscious He was of the weightiness of this moment! Jesus was fully cognizant of what He had just agreed to do. He was deeply aware of what it meant that He had publicly committed Himself to fulfill all righteousness, and thus do His Father’s business.

In His perfect humanity, He knew that He needed the Holy Spirit’s empowerment to enable Him to carry out this task. Without the Holy Spirit, Christ could not have accomplished His work. There is an inseparable connection between Christ and the Holy Spirit. The Spirit accomplished Christ’s miraculous conception in Mary’s womb, and we read in the book of Hebrews that it was by the Holy Spirit that Christ offered Himself (Heb. 9:14). At His baptism, the Son of God, the Messiah, the Christ, longs for the divine anointing of the Spirit to equip Him to engage in His mediatorial work.

As He prayed, He may very well have said to His Father, “Lo, I come to do Thy will, O God. Father, I am prepared to fulfill all righteousness. I am prepared to do what I have committed Myself to do in Our eternal counsel of peace.” He fully knew what was before Him. I can assure you that at this extraordinary moment He saw the cross in the distance. He knew what the ultimate consequences of fulfilling all righteousness would mean. He may very well have prayed what He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt [Matt. 26:39]; Father, I will do thy business.” At a later date, we read of Jesus lifting up His eyes and saying, “Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me, and I knew that thou hearest me always” (John 11:41–42). Thus, as He was praying and looking heavenward, He sees the heavens opened

to Him and the Spirit descending. It was the visible affirmation of His baptism, for all the rites of purification, including New Testament Baptism, signify the purifying, renewing, cleansing, and enabling ministry of the Holy Spirit.

However, the descent of the Spirit was not only a visible affirmation of Christ's baptism. Most importantly, as the Messiah, He was now being anointed as the Anointed One. Rather than Christ here being anointed with oil, He was being anointed with what the oil signified, namely the Holy Spirit Himself. Jesus now witnessed this divine affirmation of His calling to be God's Anointed One. Though there is some difference of opinion among commentators, I am inclined to agree with those who maintain that Christ Himself sees heaven opened. What a profound encouragement that must have been for Him! Here the Spirit descends upon the second Adam. When God created the first Adam, he became a living soul when God breathed into his nostrils. He became a Spirit-filled man. Here the Spirit descends upon the second Adam, the only difference being that God gave Him the Spirit without measure (John 3:34).

The descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Messiah was the public affirmation that He was indeed God's Anointed One. As we have stated earlier, the word *Messiah* means Anointed One, and the Name *Christ* is simply the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word "Messiah." In Acts 10:38 we read, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power."

In Matthew 21 and Mark 11, we read of Jesus overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the temple the second time. The Pharisees then came and challenged Him by asking, "By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?" to which He replied, "I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I in like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men?" (Matt. 21:24-25). They knew Jesus had them cornered because they would be indicted no matter how they answered. Thus they piously replied, "We cannot tell," to which

He responded, “Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things.” Why did Jesus make mention here of the baptism of John? Simply because the baptism of John was His inauguration as the Messiah, and that authorized Him to do what He did, and made His actions in the temple legitimate.

Oh, what an encouragement it must have been for the Messiah to look into those heavens which were opened unto Him! This is gospel truth indeed! No one else could have achieved this but God’s Messiah. When Adam and Eve were created, they lived under an open heaven. God walked in the Garden of Eden every day, and in some way manifested His Shekinah (revealed) glory to them. Heaven descended upon earth, for God walked among them, and they communed with Him. The Garden of Eden was a portal into heaven itself.

All of that changed when our first parents sinned. As you know, they were expelled from Paradise. A holy God could not permit an unholy creature to be in His sanctuary, and the Cherubim thus barred the east gate of the garden with flaming swords of fire. Heaven was closed. The door was closed. However, as Jesus at the Jordan officially begins His ministry, being publicly inaugurated as the Messiah and accepting His assignment willingly by saying, “Thus it becomes me to fulfill all righteousness,” the heavens are opened to Him. He alone could achieve that. He alone could again open the door into heaven that we have closed through our sin.

So, in a sense, this anticipates that great moment when, at the cross, He gave up the ghost after having cried out, “It is finished!” It was then that the veil was rent whereby the Father dramatically demonstrated that the wall of separation between Him and sinners had been removed. The way to God had been opened, and all of this is already anticipated at Christ’s baptism. This is what Christ would ultimately accomplish. Through His sacrifice, as a fruit of having fulfilled all righteousness, He would open the heavens, and through that open heaven the Spirit would descend

on the day of Pentecost to render Christ's mediatorial work fruitful in the hearts of sinners.

An Approved Mediator: The Testimony Following Christ's Baptism

Thus far we have considered Christ as a willing Mediator and a qualified Mediator. We will now consider the Father's testimony regarding His Son, affirming that He is also an approved Savior and Mediator. Earthly fathers may know of moments when they can proudly say, "This is my son," or "This is my daughter." We say this because our children are a reflection of ourselves. In a way our children are a revelation of who we are. We feel this intimate bond of love and will say, especially when our children have achieved something, "My son did this. This is my boy." Beloved, I do not know how to begin to express to you what happened at this sacred moment when the Messiah, the Father's Son, willingly accepted His mediatorial assignment; when He willingly embraced especially His priestly ministry; when He willingly said "Amen" to what was required of Him; and when He willingly entered upon the pathway that would lead to the accursed cross of Calvary.

When He publicly expressed that willingness, the Father could no longer refrain from opening heaven and resounding His voice: "This is My beloved Son. This is the Son of My love, the Son of My delight, the Son of My bosom." John the Baptist would have recognized instantly the connection with Isaiah 42:1 where we read, "Behold, my servant whom I uphold, mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth. I have put my Spirit upon him." Here we have a literal fulfillment of this prophecy.

"This is my beloved Son." Oh, here the Father beheld his Son willingly commit Himself to execute that which They had agreed upon eternally in the counsel of peace. He beheld Him as willing to carry out what had to be accomplished to merit redemption for lawbreakers, for sinners like you and me who are utterly void of all righteousness. Oh, here the Father beheld His Son accepting His task as the Mediator of the covenant of grace! He knew that

His Son would accomplish His sovereign good pleasure. Christ's willing active and passive obedience cause His Father's good pleasure to prosper, and sinners would be redeemed. Therefore, The Father could not remain silent, and with unspeakable love He looked down upon the Son of His love and said, "I fully endorse Him. I am well pleased with Him. He is My approved Messiah." What an extraordinarily rich gospel is couched in these words! They communicate that the Christ we preach to you is not only qualified, but by way of the Father's testimony we also know that He is an approved Mediator. The thrice-holy God approves of the Messiah by saying, "I am well pleased in Him."

That makes the Father's gift of His only-begotten and well-beloved Son so extraordinary! Jesus communicated this to Nicodemus when He profoundly summarized the gospel, saying, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Jesus is here saying, "The measure of My Father's love is the fact that He gave Me, His only begotten Son, the Son of His love, as a sacrifice for sin."

What unfolds at this sacred moment is the public beginning of the pathway that would lead to the cross. The Father who loves His Son here expressed how well pleased He is with His Son and His willingness, as the Christ, to give Himself as a sacrifice for sin. Beloved, how can we begin to fathom the love that the Father has for His Son? It is the infinite love of a Father who knows His Son with an infinite knowledge (Matt. 11:27), and who is infinitely committed to promoting the glory of His Son. In order to accomplish the great work of redemption, He gives His Son to be a sacrifice for sin—a sacrifice that would require His Son to be nailed to the accursed cross.

Even though the cross is a profound mystery, we do know that all that the Father has ever done and will do has but one objective, namely, the glory of His only begotten Son. How conscious Jesus was of that in His high priestly prayer! On the eve of His crucifixion, He prayed, "Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son,

that thy Son also may glorify thee...glorify thou...me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was" (John 17:1, 5). Thus, He besought His Father to glorify Him with the glory He had before He came into this world to do His Father's business by fulfilling all righteousness.

The implications of this divine approval of the Messiah are momentous. Not only did the Messiah accept His assignment and say, "I am willing to do what I have committed Myself to do," but the Father here expresses that He fully accepts Him as the One to fulfill all righteousness. By saying of His Son, "I am well pleased with Him," the Father is saying, so to speak, "I accept Him as the One to do My business, to carry out My good pleasure, and to accomplish the work of redemption." Beloved, that means that everything Christ accomplished in His active and passive obedience bears the stamp of His Father's approval. This is enormously significant for believers!

The Father's approval of His Son as the one-and-only Mediator between God and man means that when, by Spirit-wrought faith, we put our trust in this Savior, we embrace Him in the totality of who He is as to His person and His work—the Mediator in whom the Father is well pleased. Why is that so precious? Since Christ here engages Himself as Mediator, He engages Himself on behalf of all those whom the Father had given Him, all whom He had received out of His Father's hand. Since at this sacred moment in redemption history Christ engages Himself as Mediator, this declaration of divine approval means that the Father is also well pleased with all whom He represents; that is, with all those who are in Christ and are united to Him. Therefore, dear believer, since the Father is well pleased with His Son, He is also well pleased with you. Paul had this extraordinary truth in mind when he encouraged the Ephesian believers by saying they were "accepted in the beloved" (Eph. 1:6b).

Thus, though believers in themselves remain wretched men or women until they die, they are accepted in this Mediator, in the Beloved. Dear believer, Jesus Christ has fulfilled all righteousness

for you. All of it! Nothing is lacking; nothing needs to be added to it. Not one tear, not one sigh needs to be added to what He has accomplished. What a privilege it is therefore to be found in Christ—to be a partaker of Him and all His benefits!

Christ speaks of that blessed union in John 15. Consequently, the New Testament often speaks of that blessed union between the Mediator and those for whom He gave Himself. Oh, how blessed are the implications of that union! Perhaps you are presently very displeased with, and discouraged about, yourself. My dear friend, if by grace you hunger and thirst after His righteousness, and therefore have taken, and continue to take, refuge to this altogether lovely Christ—this willing, qualified, and approved Mediator—you are complete in Him. The fact that you are irresistibly drawn to Christ, and that the confession of your life is, “Give me this Jesus, or else I die,” is irrefutable evidence that you are united to Christ. That means that you are indeed accepted in the Beloved!

Therefore, it will always be the distinguishing mark of God’s children, the children of this heavenly Father, that they are well pleased with this Mediator. By nature, we are neither interested in nor desire such a Mediator. Naturally, we are just like the man who came to the wedding feast and saw no need to accept the freely offered robe of the king, thinking that his own garments were good enough. He was well pleased with himself and with his own garments. Such is our state by nature.

However, when the Spirit who here descended upon Christ, whose work it is to glorify Christ, works in the hearts of sinners, everything changes. He teaches us who we truly are in the sight of God, and how unacceptable our self-manufactured fig leaves are. In short, He will make room for the altogether-lovely Christ who took it upon Himself to fulfill all righteousness.

Beloved, “making room for Christ” is a very legitimate expression when speaking of the work of the Holy Spirit, for by nature there is no room in my or your heart for this precious Christ. When the Holy Spirit begins His work in our hearts to lead us to

a believing embrace of the Lord Jesus Christ, He will strip us of all our imaginary righteousness. He will convict us that even our righteousnesses are as filthy rags in the sight of God (Isa. 64:6). How necessary such conviction is! Indeed, unless we recognize in some measure how spiritually bankrupt and destitute we are, why would we ever desire such a Savior? Unless we understand, not just theologically or intellectually, but rather experientially, that we are void of all righteousness, why would we ever delight in a Mediator who has said, "I will fulfill all righteousness. I will do it all"? Let us realize that we do not possess even a stitch of righteousness in the sight of God, so that we will treasure such a Mediator.

What a painful discovery it is when the Spirit of God strips us of all of our imaginary righteousness! How unsettling it is when the Spirit of God makes us utterly displeased with ourselves! For, it will be then, and then alone, that we will look outside of ourselves to the Christ freely offered to us in the gospel. Only when we see ourselves the way God sees us, as altogether guilty, vile, and corrupt, will this Christ become altogether lovely. Expressed differently, the more I become displeased with myself, the more I will become well pleased with this willing, qualified, and approved Mediator. To put it in the words of John the Baptist, the more He increases, the more we will decrease (John 3:30).

This becoming displeased with ourselves and well pleased with Christ are the two inseparable sides of one experiential coin. How lovely Jesus increasingly becomes to His people who increasingly discover how utterly unlovely and wretched they are in themselves! How exceedingly precious to them is this willing, able, qualified, and all-sufficient Mediator as the One whose precious blood cleanses from all sins, whose flawless righteousness covers our spiritual nakedness before God, who reconciles us unto God, who has paid the price for our adoption into God's family—and thus who, by fulfilling all righteousness, has restored our broken covenant relationship with God! What beauty and preciousness may believers behold in this Mediator in whom the Father is well pleased, and in whom they may be well pleased!

Some friends once asked an old, experienced Christian, “Brother, how is it with your soul?” After a moment’s pause, he pointed to the door of his room and simply replied, “Do you see the key in that lock? Christ fits in my soul as precisely as that key fits that lock.” What a simple yet powerful illustration of the saving ministry of the Spirit of Christ! Beloved, the Christ of our text does not naturally fit in our hearts. A mighty work of the Holy Spirit is therefore necessary to prepare our hearts so that Christ will become a precise fit. That is preeminently what the Holy Spirit does! He will work irresistibly in the heart until Christ becomes a precise fit for our souls so that we will desire and need exactly such a Savior as is set before us here: a willing, qualified, and approved Mediator.

Beloved, we need to know this precious Christ personally and experientially. I recognize and acknowledge that God is sovereign and free in how He leads us, and that each believer has a unique history. That being said, however, if you know nothing of being emptied of your righteousness, of despairing of yourself, and of looking outside of yourself to this magnificent Savior, you are a stranger to saving grace. It’s that simple! Christ said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are they that mourn, and blessed are the meek” (Matt. 5:3–5), for they will hunger and thirst after this Christ and His perfect righteousness. They need this perfect righteousness. They need this alien righteousness, as Luther called it, a righteousness outside of themselves—a righteousness required by the Father and provided in His Son. Therefore, true believers need and yearn for a Mediator who has accomplished all righteousness. All of it! Jesus summarized this by saying, “Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me” (John 6:45b).

Conclusion

Beloved, how instructive is the account of Christ’s baptism! What a dramatic moment in redemption history, and a most extraordinary affirmation of the Trinity—probably the most extraordinary

affirmation of the Trinity in all of Scripture! When Jesus commissioned His disciples to engage in New Testament Baptism, instructing them to do it in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, all three Persons of the Trinity were mentioned by name for the first time in that sequence. However, at this sacred moment, we hear the voice of the Father audibly, we witness the descent of the Spirit visibly, and we behold the incarnate Son, the Word made flesh. All three persons of the Trinity are highlighted in this amazing and dramatic moment in redemption history.

Thus, as the Mediator begins His public and official ministry, we see that in the work of redemption that would prosper by His hand, He would be accomplishing the work of a triune God. Salvation is indeed the work of a triune God. Therefore, Jesus sends His disciples into the world to baptize sinners “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matt. 28:19).

Beloved, in conclusion, I ask you once more: “Are you well pleased with this Mediator? Does this Savior fit your heart like a key fits a lock? Is it also your confession that Christ is a precise fit for your heart?” I must emphasize again that all believers will have that in common. All believers indeed love this Christ in sincerity (Eph. 6:24). All believers will confess what the bride confessed in the Song of Solomon 5:10, 16, “My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand.... yea, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.” Is He also altogether lovely to you?

And if you do not yet savingly know this precious Christ, then I preach to you a complete Savior who is fully capable, willing, and qualified to save a sinner just like you. In His name I offer you freely that righteousness which He has accomplished. The gospel promises you, sinner, that if you believe in this Christ, God will impute to your account, to your bankrupt sinner’s account, that righteousness which Christ has merited. He will impute to you the righteousness He requires, for He requires a flawless obedience and a perfect righteousness that you and I cannot manufacture. By

way of the gospel, God proclaims this marvelous promise, saying, “Sinner, if you believe in My Son, I will credit to your account the righteousness I require and My Son has accomplished. Once I do that, I will view you as if that righteousness were your own, and I will declare you righteous based on His imputed righteousness.”

That is the unconditional and unfettered promise of the gospel! It matters not how deeply you have sunk, how grievously you have sinned, or what may be the damning record of your sins. It matters not because the blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, cleanses from *all* sin. When you take refuge in this Christ and believe on Him—even if your faith is as feeble as a dying Israelite in the wilderness looking upon the brazen serpent, or the woman with the issue of blood touching the hem of Christ’s garment—you may be sure that He will also cleanse you from *all* sins and grant you the full pardon of *all* your sins. That is the unmistakable promise of the gospel: “To him [Christ, the Messiah] give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:43).

Dear believer, God still declares to you today what He said to His people in Exodus 12:13, “When I see the blood, I will pass over you.” Oh, beloved, He always sees that blood, and He alone knows the true and infinite value of that blood, the blood of His only begotten Son in whom He is well pleased. Through the ministry of Word and sacrament He wants to reassure you, saying, “When I see that blood, the blood of My infinitely precious Son, the blood of the Lamb of God, I will most surely pass over you.”

What a comforting truth that is! Believer, the foundation of your salvation is not in what you see of it. What you see of that blood is very deficient and intermittent. Therefore, the foundation of your salvation is secure in the fact that the Father always sees the blood of His Son and that He is well pleased with that blood. When we may see that blood by faith, we may experience the comfort of that blood and the righteousness secured by it. However, the foundation of our hope is anchored in the fact that the Father sees the blood of His beloved Son who has fulfilled all righteousness.

He sees it even when the clouds of unbelief obscure for us that precious Savior and His blood.

In conclusion, beloved, I urge you to consider the Father's testimony regarding His well-beloved Son: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!" The question, therefore, is, "Are you also well pleased with the Father's Son?" Your answer to that question will determine your eternal destiny. You cannot honor God more than when you also are well pleased in His beloved Son. God will welcome with open arms all who are well pleased with His Son and believe in Him.

However, you also cannot dishonor Him more than by not believing in His beloved Son. In the final words of his public ministry, the John who baptized Jesus stated this with razor-sharp clarity: "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36). God forbid that you would have to endure the wrath of the Father who publicly declared His love for His Son and who will damn you because you made Him a liar by not believing the record He gave of His Son (1 John 5:10–11). Indeed, "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?" (Heb. 2:3). Therefore, give heed to the urgent imperative of the gospel: "Kiss the Son, lest he [the LORD, the Father] be angry, and ye perish from the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they [and they alone!] that put their trust in Him." Amen.

