

The Baptism and Genealogy of Jesus

by John Piper

Jesus' baptism and genealogy in Luke 3:21-38 emphasize his solidarity with all men through his descent from Adam, highlighting the universality of the gospel and his role as a new and second Adam.

Topics: "Jesus Baptism", "Holy Spirit"

Description

John Piper delves into Luke 3:21-38, highlighting the significance of Jesus' baptism and the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, emphasizing the transition from John the Baptist's ministry to Jesus' ministry. He explores the questions surrounding Jesus' baptism, his prayer before the heavens opened, and the symbolic meaning of the dove representing purity, meekness, and tenderness in Jesus' ministry. Piper also discusses the genealogy in Luke, pointing out the differences from Matthew's genealogy and the emphasis on Jesus' connection to all humanity as the second Adam, creating a new race marked by the character of the Holy Spirit.

Transcript

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Luke 3:21-38

21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."

23 Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age, being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph, the son of Heli, 24 the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, the son of Melchi, the son of Jannai, the son of Joseph, 25 the son of Mattathias, the son of Amos, the son of Nahum, the son of Esli, the son of Naggai, 26 the son of Maath, the son of Mattathias, the son of Semein, the son of Josech, the son of Joda, 27 the son of Joanan, the son of Rhesa, the son of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, the son of Neri, 28 the son of Melchi, the son of Addi, the son of Cosam, the son of Elmadam, the son of Er, 29 the son of Joshua, the son of Eliezer, the son of Jorim, the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, 30 the son of Simeon, the son of Judah, the son of Joseph, the son of Jonam, the son of Eliakim, 31 the son of Melea, the son of Menna, the son of Mattatha, the son of Nathan, the son of David, 32 the son of Jesse, the son of Obed, the son of Boaz, the son of Sala, the son of Nahshon, 33 the son of Amminadab, the son of Admin, the son of Arni, the son of Hezron, the son of Perez, the son of Judah, 34 the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac,

the son of Abraham, the son of Terah, the son of Nahor, 35 the son of Serug, the son of Reu, the son of Peleg, the son of Eber, the son of Shelah, 36 the son of Cainan, the son of Arphaxad, the son of Shem, the son of Noah, the son of Lamech, 37 the son of Methuselah, the son of Enoch, the son of Jared, the son of Mahalaleel, the son of Cainan, 38 the son of Enos, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God.

You can learn more from a book if you stop and ask it questions than if you just read it passively. That includes the Bible too. One of the great problems in Bible reading is that we move our eyes over the words and come to the end of a column and don't know what we've read; we don't feel our minds or spirits expanded because we saw nothing fresh. It was purely mechanical. There was no discovery, no life, no breakthroughs to new insight. One of the best ways to change that is to train yourself to ask questions of the text. Often the posing of the question itself will already carry its answer with it and will open your mind to new things. This fairly prosaic historical text in Luke 3:21-38 gives me an opportunity to show you what I mean. I'll simply take you with me through this text pointing out the questions I asked and the answers I came up with. My guess is that as you follow me questions of your own will arise. Good questions usually beget other questions and that's how insight grows and grows.

1) Why does Luke record the imprisonment of John the Baptist (3:20) before he records Jesus' baptism by John? This is such an odd order of events that there must be some point.

The answer would seem to be that Luke wants to emphasize the break between John's ministry and Jesus' ministry. Verse 15 shows that some people thought John might be the Messiah. Others could think that Jesus was one of John's disciples. One way to keep clear in the reader's mind that a tremendous turning point in redemptive history came when Jesus started preaching, was to mention John's imprisonment even before Jesus comes on the scene. Luke 16:16 says, "The law and the prophets were until John, since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached." There is a break between the period of the law and prophets and the period of Jesus preaching of the Kingdom. John belonged to the former period and so Luke did not want to stress the slight overlap in Jesus' and John's ministry (John 3:22f). In Luke 7:26-28 Jesus says John was a prophet and more than a prophet; the preparer of my way. "I tell you among those born of women none is greater than John; yet he who is least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he." John was a great prophet but now something new has come; the Messiah is here and calling people into his Kingdom, and the least person in the Messiah's Kingdom has a greater privilege than John. So in Luke's mind there was a great break between John's work and Jesus' work and the odd order of his narrative stresses this break.

Even in v. 21 I think this is confirmed in the word "all": "now when all the people were baptized. . ." This means that Jesus' baptism was not just a part of John's work but its climax. We don't have to press "all" to mean that Jesus was the very last person John baptized, but it must mean that John's ministry was virtually done when Jesus was baptized. This too shows that the coming of Jesus meant the going of John: "He must increase but I must decrease" (John 3:30). This also gives us help in answering my second question.

2) Why did Jesus come to be baptized since John's baptism was a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (3:3) and Jesus was without sin (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15)?

Luke shows in two ways that what is happening here is not important mainly because of the baptism but because of what happens afterward. First, Luke shows that Jesus came at the climax of John's ministry,

"when all the people were baptized," and, therefore, that Jesus was not just one of the crowd. His coming had special significance. Second, the way Luke put his sentence together in verses 22 and 23 shows that the baptism is secondary and what happened afterwards is primary: the baptism of the people and then of Jesus are simply introductory time clauses telling when the last three things happened: "After all were baptized and Jesus was baptized and praying, then (the amazing thing happened) the heaven was opened, the Spirit came and God spoke." So Luke's interest is different from Matthew's, who focuses on the baptism itself and poses the very question we have posed. He tells (in Matthew 3:14-15) how John tried to prevent Jesus saying, "I need to be baptized by you and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.'" So Luke treats the baptism of Jesus simply as the occasion when God spoke to him from heaven, but Matthew deals with the baptism itself as a problem for one who had no sins to be forgiven. The answer he gives is that it is fitting for him to do everything that is right. There was enough in John's baptism for Jesus to affirm that the event was not meaningless: negatively it meant turning from sin, and positively it meant trusting God. Jesus could affirm both: he resolved not to sin but always to turn from it and he committed himself always to trust God.

Probably then--and this is what Luke picks up on--Jesus' coming to be baptized was a decisive step of commitment to begin his public ministry. Thus he aligns himself with the people who turn from sin and trust God and resolves to fulfill his calling in that spirit. Luke focuses on God's approval and confirmation of his Son's resolve.

3) But before we look at God's confirmation in verse 22 there was another question on verse 21: Why does Luke mention that Jesus was praying when the heavens opened and the Spirit came and God spoke? None of the other gospels tell us this. We are going to see in this gospel that Luke loves to picture Jesus in prayer. He shows him praying at all the crucial turning points of his life: here at the baptism, at the selection of the twelve apostles (6:12), at Peter's confession (9:18), at the transfiguration (9:28) in Gethsemane (22:41); on the cross (23:34). He tells us that Jesus went repeatedly to the wilderness to pray (5:16) and that he spent whole nights in prayer (6:12). The point of all this must be to show that even in Jesus' life there is a correlation between earnest prayer and the blessing of God. Now what blessing was Jesus praying for after his baptism? Luke 11:13 suggests the answer I think; Luke's version is different from Matthew's: "If you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" What should obedient children ask from their heavenly Father? The Holy Spirit. Not that we or Jesus did not already have the Holy Spirit within us--even the weakest believer is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). But the Holy Spirit is infinite and always has more of himself to give and his means of manifesting himself are so varied there is always some new experience awaiting those who go hard after his fullness.

I assume that Jesus was praying for a manifestation of the Spirit to confirm to him his Messiahship and that God's favor was on him as he set out on his public ministry. God answered his prayer. And that leads to a fourth question.

4) What is the significance of the Spirit's descending in the form of a dove and God's declaration of his love? God answers Jesus' prayer by sending his Spirit in a visible form and then declaring verbally his delight in his Son: "You are my beloved son; in you I delight." This is a green light for Jesus. And not just a green light but a powerful enablement and directive.

The way the Spirit comes gives a direction for how its power is to be used. The word "dove" occurs on Jesus' lips one time in the gospels, namely Matthew 10:16: "Behold I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." The dove suggests to Jesus' purity, meekness, innocence. It was not majestic like the eagle or fierce like the hawk or flamboyant like the cardinal. It was simple, common, innocent, the kind of bird poor people could offer for a sacrifice (Luke 2:24; Leviticus 12:8). This was a directive to Jesus from the Father: the Spirit with which I anoint you is not for ostentation or for earthly battle. What is it for?

An answer comes from Isaiah 42:1-4. This text is relevant because this is where the words of God the Father come from which follow the giving of the Spirit: "Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law." The beauty of this picture is that he has the power to bring forth justice to the nations but he will not use it to "break a bruised reed or quench a dimly burning wick." That is he will be tender with the weak and failing. He will be dove-like not hawk-like. So when God anoints Jesus with the Spirit in the form of a dove he directs him to use his power in meekness and tenderness and love. Which Jesus does: "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest . . . for I am meek and lowly"--I have the Spirit of a dove not a hawk. He says in Luke 4:18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor . . ."--the bruised reeds of the world and the smoldering wicks. To these he comes with his dove-like Spirit and heals and fans into flame.

So in summary, what Luke is doing in verses 21 and 22 is setting Jesus' ministry off from John's, demonstrating that he has God's fullest approval and blessing and revealing the kind of ministry he will have--namely a dove-like ministry.

Now comes the genealogy and a whole bunch of questions leap off the page into our minds. In Matthew and Mark the account of Jesus' temptations comes right after the account of his baptism, but Luke inserts the genealogy between these two accounts. Why? Luke's genealogy goes all the way back to Adam while Matthew's goes back only to Abraham. Why? The names in the two genealogies from Jesus back to king David are almost all different. Why? And are we to imagine that man is only as old as the number of years that can be calculated for all these names back to Adam? Let's look at some answers to these four questions very briefly in reverse order.

1) No, we need not think that the sum of each of these person's life equals the age of man. The main reason is that in Jewish lineage lists "son" was often used also in the sense of "grandson" or even "descendant." In fact in Luke 3:24-38 the word "son" does not even occur in Greek. It simply says Heli was "of Matthat, of Levi, of Melchi" and so on. What matters in a lineage is not that every member be included but that the genuine line of descent be maintained.

We know from Matthew's genealogy that some names were left out. In Matthew 1:8 it says Joram was the father of Uzziah; but in 1 Chronicles 3:11 there are three other names listed between these two. One of the reasons for this is so that Matthew could have three equal groups of 14 names each (Matthew 1:17). The same motive might have been at work in Luke's genealogy because there appear to be 11 groups of 7 names each with all the important figures either at the beginning or end of a group. But Luke doesn't draw attention to this like Matthew does so we shouldn't press it. So I don't think we are bound to Ussher

chronology which makes man about 6000 years old. Just how old man is is a problem we'll leave for another time.

2) Why, when you compare Matthew's genealogy with Luke's between David and Jesus are they almost completely different? All the names but two are different. A major commentary published in 1978 by I. H. Marshall says, "It is only right therefore to admit that the problem caused by the existence of the two genealogies is insoluble with the evidence presently at our disposal" (p. 159). What he means is not that the two are in unresolvable conflict. There are suggested solutions, but we just don't know enough to be sure these solutions are the proper ones. I'll just mention two. One suggestion is that from David to Jesus, Matthew "gives the legal descendants of David--the men who would have been legally the heir to the Davidic throne if that throne had continued--while Luke gives the descendants of David in that particular time to which finally Joseph, the husband of Mary, belonged" (Machen, *Virgin Birth*, p. 204). So, for example Luke says in 3:31 that the son of David was Nathan (2 Samuel 5:14) while Matthew in 1:6 says the son of David was Solomon, who was heir to the throne. The two lines could easily merge whenever one of Nathan's descendants became the rightful heir to the throne.

The other suggested solution is that Luke gives Mary's genealogy and Matthew gives Joseph's as Jesus' legal father. The key to this interpretation is extending the parenthesis of verse 23 to include Joseph. So it would read, "Jesus was about 30 years old being the son (as was supposed of Joseph) of Heli etc." By including "of Joseph" in the parenthesis the point is made that Jesus is really the son of Mary not Joseph and Heli is his grandfather (Mary's father). Both of these solutions are possible; the first is more probable; but neither can be proved.

3) The last two questions are more important because they help us understand Luke's message. Why does the genealogy go back to Adam while Matthew's stops at Abraham? The reason surely is that Matthew is writing for Jews who are interested in Jesus' connection with father Abraham, but Luke is writing for a Gentile and therefore is more interested in Jesus' solidarity with all men through his descent from Adam. This fits beautifully with the emphasis we have seen already on the universality of the gospel--it is open to all men; Jesus is not just a son of Abraham; more importantly he is son of Adam; he is a man. His humanity not his ethnicity is the crucial thing. That seems to be Luke's point in attaching him to Adam. But there may be more as we pose our last question.

4) Why did Luke insert the genealogy here between the baptism and temptation of Jesus which Matthew and Mark put together? I find the key in the surprising ending of the genealogy: Luke doesn't stop with Adam but says Adam was "son of God." I doubt that Luke wants us to think of Jesus as the son of God in the same sense that Abraham and David and all the other descendants of Adam were. Luke 1:35 shows that his sonship depends on his unique creation in Mary's womb by the Holy Spirit. So it has seemed to many commentators that the reason Adam is called the son of God is to establish a comparison between Adam and Jesus as uniquely and immediately, though not identically, created by God. This then calls to mind Paul's teaching that Christ is a second Adam, the beginner of a new humanity. In 1 Corinthians 15:47-49 Paul says, "The first man was from the earth a man of dust, the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have born the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven." There is no reason to think Luke was ignorant of this idea since he was with Paul as much as anyone. If this was before his mind then one reason he inserted the genealogy here was to stress that like Adam Jesus was man and was uniquely created by God, and that therefore he is a new and second Adam whose ministry will be to create and assemble a new race of humans who are not marked by Jewishness

or non-Jewishness but by the dove-like character of the Holy Spirit.

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