

# Christ Greater Than All

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The sermon explores the significance of Christ's baptism and His role as the ultimate deliverer from sin, emphasizing the believer's call to embody and share His presence in the world.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 3:1

**Topics:** "Baptism", "Spiritual Vocation"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that the life of Jesus is being replicated in the lives of believers, highlighting the interconnectedness of baptism, anointing, and temptation. He explains that John the Baptist represents the Old Testament prophets who brought conviction of sin, while Jesus embodies the fulfillment of their prophecies by taking away the sin of the world. Sparks discusses the significance of the two baptisms and two lambs, illustrating how Jesus' baptism signifies the transition from judgment to salvation. He stresses that every believer is called to bring Christ into the world, akin to the roles of John the Baptist and Mary, and warns that this calling will inevitably lead to spiritual conflict with the enemy. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deeper understanding of one's vocation in Christ and the importance of living out that calling.

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## Transcript

Reading: Matthew 3:1-6, 13-17; 4:1-11.

We are seeing that the Holy Spirit is taking up the history of the Lord Jesus and is repeating it in the lives of His people, and we come to the next chapter of the biography that He is writing in the hearts of believers.

It is unfortunate that these chapters in Matthew are divided as they are, for the section that we have just read ought to be one chapter. We should never divide the baptism, the anointing and the temptation, for they are all parts of one thing, and each depends upon the other. We shall see that as we go on, but let us come back to the beginning, to John the Baptist's preaching in the wilderness of Judaea.

This was evidently one of those occasions in history when there was a new movement of the Spirit of God from heaven: what we would call in our time a revival. The Spirit of God was coming down upon that country and was convicting men and women of sin, and as they were convicted of sin they became afraid of judgment - and that is what every revival ought to be like. First of all there should be conviction of sin and then fear of judgment. John cried: "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" A great spirit of

condemnation and conviction had come upon the people and they were fleeing to John to know the way of escape from the coming wrath of God. Of course, that was just the ministry of the Old Testament Prophets.

Then right in the midst of that revival, or that Holy Spirit-convicting of sin and judgment, Jesus appeared on the scene. It is wonderful that, while all this was going on, He suddenly came into the midst and right into that particular situation. The whole multitude were under a great burden of sin and fear of coming judgment, and the Lamb of God appeared in that - "Behold, the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

## THE TWO PROPHETS

Now John was the last of the Old Testament Prophets and the beginning of the New Testament Prophets, and if you see Jesus standing there at the side of John the Baptist, you see the Old Testament and the New Testament. All that is in the Old Testament is gathered up in John the Baptist. Jesus said that he was the greatest of the Prophets, and that was because he gathered up all the Prophets into himself. As I have said, the ministry of the Old Testament Prophets was to bring conviction of sin and fear of judgment, but standing by the side of John the Baptist is another Prophet, One who is greater than John, and He has come to answer the great cry of the Old Testament for deliverance from sin and judgment. He has come to bear away the sin of the world.

So John is the sum of the Old Testament Prophets and Jesus takes up the work where all the Old Testament Prophets laid it down. They were not able to go beyond conviction of sin, for they were quite unable to take sin away. Jesus takes up their work at that point, and the imperfect work of the Old Testament is made perfect in the New.

So you have two things side by side. First you have the two Prophets, the Old Testament Prophet and the New Testament Prophet.

## THE TWO BAPTISMS

Then you have the two baptisms. There are two baptisms in the Bible, and you will find these mentioned in the nineteenth chapter of the Book of the Acts, when Paul came to Ephesus and discerned that there was something missing in the Christians there. He asked them: "Did ye receive the Holy Spirit when ye believed?" (verse 2), and they replied: "Nay, we did not so much as hear whether there is a Holy Spirit." So Paul said: "Into what then were ye baptized?" And they said, "Into John's baptism." Then, after Paul had explained the significance, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.

Now I do not advocate being baptized twice. I believe that in one country people are baptized every year, but, as far as I can tell, they are not any the better for that! However, here you have the two baptisms alongside one another. John said: "I indeed baptize you in water... but he that cometh after me is mightier than I... he shall baptize you in the Holy Spirit." Water in the Old Testament speaks of judgment and death. You ask Noah about that! You remember that the Apostle Peter refers to the flood as the baptism of that time (1 Peter 3:21), and that was a baptism indeed! If you asked those people: 'What did your baptism mean to you?', and they were able to answer you, they would say: 'Well, it was judgment and death. That is what the water meant to us.' Go on a little further in the Old Testament and ask Pharaoh about water. You know that the Apostle Paul tells the Corinthians that the Israelites were "all baptized into Moses in the sea" (verse 2), so the Red Sea was a baptistry. If you asked Pharaoh and his army what their baptism

meant, they would answer: 'It was judgment and death.'

This was the baptism of water in the Old Testament, and John's baptism was the baptism of judgment and death. But he said: 'He who comes after me will baptize in the Spirit', and that is life and salvation, that is baptism into the Saviour and not into death and judgment, and that is baptism into eternal life.

## THE TWO LAMBS

Then you have the two lambs. They are here in these Scriptures, although they are not mentioned by name. John represents the Old Testament system, and therefore he gathers into himself all the types of the Old Testament, those lambs that were slain over many, many centuries. Day after day, and year after year the lambs were sacrificed, but we are told by the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews that they could never take away sin for, after all, they were only types, and not the reality. Thousands, or millions, of lambs never took away sin, but John points to the other Lamb. There is only one Lamb, but this One does what all the millions could never do: "The Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." Here you have the reality! In the Old Testament the lambs were never effective, but this Lamb is the One who has the POWER to deal with sin. What those other lambs could never do He does in one offering forever.

Do you hear what Jesus says? "Thus it becometh us to fulfil ALL righteousness." You remember that we have already said that that word 'righteousness' means 'right standing with God', so Jesus is saying: "Thus it becometh us to fulfil all right standing with God." Here, however, our language is difficult, and the real meaning is 'To make full and complete right standing with God.' Through all the ages all the world wanted to be in right standing with God and now here at the Jordan is the One who is making right standing with God complete.

I wonder if that is what your baptism has meant to you? Those waters of baptism ought to have carried away all condemnation and all judgment. Charles Wesley wrote one poem that has never become a hymn to be sung, and I do not know whether it would be possible to sing it. Certainly those in denominations would not be able to sing it honestly, nor would anyone in the Christian system as it is today. In that poem Charles Wesley depicted all the different kinds of Christians: the Presbyterian with his clerical clothes and collar, and his special kind of hat, and even the Plymouth Brother, whom he depicted with a Bible in his hand. He brought them all to Jordan, and when they got into the midst of Jordan, the stream was rushing so fast that it carried away the clothes of the Presbyterian, everything that marked the different denominations, and even the Bible of the Plymouth Brother! All that went down the river, and all that was left was just men stripped of everything. Did your baptism mean that? You cannot be a sectarian if you understand your baptism! You cannot be any of these things that Christianity makes us in these times. The waters of the Jordan take from us all these artificial things and leave us just men and women before God. That is the meaning of baptism.

I said that I do not advocate being baptized twice, but perhaps some of you are feeling that you ought to be baptized again now!

Well, these two baptisms and these two lambs represent a dividing of everything that is imperfect and a making of a way for that which is perfect, and they leave us in right standing with God. All these other things do not bring us into that right standing with God.

## THE TWO HORIZONS

Now we have two other things - two horizons which meet at Jordan. "Then went out unto him (John) Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan." Although these were different regions, they were one nation, which means that representatives of the nation were there, and when they were baptized they had to leave their national ground. They were Jews, or Israelites, no longer. You say: 'Where do you find that in this Gospel?' Well, what did John say about the Lord Jesus? 'Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of Jerusalem? Or the sin of Judaea? Or the sin of Palestine?' Oh, yes, He does, but much more than that. The WHOLE WORLD meets at the Jordan and all mere nationalism goes.

When you are baptized into the Holy Spirit you lose your earthly nationality - and now you say: 'What is the proof of that?' My answer is that Hotel Bellevue, Hilterfingen, Switzerland, is the proof of that! How many nationalities are there in this room? And how many of you different nationalities will have nothing to do with those of other nations? 'Oh, he is German, or - worse still! - British, or Chinese, so we do not have anything to do with them!' No, a greater horizon comes into view in Christ. It is something that the Spirit of God does in us, so that we love one another without any regard for nationality.

I think Christians have to learn something about this! Although what I have just said may be very true with us here today, it is not true amongst Christians everywhere. I have been to other countries and I have overheard people say: 'I wonder what that ENGLISHMAN is doing here?' They were Christians and in a Christian conference - but that is an absolute denial of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Well, all this is very simple, but it is very blessed to have an experience of the Jordan. You see, I am talking about the real writing of the life of Christ, and there is a chapter on 'Christ greater than all'.

## THE BAPTISM

Now Jesus is baptized, and when He sinks beneath the waters He represents that whole race of mankind which is discredited by God. When He said: 'This is the way to fulfil all righteousness, to make real and full right standing with God', He clearly implied that we are not in right standing with God without this. The man who is not in right standing with God must be put under the water out of the sight of God, for he is the discredited humanity. Surely we agree with that if we know men?

So these waters cover that which is discredited, and when Jesus comes up out of the water what is the first thing that happens? This One is accredited: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." He is accredited by God. He is another Man. The one has been put out of God's sight, and now the other stands under an opened heaven and God is saying: 'I love this One!' He is the first of a new race to be accredited by God.

## THE ANOINTING

We must recognize that the anointing must be kept related to the baptism. There cannot be the anointing until there has been the baptism. These two follow each other as day follows night, and in the beginning of the creation the day and the night were one. It is strange that it says that "there was evening and there was morning, one day" (Genesis 1:5). I think it just means that you cannot have a whole day until you have had the night of judgment and condemnation and come out of it into the new day of light. It is like that in spiritual experience. We know that there was one day in our lives, and half of it was night when we came under conviction of sin and under the fear of judgment. That was the dark part of another day. I am an old-fashioned Christian and I believe that this ought to be true of everyone who is born again. I think that the trouble with many Christians is that they never had a dark night, the terrible sense of sin and

judgment which is a necessary preliminary to the day.

Now I know that some of you are saying: 'I know I am a Christian, but I never had that experience.' I will ask you this: 'If you did not have it at the beginning, have you had it since? Has there never come into your spiritual experience something of this sense of the awfulness of sin and the reality of judgment?' I think that experience has to have a place in every Christian life, and I am not sure that that night/day ever has an end. I mean this. Even after many years of being the Lord's, you can have a terrible experience of what a dreadful thing sin is in your own heart. I think the Lord has to do that from time to time to make us appreciate the wonder of being saved. These dark nights of condemnation leading to glorious mornings of justification are foundational to spiritual growth.

Well, if you do not believe that theology, or accept that doctrine, do not worry too much about it. I am only telling you of my experience, when sometimes I have got into the depths of feeling what a terrible person I am, and then the Lord has brought me through and shown me what a glorious thing salvation is. I think that is the only way to appreciate our salvation. I am sure you agree with that!

Now, what does the anointing mean? There is another Man now, who is on the life side of the Jordan, and there we are all supposed to receive the Holy Spirit. I believe that the reception of the Holy Spirit goes with new birth. As with salvation you come more and more to understand and appreciate salvation, so with the Holy Spirit you come more and more to understand the meaning of the Holy Spirit, but that does not mean that you have just that day received the Holy Spirit. I know I am on dangerous ground, but I am not going to be drawn into your argument! I am going right on. What does the anointing mean?

Notice that the anointing relates to only one thing, and that is the purpose of God in our salvation. I am going to call that purpose 'vocation'. It was here at the Jordan that Jesus took up His life vocation, the very purpose for which He had come into this world, the work that He was to accomplish. Get that and hold it for a minute!

The second thing was that it established the relationship between Him and God. Notice the sequence: first, purpose; second, relationship; and the third thing was equipment for the vocation. When Jesus was anointed at the Jordan, that was the beginning of His life vocation, and that vocation was to be established upon a complete fellowship with His Father. The relationship was to be on the basis of Son and Father, Father and Son. The Bible has so much to say about that relationship! I dare not stop to go over that ground, but the Bible's idea of a Son/Father relationship is that the Son will do nothing without the Father. He will consult His Father about everything; He will seek to know the pleasure of His Father in everything; He will do the will of His Father in everything; He will listen to no other voice than the voice of His Father. That is the relationship in both the Old Testament and the New. You see, the devil has upset that, but here it is established as the only ground upon which a life service for God can be fulfilled.

The purpose of God - that governs. Fulfilled in relation to God - that governs. And then, equipped by God to fulfil that purpose - THAT is the anointing.

It is gathered up into one word, and that is 'servant'. You remember what we have already said about that! Let us go back to Mary, the mother of Jesus. We saw that her whole significance was to bring the Lord into this world, and that is THE meaning of service.

We saw three things in the case of Mary. Firstly, we saw the Cross, the cost of this service - and how costly this was to Mary before this world! And the old man in Jerusalem said to her: "Yea and a sword

shall pierce through thine own soul" (Luke 2:35). It was going to be a very costly thing to bring the Lord into this world! It was going to mean the Cross, because it was at Calvary that the sword went through the soul of Mary.

Secondly, we saw that the ability to fulfil this service was the Holy Spirit: "The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee" (Luke 1:35). He was the ability, or the resource, for fulfilling the ministry.

Then we saw the third thing - the devil. He had an instrument, that wicked Herod in Jerusalem. Shall we say that he was 'Satan incarnate', who focused all his malice upon this one little child. He would stop at nothing to kill that Babe! "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning" (Matthew 2:18), and do you think that Mary escaped? She knew about it, and she knew that her Babe was involved in that! The devil came out when she brought the Lord in - and what a lot of history there is in that!

Let us go on to John the Baptist. His vocation was to prepare a way for the Lord, to bring the Lord in. Was it a costly thing for John? Yes, John brought the Lord Jesus in, but the same devil was watching and he had a Herod again, and this Herod beheaded John. Behind the incidents that led up to that there was this sinister power that says: 'If you are going to bring Jesus Christ into this world, I am going to be your enemy!' It was costly indeed for John to bring the Lord in, but he fulfilled his ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit, and although Herod took off his head, later that same Herod was afraid that John had risen from the dead. When Herod heard what Jesus was doing he said: "John the Baptist is risen from the dead... John, whom I beheaded, he is risen" (Mark 6:14,16). I think John the Baptist haunted his dreams! However, the point is that the work was accomplished in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Are you translating this into spiritual experience? This is not only Bible teaching, or exposition, but it is spiritual history. You see, dear friends, we are here in this world as Christians for one purpose only, and while what I am saying will have a special meaning for those who are in what we call 'fulltime service' - people whom we wrongly call 'the Lord's servants' - it applies to the simplest, humblest believer in this place. You are called to the same vocation as were John the Baptist and Mary, the mother of the Lord Jesus. More than that, you are called to the same vocation as was Jesus Christ, and that vocation to which you are called is no more nor less than, nor anything other than, to bring the Lord in, that where you are the Lord is. You are to make a way for the Lord. You are to be, so to speak, the vessel of Christ coming in. You are John the Baptist, and you are Mary. In a sense, your presence means Christ. That is our vocation, and it ought to revolutionize our lives.

Dear friends, it revolutionized my life. You see, I was what was called 'a minister', and I wore a clerical collar and all that kind of thing. I thought 'the ministry' was mostly to do with getting up sermons and preaching them on a Sunday. Really, for me, 'the ministry' was climbing steps up into a pulpit and preaching a sermon. Well, as you can see, the Lord has done something! He has shown me what the ministry really is, and if this ministry is not being fulfilled, I am ready to go out at once. If I am not bringing the Lord Jesus in, if the result of any life is not more of the Lord Jesus in this world, then my life is a failure. I have missed the meaning of service. And this belongs to you, whoever you are. You may not be a great public figure, you may never be called a 'minister', you may never preach in a pulpit, but you can be a servant of the Lord as much as John the Baptist was. It can be said that because people met you, they met the Lord, because you lived in that village, people knew the Lord was there.

Are you taking this to heart? You see, this is the principle of the New Testament. It is put in this way in the Gospels: Jesus sent His disciples into all the towns and villages WHERE HE HIMSELF WOULD COME

(Luke 10:1). Why did they go? To bring Him there. That is the principle throughout the New Testament. Oh, no, they were not sent into all these places to form churches, but to bring the Lord Jesus. I do not think that the devil cares a little bit about people forming churches, in fact, I think that many of the churches that are formed please the devil very much! He does not find that they are a challenge to him, but where these New Testament servants of the Lord went, the devil recognized the significance of their being in that place. 'They are to bring Jesus here, and that is the most dangerous thing to our kingdom!' So, if we have something of the Lord, if our presence means the coming in of the Lord, what do we expect?

## THE TEMPTATION

We expect the third part of the chapter, for the next phase is the temptation in the wilderness.

My time has gone, but I will just say one thing and leave it there. Baptism, the anointing and the temptation are all one thing. If you are in right standing with God, for that is what baptism really means, if you have received the Holy Spirit, the anointing, you must expect that the next thing that will happen is that the devil has put his mark upon you, and his one object will be to break up your testimony concerning the Lord Jesus, to nullify the presence of Jesus in your life, or to get you right out of the way. The enemy will be watching you all the time to try to destroy the presence of the Lord Jesus and to get you out of the way.

This is the quite natural sequence: right standing with God; the indwelling Holy Spirit of the anointing; the great purpose of God taken up to bring Him into this world; and then the conflict with the enemy, and that will go right on to the end. Do not expect anything else. Jesus told us not to expect anything else, and the Apostles show us quite clearly that we should not expect anything else.

May the Lord write this chapter in our hearts!

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