THE BAPTISM AND GENEALOGY OF JESUS

Luke 3:21–38

Key Verse: 3:22b

“…and a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’”

Who are you? That’s a deep question, so deep we rarely even think about it. We may define our identity in terms of our race, our social background, our human family or gender. We may see ourselves in terms of our career, our abilities, our achievements, our appearance, even our flaws and weaknesses. We may internalize what other people have said about us and let it shape who we think we are. But discovering who we really are can’t be based on any of these external things. Sadly, many people go through life never really finding out who they are. Knowing who we are is possible only when we encounter God, the One who made us. In today’s passage we read how God the Father gave Jesus his Son some profound words: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” What was happening? Why was this necessary? What did these words mean to Jesus, and what do they mean to us? May God open our hearts and speak to us today.

In verses 1–20 Luke describes the ministry of John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah. Now he turns his full attention to the ministry of Jesus. He records three things before Jesus’ ministry actually began: his baptism (3:21,22); his genealogy (23–38); and his temptation (4:1–13). Today we will be looking at the first two, and next week we will be looking at the third.

All four Gospels tell us about the baptism of Jesus, but Luke’s account is unique. Look at verses 21,22. These two verses are one long sentence. Luke doesn’t even mention John the Baptist’s name. In fact, Jesus’ baptism itself is skimmed over, in order to focus on what happened afterward. Luke first adds a detail the other Gospel writers don’t: at this moment, Jesus was praying. Luke is going to tell us often how Jesus was praying. Prayer was his way of staying close to God and depending totally on him. His example shows us that we should pray before doing anything.

Next, Luke says that “the heavens were opened.” This expression suggests that after a long time God is now about to do something exciting in this world, revealing his great power and glory. It was a dark world. Herod, an evil man, seemed to be in power, hindering any good from happening. But God in heaven is the real Ruler of this world. And he is still there, unchanged by all the world’s evil and injustice, ready to show all people his salvation (3:6).

What happened when “the heavens were opened”? Look at verse 22a. “…and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove…” God the Father sent the Holy Spirit to come upon Jesus his Son. Why? Already Luke has emphasized the Holy Spirit’s work surrounding the births of John the Baptist and Jesus (1:15,35,41,67; 2:25–27). Uniquely, Jesus was conceived not by a man but by the Holy Spirit (1:35). Now, Luke is going to show us that the Holy Spirit also played a key role in the ministry of Jesus (4:1,14,18). God gave Jesus the Holy Spirit to lead him, empower him, and anoint him to do his work. The Holy Spirit also filled him with joy (10:21). It was a unique experience for Jesus. But all those who believe in him also need to be baptized by the Holy Spirit (3:16). It’s not only so that we can be changed from within, but also, so that we can be empowered to live as his witnesses (Ac1:8). Only Luke records how Jesus said to ask God in prayer for the Holy Spirit (11:13). When the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus, it looked like a dove. Just as at the time of Noah, after the flood, the dove was a symbol of hope. God’s anointing Jesus with the Holy Spirit was a sign of God’s great hope to bring his salvation to all peoples on earth.

Read verse 22b. Being fully human, Jesus not only needed the anointing of the Holy Spirit; in a sense he also needed to hear these words from God the Father. These words fulfill two famous Old Testament prophecies. Psalm 2:7 says, “I will proclaim the LORD’S decree: ‘He said to me, “You are my son; today I have become your father.”’” Isaiah 42:1 says, “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.” These prophecies tell us that Jesus is God’s Son, and at the same time, he is God’s Servant. Though he is God the Son, he came to live among us as “one who serves” (22:26,27).

Throughout this Gospel Luke emphasizes that Jesus was an ordinary human being. 25 times Luke mentions that Jesus called himself “Son of Man” (5:24; 6:5,22; 7:34; 9:22,26,44,58; 11:30; 12:8,10,40; 17:22,24,26,30; 18:8,31; 19:10; 21:27,36; 22:22,48,69; 24:7). Calling himself “Son of Man,” Jesus saw himself as a servant for all human beings, including all the outcasts, all the “lost.” Sinful people would despise and reject him. His life would be full of self-sacrifice. More than the other Gospel writers Luke uses the word “suffer” to describe Jesus (9:22; 17:25; 22:15; 24:26,46). An ordinary person, serving even the lowliest people and suffering many things, doesn’t seem so special. But before any of this begins to happen, God the Father gives Jesus these words of affirmation: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” God gives these words again when Jesus is transfigured, telling his disciples: “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him” (9:35). We need to know that Jesus, though he was just an ordinary person, serving everyone and suffering much, really is the Son of God.

These words from God the Father were directed this time at Jesus himself. These words would be most precious to him, beginning from when the devil came to tempt him and question who he was (4:3,9). When his hometown people saw him from a human point of view and turned on him (4:22,23,28–30), Jesus held onto these words. When the religious leaders criticized his every word and every move (5:21,30,33; 6:2,7; 7:39), Jesus held onto these personal words from his Father. Jesus knew many would reject him and his followers. But he said, “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (10:22). When he was betrayed and disowned by his disciples, rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, mocked and beaten, insulted and crucified, Jesus held onto these words from the Father, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” These words confirmed his real identity and gave him the strength to carry out his Father’s will to the very end.

It was not just his personal story. Jesus, God’s beloved Son, came into this world to redeem and adopt us as God’s children. By his one-sided, amazing grace, all our sins are blotted out, and God wholeheartedly accepts us as his own precious children. As children of God through faith in Christ, we share this same deep love relationship with our Father God (Gal3:26; 4:4–6; Eph1:3–8). We no longer need to define ourselves based on our sins or failures, on what people may say or think of us, or on our race, social status or gender. All these things, even our strengths and achievements, are a flimsy basis for an identity. Through faith in Christ we are God’s precious child, as dear to him as any other believer. On the basis of this truth, Gentile believers could be welcomed into fellowship with Jewish believers as equals, not second-class citizens. The Father’s words to Jesus, “You are my beloved Son,” mean that God dearly loves us, too. God loves me. He’s telling us this today. We need to hear his words and really meditate on them. Only his love, his acceptance, can satisfy our souls. His words give us an absolute sense of identity in him, not in my human elements or how people try to define me. On the basis of his words to me, now I seek his affirmation, not people’s. Now I find my strength in my relationship with him. With his loving words in my heart I now can carry the cross he gives me and carry out his will all throughout my lifetime.

Right after this, and before getting into his ministry, Luke records a genealogy of Jesus (3:23–38). We wonder why. In a sense it continues the theme that Jesus is God’s Son. His genealogy is meant to help us see his credentials, to accept that God sent him according to his promises. But Luke’s genealogy is different from Matthew’s. Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus is right at the beginning of his Gospel in chapter 1. It begins with Abraham and goes forward to Jesus. There’s an emphasis on the history of Israel, good and bad. In contrast, Luke’s genealogy appears at the end of chapter 3. It begins with Jesus and goes backwards, all the way to Adam, the first human being. Luke points out that Joseph wasn’t really Jesus’ father—reminding us that, from a human point of view, Jesus was born an illegitimate child. If we examine this genealogy closely, there are many things about these names that we can’t understand. During the period between Jesus and David Luke seems to blur Matthew’s emphasis on Israel’s kings and its national division. Simply speaking, Luke’s goal is to stress the common humanity of Jesus. Just as he was baptized along with everyone else, even though he had no need to repent, so Jesus descended all the way from Adam, just like any other human being who is alive today—any race, any status. Because he shared our humanity, was truly human like us, he understands us fully. His genealogy doesn’t signify that he had some kind of elite stature, but that he is ordinary like us. He came for all races, all classes, all types of people, including all outcasts—all human beings like Adam, created in the image of God. Through his Son Jesus, God wants to bring all people, no matter who they are or where they are, back to himself.

As Luke has already told us, Jesus is the Son of God (1:32,33; 2:49), the son of David, the promised Messiah (1:68,69; 2:10,11), and God’s salvation for all people (2:30–32). As the Son of God he is fully God; as the Son of Man he is fully human. As such, he is the only mediator between the holy God and sinful human beings (1Ti2:3–5). Through Jesus anyone can come to God and be restored. Jesus is the Second Adam who began a new history through his perfect obedience to God. Through faith in Jesus we can get out of Adam’s lineage and be made alive spiritually (1Co15:22).

Let’s read verse 22b again. May God help us to hear these words to Jesus as his words to us as well. May God assure us personally of our new identity in Christ and of his great love for us. There are so many people today who don’t know who they really are. May God fill us with the Holy Spirit and use us to bring this good news in Jesus to all kinds of people in our world today.