

Robe of Righteousness

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[0 : 0 0] Pray with me. Lord, as we look into your word together, I pray that you would give us understanding, I baptise with water for repentance, but after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I'm not worthy to carry.

He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand. He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. And can you imagine the crowds that have gathered from quite a large area to come and listen to John's preaching as well as his baptising, speaking about this messianic figure who was going to come, who was, by incomparison, John was absolutely nothing.

John baptises with water for repentance, but this messiah is going to baptise with fire. And you can imagine people listening to that thinking, ooh, I don't fancy the idea of that.

Being baptised with water is one thing, but being baptised with fire, that doesn't sound pleasant. John was a terrifying character. The bit in the middle of the reading that we skipped over where he has a go at the Sadducees and the Pharisees and he calls them a bunch of snakes.

Who told you to come? John was fierce. And he gives this fierce build-up for the coming of the Messiah. Basically what he's saying is, the Messiah's going to come and he's going to take over from me and you haven't seen anything yet.

[1 : 5 7] If you think I'm fierce, you've not seen anything yet. I baptise with water. He is going to use fire. Be very afraid. And then as we read on in that passage, we read very gently, then Jesus came from Galilee to be baptised by John.

Can you imagine how John felt? I don't think that he put forward this warning about the Messiah coming and baptising with fire and I'm not even fit to take his sandals off and clean his shoes only the once.

This would have been something that John had been saying over and over and over again. This enormous build-up. And then one day, Jesus quietly comes along and he joins the back of the queue.

Because there was more than one person being baptised, so I've got this mental picture of there being a bit of a queue of people coming to be baptised for repentance. And John hammering it home as he did.

And Jesus joins the back of the queue. Does John recognise Jesus at the back of the queue? And what is going through John's head as he is continuing to baptise people and he sees Jesus taking his turn, inching forward and forward.

[3 : 2 8] And John is in his head thinking, no, you're not supposed to be doing that. I've given you this big build-up. You're not supposed to be being baptised.

You're not supposed to be sweeping him in power and taking over and frightening people even more than I am. And Jesus comes into the water and says, baptise me.

And what we have in Matthew's Gospel certainly is what John says here and it certainly must reflect a great depth of thinking. I need to be baptised by you.

This is the wrong way around. What are you doing, Jesus? Can you imagine perhaps a few mutts of whisperings in the water as John is saying to Jesus, what are you doing, Jesus?

I've given you this big build-up and you're coming to be baptised. That's all wrong. It's the wrong way around. You need to be baptising me, if anything. And John is torn inside because half of me is saying, you've ruined my big build-up.

[4 : 32] And half of me is thinking, well, if you are the Messiah, I shouldn't be talking to you like this. This is all wrong. And Jesus reassures John and he quietly replies, let it be so now.

It is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness. And John is persuaded to baptise Jesus and the next thing we read is that as Jesus comes up out of the water, the Holy Spirit descends on him and there is this audible voice saying, this is my son in whom I'm well pleased.

This really is the right way round. John has to be reassured as the Holy Spirit descends in response to Jesus being baptised, yes, this was the right way round after all.

John must be very confused. And the problem is that John really got a clear idea of the Messiah as Lord, that he has an awful lot to learn about the Messiah as Saviour.

And the first thing that Jesus was coming to do was to be the Saviour. His return as Lord, we are still waiting for. This really was the right thing.

[5 : 52] And John had picked up half the story, but not all of it. And that's why he had been so confused. But if Jesus has come as Saviour, why couldn't Jesus go straight to the cross?

Why do we have this three-year gap between Jesus being baptised, appearing on the scene, being acknowledged by the Father and the Holy Spirit, and if the thing that he's come to do is to go to the cross to die for everyone's sins, why doesn't he go straight to that?

Why do we have the teaching and the healings and the miracles and the parables in the dreams? Why does Jesus particularly, repeatedly say, not yet, my time hasn't come?

And when he seems to be in danger and the disciples are saying, Lord, you've got to watch out here, Jesus says, it's okay, my time hasn't come yet. Why hasn't Jesus' time come?

What is the importance of this time in between? And there is one line that often gets overlooked in this account of Jesus' baptism and it is where Jesus reassures John and he said, let it be so now, it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.

[7 : 12] What does Jesus mean by that? Because Jesus is already perfect, he hasn't got to sort of earn anything or prove himself, he is already perfect.

He is, as John reminds us, he is God the Son. He's not just the Son of God, he's not just the good man who is adopted by the Father. You're good enough, you'll do, I'll make you my son.

He is the Son and he has been through all eternity. He is the second person of the Trinity. He is the Word of God made flesh. And our redemption comes through Jesus' suffering and dying on the cross, not his baptism.

So why does Jesus say it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness? What needs to be fulfilled? What is Jesus doing here? And we would rightly say that Jesus is being baptised to identify with the sinners that he has come to save.

This is Jesus' righteous way of identifying with those he will redeem, of being the saviour. But is there a bit more here?

[8 : 26] And is righteousness the key? And there's something that has been quietly thought about in the background for a long time in the church but often, more often than not, overlooked.

And it is that the life of Jesus has an important part to play in our salvation as well as his death. This isn't to play down Jesus' work on the cross.

That is absolutely crucial and the life of our salvation. But there is a part for Jesus' life to play as well. You think about this parable of the prodigal son where the son goes away, takes half his inheritance, goes and blows it in wild living, it all goes wrong and he comes back and he finds that he is welcomed by the father if not by his older brother.

And he is just welcomed home with open arms. And the point, we mustn't push the parable any further than that because Jesus is making a different point here, one about the father's welcome and one about forgiveness.

But the son has blown his inheritance, he comes home penniless. What's left belongs to the older son. The younger son has had his inheritance and the fact that he's been forgiven by his dad means that he is restored to the family.

[9 : 54] His debts will be paid off, he is clear of all the debts, but he hasn't got a penny to his name. He's had his inheritance and he's lost it.

And in a sense, when our sins are forgiven, all that is wrong in our lives is dealt with. But we haven't got anything positive to our name.

The debt is cleared, we are debt free, but we don't have a penny. There is nothing that we've got on the positive side.

And the church in the past has got into a real tangle over this. Jesus has died for my sins and dealt with my sins, but how am I positively righteous?

What credit have I got to my name? The debt's cleared, but I haven't got anything positive. And long, long, long time ago, people got into a tangle over this and they taught that baptism wipes the slate clean, but then they were very frightened about what they called post-baptism or sin.

[11 : 05] Everything that I've done wrong, everything that's wrong in my life, is dealt with the moment I turn to Jesus and baptism reflects that. But what about the sins I commit in the future?

And actually what they then started to do was delay being baptized until they were dying. And there's accounts of people on their death there thinking well I haven't got long now, I haven't got any time left to commit any sins, now it's safe to be baptized.

And then they got into right tangles about things like purgatory to try and pay off any future sins, the merit of Mary, the merit of the saints and so forth. Or of salvation by works.

And there's still groups around today that will preach and teach that Jesus' death deals with our past sins but it's up to us to keep our noses clean in the future.

And effectively earn our way to heaven in a positive sense. We are unforgiven by Jesus but it's up to us now. And that's a salvation by works and that's clearly not what the New Testament teaches.

[12 : 13] The medieval church likewise very often emphasised Jesus' life but more as an example to follow. So you become a Christian now do your best to be like Jesus.

And at the Reformation the Reformers point us back to Jesus' death and say no Jesus has died on the cross and the gospel is that everything that is wrong in our lives is forgiven and that includes our past sins our present sins and our future sins as well.

It is all covered by what Jesus has done. And that is the gospel that we believe and that is the gospel that we proclaim. That Jesus is dying on the cross deals with everything that is wrong in our life throughout the entire course of our lives.

We don't need to wait until we're dying before we're baptized to avoid the consequences of future sins. That's a nonsense. But that can leave us thinking so what was the point of Jesus' life?

Because Jesus is dying and he deals with everything and it does. but what part does Jesus' living play? And the answer is quietly there in scripture but it is often overlooked.

[13 : 30] And I'm just going to briefly share four scriptures that make this point. 1 Corinthians 1 verse 30 says it's because of him, Christ Jesus, that you are in Christ Jesus.

He has become for us wisdom from God. That is he has become our righteousness, our holiness and our redemption. There is something about Jesus and everything to do with him that becomes our righteousness.

When Paul writes to the Philippians, our second reading today, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from keeping the Lord, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

I want to know Christ, yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings. It is everything that Jesus has done, his living, his dying, his rising, are all together our salvation.

Romans 5 verse 19, just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sins, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

[14 : 50] And Romans 13 verse 14, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ and don't think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

And Paul there is referring to a prophecy of Isaiah in Isaiah 61, he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness.

In other words, the life, however hard I try, however good I try and seek to be, however God I want to be, God gives me a robe of righteousness over me because I can't do it sufficiently well enough.

I can never be good enough to earn and merit my salvation. And God gives me a robe of righteousness, something that covers over my rags and makes me look the part.

God and Paul later on says, clothe yourself with Christ, with the Lord Jesus. And again this idea of putting Jesus on like clothing, like an overcoat, that actually makes us look right.

[15 : 57] And there's robes of righteousness referred to in Revelation as well. Again, that sense of being clothed with something that God gives us that looks and is right. in short, what is righteousness?

It's a perfect life. It's a life that completely and perfectly, 100%, totally fulfills every demand of the law. A life that succeeds in loving God and one's neighbour with a whole heart every moment we're alive, from the cradle to the grave.

A life that honours God and loves God and gets it right. a life that totally identifies sinners but is itself sinless.

And that is what Jesus is referring to at the moment of his baptism. Let this happen. Let me baptise. He baptised because we need to fulfil all righteousness.

Jesus' death on the cross pays the price of our sin. Jesus' resurrection deals with our death. Jesus' righteous life as well as his death together provide our righteousness.

[17 : 11] And that is something that is so overlooked. We're not just left debt free but we are left millionaires in the eyes of God because all that there is to Jesus is made over to us.

We are clothed with Christ. And it's his perfect life and his death together that bring us that. That Jesus has fulfilled the law in his perfect life on our behalf and he makes that over to us as well.

Jesus has loved God the Father and he loved his neighbours perfectly and he makes that over to us as well. This isn't to detract from the cross because the cross is supremely the work of salvation, uniquely so.

But it does complement it by adding meaning to the life that Jesus lived. And that is why Jesus said my time hasn't yet come. That is why when Jesus was baptised he said let it be so, we need to fulfil all righteousness.

And again in Philippians 3 Paul combined all those elements of Jesus' righteous life, his redemptive dying, his resurrection from the dead.

[18 : 29] And where does that leave us? That leaves us fully centred on Christ. We are dependent 100% in every respect on what Jesus has done and on who Jesus is, his living, his dying, and his rising.

And yes, we are still called to walk in the spirit, we are still called to grow and mature as believers, we are still called to holy living. that when we stand before the Lord on the last day, whose righteousness do you want to rely on?

The best that you've been able to come up with? Or would you prefer to be clothed with Jesus and stand in his righteousness? I know which I would prefer.

We sing about it occasionally, these words might be familiar, I'm going to close just by citing some words from some of the songs that we've sung. Songs of Fellowship 579, and I use the Songs of Fellowship version, there's a song that we sometimes sing, we have come into this place, we've gathered in his name to worship him.

Mission Praise has three verses, it misses out a key additional verse which Songs of Fellowship includes, he is all my righteousness, I stand complete in him and worship him.

[19 : 54] He is all my righteousness, I stand complete in him and worship him. He is all my righteousness, I stand complete in him and worship him, worship him, Christ the Lord.

And another one that I couldn't find in any of the books, but if you go back to the 1970s and 80s, you might remember this one. I am covered over with the robe of righteousness that Jesus gives to me, gives to me.

I am covered over with the precious blood of Jesus and he lives in me, he lives in me. Oh, what joy it is to know my heavenly father loves me so and gave to me my Jesus.

When he looks at me, he sees not what I used to be, but he sees Jesus, Jesus, Amen.