

The River of Rescue

Scriptures

Matthew 3.13-17

Opening

When he was a young man in backwoods Virginia, John Day boasted that nothing could hurt him. He lived a fast life and admitted it was even *too fast* and excessive. He was just the kind of character that John Jacob Astor was looking for in 1810 to lead expeditions to Oregon for his Pacific Fur Company. So John Day set off with Ramsey Crooks, like Lewis and Clark before them, and they were commissioned to rendezvous with Astor's company in Astoria by early 1812.

But when Day and Crooks reached the Idaho wilderness, Day's fast living caught up with him. Illness set in for John Day and the rest of their traveling company left Day behind at the Mau Mau River in northeastern Oregon, with only his friend, Ramsey Crooks, present with him. Sick and starving, they were then attacked, robbed, even to their last stitch of clothing. This became the site of Day's ultimate humiliation, but also his rescue. Another expeditionary company headed to Astoria rescued Day and Crooks soon thereafter, preserving their lives. The Mau Mau River was renamed the John Day River, a living memorial to the most humbled man who walked her shoreline. ¹

When John the Baptist appeared in the Judean wilderness, he met men and women from all Jerusalem and Judaea who had lived too fast, who were sick and starving, spiritually if not physically. The Jordan River was the place where they acknowledged their humiliation. They had come to repent. And we *know* they were humiliated. Baptism was something *Gentiles* did to become Jewish. If you weren't born Jewish, baptism is what Gentiles received to

¹ <https://www.cityofjohnday.com/community/page/who-was-john-day>

belong to the God of Israel. So what's going on when *Jews* come to the Jordan River for baptism?

To enter that river was an admission that though I belong to God by birthright, I've become a pagan. But to enter that river in humility was *the only* way to seek God's rescue.

The Pharisees and Sadducees come to Jordan's shoreline, too. They've come here to investigate what's happening, not because they're humiliated by their sins. They're not admitting they've become total pagans, but they ask for baptism.

The prophet of God, John the Baptist, refuses to baptize them, rebukes them, saying their birthright would not save them from the coming King. "Don't say 'We have Abraham as our father.'" John said. "God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham."

Now that's a very symbolic place to be speaking about stones and Abraham's children. Remember this is the same Jordan River where Israel crossed over into the Land of Promise, Canaan, the new Eden. Joshua led the river crossing, but when the priests entered the Jordan's current, carrying the Ark of the Covenant, the presence of God among them, the Jordan divided in two just like the Red Sea. And the Lord told Joshua after they came through the water, "Take twelve stones from the midst of the Jordan." Every tribe sent a member to lift a stone, every stone represented a tribe, the twelve stones gathered became a memorial with a message: God is with you, the hand of the Lord is mighty, and remember to fear the Lord your God forever.

Well, John certainly was preaching the fear of the Lord and all who *did* enter the Jordan in humility came with fear and trembling. Here were repentant sons and daughters of Abraham, dripping wet and ready for God's rescue. So what on earth does it mean when Abraham's greatest son, whose Hebrew name is Joshua (Jesus), comes to John asking for baptism himself?

Jesus at the Jordan

It means that the Rescuer himself enters Israel's crisis in total humility. From the beginning of Matthew's story, we know that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb.

He does not have the stain of sin, yet he was born in humility and poverty. He becomes a refugee in Herod's rage of child sacrifice, going down to Egypt with his parents. He returns home to Nazareth. You know what people say about Nazareth. Can anything good come out of that place?

When the child Jesus grows up into a man, the first place we see the mature Jesus is this scene at the Jordan River. This is our introduction to the man Jesus. He is the new Joshua at the Jordan River. No wonder John protested Jesus' request for baptism. John *adamantly* opposed the idea, but the Prophet of God stood down when the Son of God said, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting to fulfill all righteousness."

This is how we're meant to see him if we read Matthew's Gospel as a whole story. Here's this man whose lineage goes back to Abraham, he was born of a Virgin, he is the new Joshua, his name Yeshua means 'God will save,' yet he has stepped in line with Judea's notorious and humiliated sinners, seeking a baptism that was heretofore only reserved for Gentiles, and he has not and will not sin in his days. "Let it be so for now..." the first words we hear from Jesus in all of Matthew's Gospel. He's going into the Jordan River for a baptism he doesn't need himself. He's entering Jordan's stream to fulfill a righteousness no one else could fulfill.

An Immersion in Israel's Story

Jesus enters the water because he's fully entering the stream of Israel's tragic and agonizing story. God chose Abraham's family to be the beginning of a new humanity, but Israel's story thereafter had become tragic. As N.T. Wright has said, "Israel, the people who bear God's solution for the world's problems, (has become) the problem."² God saved Israel in the Exodus so Israel would God's son and bear his likeness—to be a wise, loving, and faithful son among the nations of the world. Yes, there are sages and saints in Israel's story, faithful kings and prophets, but for a nation called to be holy, Israel had many more cruel kings and false prophets. Saved in love at the Red Sea, commanded to love God at Mt Sinai, Israel

² Wright, N. T.. How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels (p. 178). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

made idols and worshiped false gods. Her greatest king David endangered his kingdom through murder and adultery. She killed the prophets God sent to speak his words and draw Israel back to himself. Her priests neglected the poor and weak whom God loved. No one could reverse the course of Israel's story because "all like sheep have gone astray, each one turning to his own wicked ways" across the ages.

That is, until the new Joshua enters the Jordan. And here is how the stream of Israel's history will reverse course. Jesus will "stand in" for Israel's failures and in his life he will redeem all of Israel's failures. All the commandments she failed to keep; the royal disasters of her kings; the lies of her false prophets; the corruption of her priests; the hard-heartedness and rebellion of her people; all these Jesus will redeem through his life of perfect obedience and holiness. Before blood and water flowed from his side on Calvary, he sought the baptism of his whole body in the Jordan so he could take the whole human story to the cross.

Baptism in a New Name

I cannot fathom his love. He doesn't consider equality with God something to be grasped. He stands in line with sinners humiliated in their guilt, awaiting a baptism he didn't need. This is the Gospel of Jesus' baptism. There is no way we can make our story right in our own strength. I'm not strong enough, faithful enough, resilient enough to choose the obedient life at every move. If turning this story around; if making this story ends well depends on the strength of my faithfulness, this story remains a tragedy. But if I'm baptized in the Name of Jesus Christ who lived the perfect life to God, then my story and our story has become and will always be a *Gospel* story.

I love that we read and sing songs about the Lord's anointed in Advent. Because when we continue celebrating the majesty of Jesus' incarnation in his baptism, we see the glory of the Lord's anointed is his love and his humility. Isaiah, seeing an image of the Lord's anointed in a prophetic vision said, 'A bruised reed he will not break and a faintly burning wick he will not quench.' This is the Lord's anointed servant. This is the one who walks to the river of humiliation so he can make it the River of Rescue again.

Remember what St Paul said about our Lord Jesus, “For our sake God made Christ Jesus *to be sin who knew no sin*, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”³

Before he became sin on the cross, he identified with our transgressions, our rebellion, by going into the Jordan River. He stood with sinners on Jordan’s banks before he was nailed between two thieves on the cross.

A Vision and a Voice

As soon as Jesus came out the water, a sign appeared. The heavens opened. The dove descended upon him. It was a vision for all to see; yet not just a vision, an epiphany; yet not just an epiphany, a theophany—the appearing of God. And then the voice from heaven, the Father speaking, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’

Oh, how important we notice this wasn’t a *private* communication between Father and Son. This was spoken for everyone to hear. If it had been words for Jesus alone, it would read differently. “I am well pleased with you, my beloved Son.” But no, this is an announcement, a revelation. For all who stand on the Jordan’s banks, not only in the first century, but even now; to all who don’t have the power to reverse the course of your story; to all whose best efforts at repentance still falls short; to all bruised wicks and faintly burning wicks—“This is my Beloved Son.” And we can see why the Lord is well pleased with this beloved Son. For he dwells in humility and love among the poor in spirit of Israel. He fully embraces his name and his mission, Yeshua, God will save. Yes, the Lord is well pleased with this Son.

And he is well pleased with all who are baptized in His Name. For freedom Christ has set us free. We are freed to live a life of obedience and holiness, knowing that we are saved by grace, not by our works or our performance. We are saved by his redeeming love. Thanks be to God alone, our story is no longer tragic. It has become a Gospel story because Christ turned the river of humiliation into the river of rescue. Thanks be to God, for we are baptized, not in our own name, but in the Name of the God who appeared at the Jordan River, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³ 2 Corinthians 5.21