

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 - The heavens opened at Jesus' baptism! Epiphany 1 Jan. 13-14, 2019

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Grace, mercy, & peace to you from God our Father and Jesus Christ our baptized Lord and Savior! Amen.

We read of the special blessings which God gave when Jesus was baptized in Luke 3:15-17, 21-22.

These are your words heavenly Father to reveal how heaven was opened by Jesus for sinners like us.

Dear Believers, baptized into Christ,

The Bible often shows opposites: death or life, saint or sinner or hell or heaven. In the life of Christ, we see He received the opposite of what He earned by His perfect life: heaven was closed to Him as He hung on the cross, so that we could receive the opposite of what we deserve: heaven's open door.

Heaven opened at Jesus' baptism!

First, how is Jesus' baptism connected to heaven? Until the time of His baptism Jesus had lived a quiet life. Except for His extended stay at the temple at age 12, as far as we know Jesus served as a perfect carpenter in Nazareth until age 30. Then Jesus left Nazareth and went to see John the Baptist at the Jordan River. John was preaching about the kingdom of God and the need for people to repent of their sins so that they would not be left out of heaven. Many people confessed their sins and were given God's promised forgiveness through the means of baptism that God had commanded John to do (*Mark 1:4*).

Our verse states, "*When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too*" (v.21). There was nothing in Jesus' life for which He needed to repent. He was the perfect in everything God wanted Him to do. Jewish law demanded that a lamb of sacrifice be pure. That is why John could later point to Jesus as the "*Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" (*John 1:29*). If Jesus was to take away their sins, He had to stand in the place of sinners. The Bible states, "*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*" (*2 Corinthians 5:21*). The Bible predicted that Jesus would "*be numbered with the transgressors*" in *Isaiah 53:12*. When Jesus hung on the cross, heaven was closed to Him. He suffered as if He were the worst sinner who was banned to hell. But, because He remained the perfect Savior, neither hell nor death could hold Him. He died in victory over hell and rose from death three days later to show His victory over the power of death. Anyone who comes to God in Christ will find that heaven remains open until the Last Day of life.

Jesus' baptism was the beginning of His three year journey to the cross. His baptism for sinners showed that He was fulfilling His duty as the Christ. By His baptism Jesus was willing to serve God and to be punished for sins that He didn't do. He put Himself under the law of God, to be judged in our place.

Jesus did not do this work alone. As Jesus was baptized in the water, God His Father was ready to bless Him. Only Luke states, "*As he was praying, heaven was opened.*" (v.21) Once He was baptized, Jesus prayed for His Father's blessing to help Him complete the work as the Savior. In answer to His prayer, heaven opened above Him. He could see the glory that awaited Him and all who would believe in Him. Since Jesus lived humbly on earth and was tempted like any of us, He valued His Father's support.

Also for Jesus, "*the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove*" (v.22). What did this mean for Jesus? John's Gospel tells us that the Spirit came upon the human nature of Jesus and remained on Him. From the time of His baptism the humble Jesus would carry out His work in the power of the Holy Spirit. This was prophesied in *Isaiah*, "*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*" (*Isaiah 42:1*). Jesus already had the Spirit as a believer, He now had the Spirit to help Him perfectly accomplish His saving work.

God gave Jesus a third encouragement: “A voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased’” (v.22). What great help this was for the humble Savior! We read in the book of Acts that before Paul began his work as a missionary he was baptized to wash away his sins. All the terrible things he did to Christians that would keep most people from daring to speak for Christ were taken away so he served God with freedom (Acts 26). Jesus’ work was more challenging. He faced every kind of temptation. He carried a weight of sin that would have crushed us. He died on the cross taking the full punishment of our sins to set us free. After Jesus rose from death He lived on earth for 40 days and then bodily entered heaven, where His human nature was given glory and honor. Who would have ever imagined that such glory for Jesus began with a humble ceremony of baptism in the Jordan River!

God has blessed us in baptism, too. God made a way for us to receive the victory that Christ won on the cross so that we might believe and be saved. John the Baptist had earlier warned that when Jesus would come a second time, it would be in power and judgment. People needed to be prepared because in His judgment Jesus will separate believers and unbelievers, like a farmer separating chaff from good wheat. The chaff represents unbelievers who reject Jesus’ saving work. In judgment, they will suffer unquenchable fire in the torments of hell that will never cease (v.17).

But Jesus promised in His Word, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:16). No matter how many temptations or difficult situations we may experience, as baptized Christians we can be sure that God in Christ is committed to us. In Christ, heaven remains open. God the Father is showing His loving care for us throughout our lives. And when our death approaches, because of Jesus’ perfect life and death, we can be sure that the door to heaven will be open for us to be with Christ our Savior forever.

Our baptism is not a onetime event to be forgotten. Paul wrote in Romans 6:3-4 that in baptism we are connected to Christ so that we now consider ourselves dead to sin and alive in Christ to live a new life. The new life is worked by the Holy Spirit. The Bible states, “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” (Titus 3:5) Jesus promised that God would pour out His Spirit on all nations. We need the Holy Spirit to bring us to faith in Christ and to keep us in faith. Thank God that our victorious Savior sent the Holy Spirit through the Means of Grace to bring us saving knowledge and belief in the truth!

Through faith we have received all that Christ won for us. Paul wrote, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:26-27). God’s Word assures us as we believe in Christ, we are covered in the perfect life of Jesus. God no longer sees sinners when He looks down at us. Since the day of our baptisms we can be confident that God is saying: “You are my [child] whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (v.22). The moment the Holy Spirit brought us to faith, our sins were washed away through the payment of Jesus’ blood. We can’t live perfect lives on earth. But, through faith in Christ, we will receive the blessings of heaven that Jesus earned by His perfect life.

Jesus was baptized to begin His work as our substitute to save us. He completed His work at the cross and now has sent out His Word to reach sinners like us. We have been baptized into Christ by water and God’s Word so that we have a saving faith in Jesus. Jesus has opened heaven for us. He will continue to send His Holy Spirit to help all baptized believers remain firm in the faith until we are safely home with Him. Amen.