

## What Happened When Jesus Was Baptized?

Jesus and John the Baptist were cousins when they met at the Jordan. Jesus came with crowds of others to be baptized. John knew him and recognized him and “*tried to deter him (Matthew 3:14)*” from being baptized with the others. Why would John, who baptized all comers, including Pharisees and tax collectors, hesitate for his cousin Jesus?

Jesus was born in Bethlehem. His parents had come to town from Galilee in the north and barely found a roof to shelter them. The angels sang and the shepherds came. The wise men brought their gifts. Mary listened to all that happened and treasured all that she heard, pondering it in her heart. Then danger came, and the little family fled to Egypt.

When the coast was clear again, they went back to their home in Nazareth. Then follows a long silence. Except for a brief bout of adolescent rebellion, Jesus-style, we hear nothing more about what happened to Mary, Joseph, and Jesus for nearly thirty years.

### What happened between birth and baptism?

In their culture, thirty years was most of a lifetime. In a culture where most girls were married in their early teens, a thirty year old might expect to be a grandfather. A man’s career was prepared for, entered, practiced, and nearly completed in that time. For those of us now who are barely grown up at thirty, or even much later than that, it’s hard to imagine someone of thirty as beyond middle age. In those days, thirty was pretty much over the hill.

Mary was very patient in her waiting and pondering. While other boys were learning their trade, Jesus did too. While other boys were growing up and raising families, she waited. While she watched Jesus grow in knowledge and wisdom, she waited. She may have nudged him a bit from time to time, but she let him make his own decisions.

How much do you think that Mary and her cousin Elizabeth told their boys about what had happened when they were born? We know that the whole village was involved when John’s father Zechariah lost his voice and got it back again. In John’s village, he would have been a center of attention, with everyone knowing that he was destined for great things.

John had a special upbringing, living in the wilderness until he began his ministry. Living in the wilderness probably didn’t mean that he was abandoned to live there alone, of course. In those days hermits and members of the sect known as Essenes lived out in the desert, and these might have been some of John’s teachers.

The miraculous events around the birth of Jesus didn’t happen in the village where he grew up, so he wouldn’t have been a celebrity among the other boys. In a sense, hearing nothing about his childhood and young manhood leads us to think that he was “normal.” He most likely did the expected things a boy did, except for his unusual interest in studying the scriptures. He probably learned and practiced his father’s trade, and there was lots of work for carpenters in the area in those days.

Remember that this was the time of the Herods and the Roman occupation. There were new cities being built all over the place, and archeologists have uncovered one small Roman city that was built near Nazareth. Herod the Great had begun the reconstruction of the great temple in Jerusalem, and there was work going on all over that city as well.

With the Roman enforcement of safety and tolerance for different religions, it was also a time of great religious growth in the Jewish community. The Sadducees and the temple establishment were restored and growing in influence. The Essenes had flourishing communities out in the desert. The new purification movement of the Pharisees, bringing religious practice from the Temple to the family, was flourishing. It was an exciting time to be a Jew.

For Jesus, interested in the scripture as he was, it was an unparalleled opportunity. The rabbinic schools of Hillel and Shammi were active and growing. Argument and discussion of Torah and its application were all around, not just in the synagogue but in the marketplace and where the elders gathered at the town gates.

People were talking and arguing and advocating and studying in their determination to understand the words and will of God. Many were hoping for and talking about someone who would rescue them from the Romans. A boy growing up and a young man struggling to understand his destiny only had to listen to what was going on around him.

### **How well did Jesus and John know each other?**

How well do you think Jesus and John knew each other before they came together at the Jordan? Their mothers were friends as well as cousins, brought closer together by their pregnancies. Even though they lived at a distance from each other and though John was growing up in the desert, the boys still probably saw each other from time to time.

When their extended families came to Jerusalem for the festivals, the two boys probably had time to play together and talk together. John is one of the few people Jesus could have shared his own story with, since John was in the middle of a story of his own. I can imagine the boys saying, “My Mom said ....” “That’s weird. What do you suppose it means?”

Both boys had something else in common, something that would have been more obvious in their culture than it would be in ours. Both were special given names that were not part of their family tradition. For John, there was a lot of discussion about his name at the time he was born. Luke says,

*On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.” They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.” Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.” (Luke 1:59-63)*

For Jesus, his name was given to his mother, quietly, by the angel Gabriel:

*But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, (Luke 1:30-32)*

We sometimes miss, because we call Jesus by the Greek version of his name, that he was named for the great war leader Joshua, the one who led the Israelites into the promised land. I can see him wondering, “Why on earth am I named for Joshua? How am I supposed to be like him?”

The two boys, wondering together, must have wondered why they had such unusual names. The stories their mothers told would have led them to dream of strange and wonderful things. But what would it mean in practice? John knew how to learn to be a prophet, because

this was a career path that had a tradition from ancient times. But the two of them must have wondered together what was in the plan for Jesus. One thing is clear—when they came together at the Jordan, they didn't come together as strangers.

### **What did Jesus bring to the meeting?**

Jesus had been waiting for this moment, the right moment, to come to John. It wasn't that he'd just heard about John's preaching, because John had been preaching and baptizing for some time. Jesus needed to know, for himself, that it was time. He was no fool. He knew, because he'd read the scriptures, that the path he would be taking would not be easy. Listen to the warnings he heard from Isaiah:

*He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. ..."*  
(Isaiah 42:2-4)

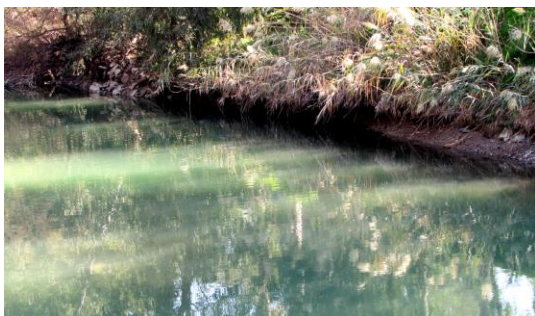
How would you like to get up in the morning and know that your to-do list for the day includes "establish justice on earth"? How would you like to know that it's going to be an uphill battle, knowing that you'll have to struggle on and "not grow faint or be crushed"?

I can see that, for Jesus, the moment of decision to begin his ministry was very like the moment of trial in Gethsemane. Once the decision is made, once the first step is taken down the path, all of the rest will follow. Yes, the glory will follow too, and the victory, but the cost is so high!

Taking that first step makes real all the effort and all the suffering that are going to be required to win through to the end. Jesus knew what he was starting. Like the king in the story he talked about, planning to go to war, he knew enough to count the cost up front. The cost was high, his own life, but ultimately he was willing to pay it. So, finally, he came to John to let his journey begin.

### **What happened when they met?**

Jesus was scheduled for an encounter, not with destiny, but with the power of God the Holy Spirit. John's been baptizing with water for the forgiveness of sins, and John knows that this man coming to him has no need of that. He's seen this person, boy and man, and knows that sin is completely foreign to his nature.



Of course John is concerned. He knows where he fits in the hierarchy of heaven. He's the announcer and not the star of the show. He has no desire to offend God Most High. John knows that there's nothing he can give his cousin that Jesus doesn't already have. John knows the priorities when he says,

*I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*  
(Matthew 3:14)

But Jesus sees his situation more clearly.

Jesus gave up all his power and divine knowledge when he became a human being, but as a human being he does know one thing. Whatever he has to do, there's no way he can do it alone. He needs help, and he knows that it's through baptism that he can receive it.

Jesus is the first person to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit, filling him and giving him the strength and the power he needs to go forward. Did Jesus know what he was asking of John? I don't know. He might simply have been listening to Isaiah, who said,

*I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles,  
(Isaiah 42:6)*

Jesus knew he was called, and to fulfill all the required formalities, he needed to be baptized. Whether or not he "knew" that he'd receive the Holy Spirit, Jesus did know where he needed to be and what he needed to do.

Jesus tells his disciples what it will be like for them to receive the Holy Spirit. He says, in an appearance to them after his resurrection, to wait for what the Father had promised:

*John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*  
(Acts 1:5)

*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*  
(Acts 1:8)

The power to do this ministry, whether it's the ministry of Jesus himself, of the disciples, or of those of us who follow him today, is enabled by this one Holy Spirit. As Jesus received the Spirit in the river Jordan, the disciples received it at Pentecost. As Paul received the Spirit on the road to Damascus, we receive it in these later days. Whenever and however the gospel comes into the world, it's through the power of the Holy Spirit.

John had the honor to witness the Spirit's coming:

*As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."  
(Matthew 3:16-17)*

The Holy Spirit is a worker of miracles. The Spirit rested on the one who had been born in Bethlehem with the character and person of God inside. The Spirit alighted on him, filling him with the love and the power of God, strengthening him and making him ready for all that lay ahead.