

For Jesus, the time of preparation was now over. Those events leading up to His ministry were now past. He had been born at Christmas; He had been taken to the temple for circumcision and naming eight days later. He had been visited by the wise men. At the age of twelve He had visited the temple, and impressed the scholars there with His knowledge. John the Baptist had come; this forerunner had preached in the wilderness. John had prepared the way for Jesus. All things were now ready; the stage was set for Jesus to begin His ministry. He would now go about Israel, preaching and healing; teaching and binding up. He is about to bring a new day of salvation to Israel, to all mankind. But before He begins this, Jesus first receives His Father's blessing; first He has the Holy Spirit poured out upon Him. We see that in the Gospel lesson, as Jesus is baptized; as heaven is opened above Jesus.

Jesus came out to the wilderness with the crowds. He came with those who were baptized by John. These crowds came in repentance; they came confessing their sins, seeking God's forgiveness given through the baptism of John. And Jesus is counted among them; He is numbered among the transgressors. Jesus comes as a sinner, not because He had His own sin, but because He bore the sins of man. Jesus comes to bear the sin of the world; to take it upon Himself and so take it away. And carrying this dreadful load, Jesus descends to John in the Jordan river.

There, with the crowds, Jesus is baptized by John; the one mightier than John, the one whose sandal John was not worthy to untie, now submits to John's baptism. And when Jesus is baptized, the heavens are opened. Here was the one who was joining heaven and earth. Here was the Christ, come down from heaven to earth. Here was the Christ, opening the way to heaven; allowing man to enter that same heaven. And it is opened first to Him. Here in the

Jordan was the Christ, who enjoyed the favor of His heavenly Father. For this Christ, nothing stands between earth and heaven; both are open to Him.

The heavens are opened while Jesus is praying. As God's Son, Jesus has the privilege of prayer: He has access to the throne of grace; He can plead for gifts from on high. He can turn to the greatest source of help and strength, with the confidence that His Father will hear and answer His prayers. He is the Son; He can seek the blessing and aid of His Father at all times. He spends time in the presence of the Father through prayer.

As Jesus prays; as the heavens are opened, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus. Here is the ultimate gift from on high: the Holy Spirit Himself rests upon Jesus. Here, in the Jordan, Jesus is anointed with this Spirit, set apart to be the Christ, the Messiah, the world's Redeemer. This same Holy Spirit remains upon Jesus. He leads Jesus and accompanies Him throughout Jesus' ministry. This Spirit is God's abiding presence upon His Christ.

From the heavens opened above Jesus, the Father speaks to His Son: "You are my beloved Son; with You I am well pleased." Here is the Father's approval of Jesus—even as He is counted with sinners! God's favor and blessing rest upon His Son, Whom He loves. The Father loves this Son who is bearing the sin of the world to take it away.

Behold the miracle of Jesus' baptism: the heavens are opened; from the open heaven, the Spirit is given to Jesus; from the open heaven the Father speaks His approval and love over this, His Son. The heavens are opened: Jesus' prayer ascends to the throne of grace. Consider these miracles, for this is what happens today in Baptism.

That is, God opens heaven at the font. This opening is not as dramatic or visible as it was for Jesus, but it is just as real. For Jesus' baptism gives us a picture of what happens at our baptisms. When we are baptized today; when we bring children to baptism, when adults come to

baptism, heaven and earth are bridged once again. The person baptized has heaven opened to him or to her. No longer does sin stand between that person and God; sin is washed away, heaven opens over the one baptized.

For we who have been baptized, this means that the way is open for our prayers to ascend to the Father. You, baptized child of God, have access to the throne of grace; you have been given the privilege of prayer. Heaven is opened, that you might spend time with your heavenly Father. You hear Him speak to you in His Word; you may lay your requests before Him. You may come to Him with your needs and beg for His help; you may do so trusting His promise that He will hear and answer your prayers. Prayer is a power granted to the baptized; for in your baptism, God opened His heaven to you; He now invites you to come before Him in prayer, seeking His blessing and strength.

Do not forsake this gift of prayer! Prayer is a constant refuge for us; prayer is a haven, especially in times of trouble. Prayer turns our needs, our worries, our struggles over to the only one who can help. Prayer lays these requests before God, whose blessing is needed in every part of our lives. Without His aid, we would be lost. Without His blessing, we would fail in all that we attempt. God alone gives all that we are and have; and He has promised to graciously hear and answer our prayers; to grant us grace in time of need. Rely on this promise; cling to His Word; pray in all situations. You are God's baptized child—speak to your Heavenly Father, trusting that He will answer your prayers.

At your baptism, heaven was opened to give you the Holy Spirit. You then are never alone; the Holy Spirit remains upon you. He is God's abiding presence wherever you are in this world. Think on Him when your way seems dark and forsaken. No, you cannot see Him, but He is there. Jesus has not left us as orphans, alone in this world. Instead, He sends His Spirit to

dwell with us at all times. He comes to lead you and guide you; He comes in God's Word to show you the way of life. In the Scriptures He speaks to you, granting you the comfort that is found in Jesus only.

At the font, heaven is opened as the Father names you His child. For baptism is God's way of adopting us as His children, adding us to His household. Baptized into Christ, you are God's own beloved child. In Christ, the favor and blessing of God rest upon you. You are granted the privileges of God's children—the constant love and care of your heavenly Father; an eternal inheritance with Him in His house.

All of these gifts are yours in Christ Jesus. For at your baptism, God joined you to Christ, that His blessings might be yours. As heaven was opened to Jesus, so now it is open to you! By bearing your sin, by forgiving that sin, Christ has opened heaven upon you; no longer does your sin stand between you and the Lord. Now, your way to heaven is open; as Christ ascended there, so also He will bring you to be with Him in His heaven.

So also the gift of prayer: it is yours in Christ Jesus. Through Him our prayers rise to the Father; He has opened this channel for our prayers. He Himself is the way to the Father. When we pray then, we pray in Christ. He prays with us and for us; His strength and His grace prompt our prayers and lift them up to the Father's throne of grace. Christ has made us to share in His privilege of prayer; He teaches us to pray: OUR Father. That is, we address the Father who is also Jesus' Father; the Father who is ours in Christ Jesus. Pray with the confidence that Christ is praying with you, that Christ has opened the way for your prayers.

The Spirit that came to rest upon Christ now rests upon you as well; this too is your blessing in Christ. As your baptism joins you to Christ, to His death and resurrection, His Spirit is given to you.

Finally, the only-begotten Son of God has made you God's adopted children. God sees you, baptized into Christ, and for Christ's sake counts you His child. In Christ you are brought into His house; in Christ you are given a seat at God's table; in Christ you are welcomed to God's eternal feast of victory. In Christ, these great blessings are yours. In Christ, they were given to you at your baptism and abide to this day and beyond.

Rejoice then at your baptism! Rejoice on this day, as we recall the baptism of our Lord. As we see Him enter the Jordan river, counted among sinners, rejoice that He has won your salvation; be glad that He bore your sin, taking it away from you and giving you forgiveness. And take heart as we see the blessings of baptism displayed in Christ's baptism: rejoice that in baptism God opens heaven, grants His Spirit, adopts His children, and invites those children to pray. Rejoice that these blessings are yours in Christ Jesus. Amen.