

Baptism (part 1 of 6): John the Baptist's Baptism By Alan Hitchen

As the fullness of time dawned, Gabriel was sent to Zacharias in the temple to reveal Elizabeth would have a son. This son was chosen by God to “*turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God,*” “*go as a forerunner before Him*”, “*turn ... the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous*”, and “*make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*” (Lk. 1:16-17). The writers of the gospels all describe how John fulfilled this.

Fulfillment of Prophecy

Mark opened his gospel describing John's work as “*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ*” “*even as it is written in Isaiah the prophet,*” who foretold John would “*prepare Your way,*” and “*make his paths straight*” (Mk. 1:2-3). So John worked to ready Israel to meet their Messiah. As all prophets before him, his primary role involved Israel's repentance.

Luke tells us he began his work when “*the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness,*” or after the Holy Spirit revealed to him exactly what he should preach and what he should do. Since his work was prophesied in Isaiah, John must do exactly as Isaiah foretold to fulfill it. His preaching and work were therefore exactly “*as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet*” (Lk. 3:2-4).

Matthew sums it up: “*In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!*” He too cites Isaiah and quotes the same passage (Mt. 3:1-3). John was chosen by God to fulfill Isaiah's prophecies concerning the Messiah. His inspired message and work were exactly as God willed.

When “*John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. And all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins*” (Mk. 1:4-5), he was doing exactly what Isaiah revealed. The “*baptism of repentance for the remission of sins*” was what God had planned when he inspired Isaiah. As “*he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins,*” it was “*as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet.*” (Lk. 3:3-4).

Two Vital Roles

God chose John, inspired him to preach to Israel, and created “*baptism of repentance for the remission of sins*” so he could fulfill his work. John's entire ministry centered on this baptism. It was such a vital part that everyone then and now knows him as “*John the Baptist.*”

They all knew that baptism was God's method to bring Israel to a state of preparation for Jesus. It was through John's preaching about baptism that the ways were made straight, the valleys filled in, and the mountains smoothed. What John preached about baptism led to the complete reformation of the people. This is why it was called the “*baptism of repentance.*” Only when the people were prepared to confess their sins were they fit subjects for John's baptism, and that is exactly why “*all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.*” At that point in his preaching, John had completed the first part of his mission.

But there was a second reason why John baptized. In his own words, John said, “*I did not know*

Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water.” Thus not only did God use baptism to prepare the people for the Messiah, he also used baptism to introduce the Messiah to Israel. Listen carefully to John’s testimony. “I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.” (Jn. 1:33-34). John’s primary work: Make Jesus known to Israel and make Israel ready for her Messiah. God chose baptism to accomplish both.

”... for the remission of sins”

Yet the Jewish leaders were deeply troubled. John was preaching that his baptism was “*for remission of sins.*” This had never been preached or heard of before. Nowhere in the Law of Moses was there such a promise or ordinance. Animal sacrifice and blood were the only prescribed means for atonement and forgiveness.

They knew there were only two alternatives. Either the Law of Moses was being changed or John was a false prophet. This was what the delegation sent to John was to investigate. Who was he? Where did he get his authority? Why was he baptizing? John had but one answer “*I am The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said.*” (Jn. 1:23). His authority to preach came from prophecy and from the imminent arrival of the Messiah.

This message had become a focal point for all Israel. John remained in the wilderness, but the message spread far and wide. “*John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. And all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins*” (Mk. 1:4-5). So Mark confirmed what Luke said. It was “*a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.*” John’s message was so popular that “*Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins*” (Mt. 3:5-6). It was important that we all understand that John did not go to them. They came to John!

Thus there was no doubt in the mind of all these Israelites that John was preaching the necessity of baptism. Repentance was required before this baptism could be performed and with this repentance and John’s baptism remission of sins had been promised by God to each individual.

Jesus also validated and confirmed John’s preaching, first by being baptized himself, “*for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness*” (Mt. 3:1-15). Second, he used the baptism of John to continue to prepare people for the kingdom of heaven. “*Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He remained with them and baptized. Now John also was baptizing*” (Jn. 3:22-23). It was not long before John’s disciples saw that “*He is baptizing and all are coming to him*” (Jn. 3:26). Later even “*the Pharisees heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself baptized not, but his disciples)*” (Jn. 4:1-2).

Jesus Validated John’s Role

After Herod put John in prison, John sent disciples to Jesus to ask a question. After answering it, Jesus spoke candidly to the multitudes: “*He began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to behold*” (Lk. 7:24)? “*This is he of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, Who shall prepare thy way before thee*” (Lk. 7:27). What Isaiah had foretold and Gabriel had affirmed to Zacharias, Jesus now confirmed.

John was the messenger to prepare them for the Messiah. Their response to John and his baptism determined whether John's work succeeded or failed. Jesus himself made baptism the focus of John's work! Their choice to be baptized showed God's wisdom in giving baptism this power. For "*all the people when they heard, and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John.*" In Jesus own words "*by being baptized*", they "*justified God*" in his choice of baptism to bring the people to Jesus.

There was an even more powerful purpose for baptism. It became a terrible indictment against all who rejected it. "*The Pharisees and the lawyers rejected for themselves the counsel of God, being not baptized of him.*" (Lk. 7:29-30). Those who rejected baptism rejected God's will. By God's sovereign decree, John's baptism gave remission of sins. By accepting John's authority as being from heaven and being baptized, they manifested their faith in God's word and received remission of sins. Those who rejected John's baptism took the position that John was not a prophet and Jesus was not their Messiah! They also revealed that they did not believe it would give them remission of sins.

At the end of his ministry, Jesus compelled them to take a side. "*The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven or from men?*" They saw their dilemma immediately. "*And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why then did ye not believe him? But if we shall say, From men; we fear the multitude; for all hold John as a prophet.*" They took the path of the coward: "*So they answered Jesus and said, 'We do not know'*" (Mt. 21:25-27).

In our next article we will see what happened to baptism after Jesus' crucifixion and the end of the Law. Did Jesus keep the ordinance or allow it to lapse with circumcision? Did its pivotal role as accepting or rejecting God's counsel continue or end? Did Jesus keep its power to bring remission of sins or did he remove that as well?