

THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF CHRIST

JESUS' BAPTISM: WHEN JESUS FULFILLED ALL RIGHTEOUSNESS

Jesus was thirty when He was baptized of John. His baptism was the most significant baptism that has ever occurred. His baptism, like His birth, was exceptional; it was divine. It was much different from the norm.

BAPTISM AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

Baptism is **strictly a New Testament practice**. John's baptism was for the Jews. His baptism was a call to repentance and was for the purpose of remission of sins. God gave this act of faith to John to preach and use in his ministry.

Jack Lewis wrote of proselyte baptism:

Proselyte baptism initiated those not Jews into Judaism, but had no connection with forgiveness of sins. John's baptism applied to those who were already Jews and did not initiate them into the faith. The proselyte immersed himself in the presence of witnesses; John's baptism required an administrator. Proselyte baptism is a practice unknown to the Old Testament. It may be—but it is not certain—that it was being practiced as early as John's day. Philo and Josephus are silent about the practice, and our earliest evidence for it is a controversy between the schools of Shammai and Hillel about the time of the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (*Passover* 8:8). At that time it seems a standing practice, but the date of its origin is wrapped in obscurity.¹

THE TIME AND PLACE OF HIS BAPTISM

Near the end of John's ministry, John met Jesus at the Jordan and Jesus asked him to baptize Him. In other words, when He was thirty years of age (Luke 3:23), Jesus traveled maybe sixty miles (from Nazareth; Mark 1:9) to Bethany (John 1:28) to be baptized of John.² The RSV has Bethany and the KJV has Bethabara.

¹Jack P. Lewis, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Austin, TX: Sweet Publishing Company, 1976), 62.

²Seven baptisms are mentioned in the New Testament: (1) The baptism unto Moses (1 Corinthians 10:2); (2) The baptism of sufferings (Mark 10:38, 39); the baptism for the dead (1 Corinthians 15:29); the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11); the baptism of fire (Matthew

Surely one should **not conclude from His coming to be baptized at age thirty** that one should wait until he is thirty to be baptized. Jesus was sensitive to the will of God at the age of twelve (Luke 2:41-49). If John had begun his work sooner, Jesus would have been baptized sooner.

Jesus joined the thousands who were coming out to hear John and to be baptized of him. Perhaps people were lined up, going out to John in the Jordan to be baptized. Then, John looked up and the next one coming to him was Jesus. He was surprised, but he baptized Him.

How many accounts of the baptism of Jesus did the Holy Spirit give us? The Holy Spirit gave us three accounts of the baptism of Jesus, with Matthew giving us the fullest account (see Matthew 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21, 22). A total of ten verses tell us about His baptism—five in Matthew; three in Mark; and two in Luke.

THE PRELUDE TO HIS MINISTRY

Four momentous events form a beautiful prelude to the public work of Jesus. **First, Jesus was baptized of John** (Matthew 3:13). The eighteen years of almost total silence were broken by our Lord's appearance to be baptized of John.

Second, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove (Matthew 3:16). This was apparently the moment when Jesus received the Holy Spirit without measure (Luke 3:23; 4:1; 1:15).

Third, Jesus was acknowledged by his Father (Matthew 3:17). The Father said that Jesus was His Son and He was well pleased with Him.

The scene of our Lord's baptism illustrates the Godhead decisively: God speaks from heaven, Jesus is baptized, and the Spirit descends in the form of a dove.

Fourth, Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11). J. W. McGarvey wrote:

It behoved him to be tempted, that thus sharing our nature with its weakness and temptation, he might bring us to share his nature with its strength and sinlessness."³

THE CONNECTING LINK

3:11); the baptism of John (Acts 19:3); the baptism of the Great Commission (Mark 16:15, 16; Matthew 28:19, 20).

³J. W. McGarvey, *Fourfold*, 88.

John was the prophet of God sent to prepare the way for the Messiah. He was the connecting link between the Old Testament and the New. He had a two-fold mission:

To prepare the people (Jews) for the coming of the Christ and His kingdom.

To identify the Messiah (John 1:23; 1:31-34).

Where did John get the concept of baptism? Did he get it from society around him or from God? Jesus said he got it from God (Matthew 21:25).

How do you picture a baptismal scene under John's preaching? Picture it in the river and on a bank. Was it immersion or sprinkling?

WHAT WAS THE BAPTISM OF JOHN?

Characteristic one: It was a baptism of expectation. It looked toward or forward to the coming of Jesus (Acts 19:4). The ones who were baptized of John pledged that they would receive the Christ when He came. John was not out making disciples for himself; he was making disciples for Jesus (Matthew 3:11).

Characteristic two: It was a baptism of repentance (Acts 19:4). The general purpose of John's baptism was to bring the people to repentance. John prepared the way for the Lord by turning the hearts of the people to righteousness.

This repentance was a **new kind** of repentance (Isaiah 1:18, 19). Prior to this, repentance was motivated by earthly blessings. The repentance John preached called for people to repent in view of the coming of the Messiah and His kingdom. That would be a spiritual repentance.

Characteristic three: It was a baptism unto the remission of sins (Mark 1:4). This type of baptism, a water baptism unto the remission of sins, is the only kind of baptism mentioned in the New Testament. The blood of Jesus reached backward as well as forward (Hebrews 9:15).

Characteristic four: It was a baptism of obedience (Luke 7:30). When the baptism of John was rejected, the counsel of God was rejected. John's baptism was part of the righteousness of God.

WHY WAS JESUS BAPTIZED OF JOHN?

The Negative Side

We will consider this question of why Jesus was baptized from two viewpoints. Let us look at **the negative** side first.

Jesus did not need repentance. Jesus was sinless during his entire earthly life (Hebrews 4:15):

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.

He was perfectly righteous and could not have been more righteous.

Jesus did not need the remission of sins. “Remission of sins” implies the guilt of sin. Having never sinned, Jesus had no guilt to remove.

He did not submit to baptism to be consecrated into the office of the priesthood. He was not a priest while on earth. God made an exception in His case and made Him our high priest in heaven.

He was not baptized so that Deity might come upon Him. He was divine from the beginning (Matthew 1:23). His baptism did not make Him divine.

One of the apocryphal Gospels suggests that Jesus refused to be baptized. *The Gospel according to the Hebrews* has this passage:

“Behold the mother of the Lord and His brethren said to Him, ‘John the Baptist baptizeth for the remission of sins; let us go and be baptized by him.’ But He said to them, ‘What sin have I committed, that I should go and be baptized by him? Except perchance this very thing that I have said is ignorance.’”⁴

The true Gospels, however, picture Jesus as wanting to be baptized of John. Why did He come to be baptized?

The Positive Side

Now, let us look **at the positive side** of why Jesus was baptized.

Jesus stated specifically why He was baptized of John. He was baptized “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15).

What does it imply?

His baptism was a fulfillment. Being baptized of John would be fulfilling the righteousness of God. “Righteousness” should be seen as being the same as “walking according to all the commandments of God.” One psalmist wrote:

All thy commandments are righteous (Psalms 119:172).

Of Zacharias and Elizabeth it is written:

⁴As quoted by William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), 52.

For they were both righteous, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, blameless . . . (Luke 1:6).

Jesus later asked the Pharisees,

The baptism of John, whence was it: from heaven, or of men? (Matthew 21:25).

Therefore, it was the will of God for Him to be baptized of John (John 6:38). So, in submitting to John's baptism, He was submitting to the will of God.

The reason given by Jesus is the only specific reason to be found concerning His baptism. However, the baptism of Jesus (beyond the specific purpose) implies several significant things.

His baptism implies endorsement. His baptism sanctions the work and message of John. His baptism speaks loudly. It says something about John! It declares that John was a prophet of God. Further, it says something about the origin of John's baptism, affirming that his baptism was of God. It says something about the purpose of John's baptism, revealing that the baptism of John was part of God's plan for the era that preceded the public ministry of Christ.

It signals a commencement. At His baptism, Jesus was acknowledged as the Messiah. The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descended upon Him following His baptism and from this point in time forward John would single Him out as the Messiah (John 1:32-34; 1:35-36).

At His baptism, the Father confessed Jesus. His quiet life in Nazareth would now be left behind. From His baptism, Jesus goes into the wilderness to be tempted, and from the temptations, He goes into His public ministry.

Did John know Jesus was the Messiah before His baptism? See John 1:29-33.

WHAT LESSONS DO WE LEARN?

His baptism does not teach us to be baptized of John. Many have said, "I'd like to be baptized just like Jesus was." Of course, it would be impossible to be baptized "just like Jesus was." John's baptism was for a particular period and a particular people. John's baptism is no longer valid (Acts 19:1-5). Jesus, the sinless One, was baptized simply to fulfill all righteousness. Jesus obeyed the Law because He lived under it. To be obedient to God, He had to obey the Law.

It is not God's will for us to obey the Law of Moses today. We cannot be baptized of John today but we can obey God for the same reasons Jesus did—to fulfill all righteousness. We should ask, "What is the will of God for me today that I may obey it just as Jesus obeyed His Father's will for Him?"

His baptism does teach us the lesson of obedience.⁵ It was His Father's will that He be baptized of John. Jesus gladly submitted to the baptism of John because it was the will of His Father. No one can say he is following the example of Jesus unless he has surrendered to the will of God. Sentimentalism is not always submission. If we have not submitted to the baptism of the great commission, we have not submitted to God. (Matthew 28:19-20).

His baptism does teach us the lesson of humility. The sinful baptized the sinless. The inferior baptized the superior (Matthew 3:13-17). Humility means "losing ourselves in something bigger than ourselves." Jesus was more concerned about the Father's will than His own image. Jesus learned obedience (Hebrews 5:8-9).

His baptism teaches us that obedience pleases our Father. After His baptism, God acknowledged Jesus as His unique Son in a public fashion. He not only said that He was pleased with Him, but that He was *well pleased* with Him.

How do we please our Father? The obvious answer is—through obedience. Three times, the Holy Scriptures represent God as speaking out of heaven in testimony for Jesus Christ; in this place (Matthew 3:17), on the occasion of the transfiguration (Matthew 17:5), and in John 12:28-30. The Father spoke from heaven here and declared, "This is My Son in Whom I am well-pleased."

What does it mean to follow in the steps of Jesus? Jesus came to do the will of His Father. The will of God for Jesus meant baptism, temptation, and the cross. What will the will of God mean for you? It will mean the baptism of the great commission, for one thing (Mark 16:15).

Jesus invited us to do the will of God and shows us how. Following the steps of Jesus means doing the will of God. If Jesus was so serious about John's baptism, how serious ought we to be about a greater baptism, the baptism of the Great Commission?⁶

Can we be confident that baptism in the Bible is immersion? Consider Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12.

⁵One can draw a parallel between our baptism and Jesus' baptism: (1) He received the Spirit at His baptism and we do too (Acts 2:38); (2) He prayed at His baptism and we should be baptized prayerfully as well (Acts 22:16; 1 Peter 3:16); (3) He was acknowledged as God's Son following baptism, we are actually made sons of God at baptism (Galatians 3:26, 27).

⁶The baptism of the Great Commission is greater than John's in its duration. John's was only for a brief period; the Great Commission baptism is for the Christian Age. The baptism of John was administered by John; the baptism of the Great Commission was administered in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19, 20). The baptism of the Great Commission is mentioned in the seven ones (Ephesians 4:4-6); and John's is not.

Key Ideas:

What formed a prelude to Jesus' ministry? What were the characteristics to John's baptism? What does Jesus' baptism imply? Should we be baptized the way Jesus was?

I was eleven years of age when I became a Christian. It was July of 1955. My brother had talked to me about how to become a Christian and I made up my mind to become one. A gospel meeting was in progress at the old South Thompson Street church of Christ. Attending it, gave me an immediate opportunity to become a Christian. When we arrived that Tuesday night, I wanted to sit near the front of the church building so I would not have far to walk. However, we had to sit in the middle of the auditorium and I had to sit in the middle of the pew. The sermon was the shortest sermon I've ever heard. When we started singing the invitation, I couldn't move. My feet were frozen to the floor. I looked down at my songbooks and said to myself, "When we come to this word in the song, I'm going to move and walk to the front." I almost ran to the front. Jesus' baptism is far more important than this recounting of my baptism. His was perfect; mine wasn't.