Laying the Foundation

LAYING THE AXE TO THE ROOT (JOHN’S BAPTISM)

Catechism Two, Lesson 13

Reading: Luke 3:1–19

1. Is The Study Of John The Baptist And His Baptism Important?

Very much so. In the Gospel of Mark the coming of John the Baptist is considered to be “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ …” (Mark 1:1). The difference John would make to history was so great that it was prophesied centuries before his birth that he would prepare the way for the Messiah.

John the Baptist was the turning point in prophetic history. Until this time the Old Covenant prophets had interpreted, confirmed, and applied the law in a moral dimension. John, by the commandment of God, introduced a new message: “The kingdom is ready, are you?”

A. John fulfilled Isaiah’s promise of a voice to prepare the Messiah’s way.

After 400 years of silence, God was again speaking prophetically in Israel. But the message was entirely new. It heralded a coming king and a new law. Preparation must be made not only in individual hearts but in society if they are to receive their Messiah.

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain(Isa. 40:3, 4).

B. John fulfilled Malachi’s promise of a herald or forerunner before the Messiah.

The people were so unaccustomed to hearing God speak that they needed a messenger before the messenger. Jesus Himself was the messenger as well as the mediator of the New Covenant which ushered in the kingdom. But before people could be alerted to hear Him, they needed to be awakened through the prophetic preaching and baptism of John, the forerunner or herald.

Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts (Mal. 3:1).

C. John came with a special ability from God to draw people to repentance.

John came in the “spirit and power of Elijah.” In this way, he fulfilled the promise to Malachi that Elijah would come again before the Messiah came. This anointing from God gave John a special ability to stir the hearts of parents and children alike and to lead them to repentance.

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse (Mal. 4:5, 6).

D. John brought the Old Covenant dispensation to an end.

The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it (Luke 16:16).

2. What Was The Primary Message Of John The Baptist?

John preached the same gospel Jesus preached—the gospel of the kingdom. The kingdom is the sphere of God’s rule. To enter this kingdom you must prepare yourself by means of repentance and baptism. If you believed the message, you obeyed it. For this reason, the most common words used by John were, “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand” (Matt. 3:2; 4:17).

John’s whole message could be summarized as “repent, and demonstrate your repentance by obedience to baptism.”

A. People were to repent of reliance upon religious traditions (dead works).

Until this time, God was to be found in connection with the Law, the Priesthood, and the Temple. But now God Himself was initiating change. He was doing away with the entire system of Judaism because the entire Law would be fulfilled in the Messiah Himself. If people were to be open enough to receive Him, they would have to let go of their closed ideas about God. They had to turn their backs on the old in order to receive the new. John baptized in the River Jordan. This meant that the people had to go outside the sacred city of Jerusalem and be immersed in the muddy old river. John’s authority to minister was not from the religious leaders but from God Himself. For this reason, the leaders opposed him.

… he that sent me to baptize with water … (John 1:33).

The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him? But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet (Matt. 21:25, 26).

B. People were to demonstrate their repentance of heart by submitting to baptism.

John would not permit the people to go through outward forms. His baptism was different than all the Jewish traditions and rites—it was a real experience of meeting God. People confessed their sins as they entered the water. They exercised faith in the coming Messiah. Their sins were remitted. But more than this, the axe was laid to the root of sin.

Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, That God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire (Luke 3:8, 9).

C. This baptism was in itself a public confession of sin and repentance.

Submission to John’s baptism was not just a popular religious fad. It cost something. By stepping into that muddy river, you were announcing to everyone that Judaism with its dead forms had not profited you. You were a sinner and needed God to do something on the inside to make you different. You were

required not only to verbally confess specific sins to John upon being baptized, but the baptism itself declared that you recognized your whole root to be no good. You wanted God to lay His axe against the cause of sin in you.

John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins (Mark 1:4, 5).

3. Were People Actually Forgiven Their Sins When They Were Baptised By John?

Yes. Those who entered the waters of baptism with true repentance and faith experienced the benefits of the coming Messiah. The word “remission” is the Greek word, aphesis, which we have already learned means “sending away, release, forgiveness.” This remission was in contrast to the mere covering of sin available under the law. It was based upon the blood of Jesus Christ, for God was looking ahead to the completed redemption.

A. John was pointing toward the Lamb of God.

Under the law, sin was remitted through the shedding of blood. The blood of animals such as bulls, goats, and lambs provided a covering over of sin for a time. But these sacrifices had to be repeated again and again. Each new offense required a sacrifice. But Jesus came to offer Himself, the perfect Lamb, once for all. He was the Sacrifice to end all sacrifices. John’s message and baptism pointed toward Christ and focused their expectation upon His work as the Lamb of God.

… John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

B. Continued benefit from John’s baptism required continuance into Jesus’ kingdom.

John’s ministry was transitional. Its purpose was to break up the strength of religious tradition and to make people ready to hear a fresh message from God. John was never an end in himself. He knew this. He was always working to direct people beyond himself to the One coming after him. He was always comparing himself as nothing in the light of the One to whom he gave witness. But even so some people failed to make the transition. When Jesus came, they were still wrapped up in John. Even after John’s death we read of his followers and how they had lost what little light they had because they did not walk in it.

And they came unto John, and said unto him, Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him. John answered and said, A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven. Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him.… He must increase, but I must decrease (John 3:26–28, 30).

He [Paul] said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him,

We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost. And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John’s baptism. Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus (Acts 19:2–4).

Notice how this movement lost its central message because of their failure to recognize God’s change of leadership. John had emphasized both faith in the coming Messiah and the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. All that remained with John’s misguided followers years later was the outward form of John’s water baptism. Its meaning was gone.

4. What Was The Benefit Of John’s Ministry?

Since those who wanted to go on to follow Jesus had to be re-baptized—or baptized into His name—what was the good of John’s baptism? God never asks us to do anything without a good reason. Submission to John did indeed prepare the way of the Lord. Those who allowed the axe to be laid to the root in his baptism were open to the message of the kingdom. They were not blinded by religious tradition or bound by the fear of their elders. They were already aware of their personal need. For this reason, they could welcome a Savior who was also a King—one who would tell them how to live their lives.

A. They were familiar with the meaning of water baptism.

They already knew to expect something to happen in the waters of baptism. This was no mere rite; it was a meeting with God. When they were told to be baptized in the name of the Messiah after the Holy Spirit proved His resurrection and ascension on the day of Pentecost, they obeyed.

B. They knew to expect the gift of the Holy Spirit.

John was always making comparisons between his water baptism and the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. Jesus and His disciples baptized in water, but this was not the emphasis of their ministry. The unique ministry of the Messiah was to pour out the promise of the Father upon those who believed. Those who were immersed in water by John were told to expect the Messiah to immerse them in the Holy Spirit. The axe had been laid to the root in the water, but the Messiah would come and burn all that needed to be purged.

5. Did John Use Any Name Or Names In His Baptismal Formula?

No. Names were not used. He simply said, “I baptize you unto the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins,” or “I baptize you in water unto repentance, but there is one coming after me who will baptize you with the Holy Ghost and fire!” (See Luke 3:16–17).

Probably the key word in John’s formula is the word “unto.” His ministry was pivotal in the history of salvation. It was the transition between the Old and New Covenants. His baptism pointed those in Israel who would repent and believe toward their true hope, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Home Study: Lesson 13

Name\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. Briefly describe the nature and purpose of John’s baptism.

2. What happens to movements when the leader becomes more important to its followers than up-to-date revelation from God?

3. In what ways did John point people toward the Messiah?

4. The key word in the message of John is “\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_!”

5. Memorize this Scripture:

The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it (Luke 16:16).