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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE FOUR GOSPELS

UNIT 5: THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

To fully understand the significance of the baptism that Jesus underwent, we must first look briefly at the earlier ritual washings described in the Old Testament, the purification rites of Jewish culture in the first century, and the baptism of repentance administered by John the Baptist (or John the Baptizer as he is sometimes called).

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The Old Testament describes numerous ceremonies that used water for physical washing as a symbol for spiritual cleansing from sin (Leviticus 15:5–33; etc.). But although they may have influenced the development of baptism, these washings were different in that they were repetitive and ongoing because they did not attempt to bring about inward change – only outward, temporary purification. Certainly, the Old Testament washings symbolized cleansing from sin, but always in response to past events and with no real relevance to future events which, if they occurred, would require the ritual to be repeated. One could theoretically be ritually “cleansed” by the washings described in the Old Testament without having any desire to change one’s future behavior or actions.

Nevertheless, as we will see later in this unit, we can learn about Jewish attitudes regarding baptism by looking at these ritual washings. For now, it is important to simply realize how common they were and how much they were a part of ancient Jewish society. In addition to washing as a result of being rendered ritually impure, the Jews washed by immersion (see Note 1) before going to the temple, and members of the priestly class, who had to stay in a state of ritual purity as much as possible, had to immerse themselves frequently.

As a result, archaeologists have found that many ancient homes in Jerusalem contained in their basements a large ritual bath or *mikveh*. Some homes contained multiple baths of this type not only to accommodate all the members of the household, but also to be able to host groups of pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for the Jewish festivals. It is also believed that the pools of Siloam and Bethsaida mentioned in the New Testament were used for this kind of ritual purification by those visiting Jerusalem for the Jewish holy days.

Finally, individuals who converted to Judaism were required to undergo baptism to become members of the congregation of Israel. And some Jewish groups practiced baptism for more than just the purpose of purification. The Dead Sea Scrolls indicate that baptism was practiced by members of the Essene sect at Qumran where the desert community seems to have employed purificatory baptism in connection with entry into its covenant.

Thus, baptism was not a new idea when John the Baptist began his ministry. The people who came to hear John did not ask him what he was doing or why baptism might be necessary; they only asked what authority he had to baptize (John 1:25).

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The accounts of the baptism of Jesus by John occur in Matthew 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; and Luke 3:21–22. In addition, John 1:29–34 can be associated with these passages, as it also describes the descent of the Spirit on Jesus at his baptism, although it does not directly describe the baptism itself.

Each of the gospel accounts sets the baptism story in the larger context of the ministry of John the Baptist, and these accounts all look backward in alluding to the prediction of John’s message and baptism as found in the Old Testament and particularly in Isaiah:

A voice of one calling: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” (Isaiah 40:3)

Isaiah’s prophecy may be translated either “A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way...’” or “A voice of one calling in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way...’” But in either case the message is the same. In his wilderness ministry, John certainly fulfilled this role of preparing for the promised Messiah (Matthew 3:3) – not simply by announcing Christ’s coming, but also by preaching repentance, and thus beginning to remove the barrier of unrepentant sin which stood between God and his people (Isaiah 59:2).

Malachi reiterates the preparatory role that would be fulfilled by John, but also adds the promise of the advent of the Messiah himself who would bring a message of the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31) as well as the fulfillment of the old.

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty. (Malachi 3:1)

Malachi also tells us that this preparatory messenger would be an Elijah-like figure:

See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents. (Malachi 4:5-6)

The New Testament description we are given of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:4) shows that he resembled Elijah in his clothing and appearance (2 Kings 1:8), in living outside of society (1 Kings 17:4), and in other ways, and this identification of John with the Elijah who was prophesied to come was confirmed by Jesus himself (Matthew 11:14).

Thus, John’s ministry of baptism was firmly rooted in the purificatory rituals of the Old Testament, in contemporary Jewish practice, and also in the prophesied role of the messenger who would come to announce the advent of the Messiah and his kingdom. John directly links the baptism he performed with his message, as we see in Matthew 3:11; etc. But there was also something new about John’s baptism, as we will see next.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

In calling the people of Judea to repentance and baptism (Luke 3:1-3), John indicated that their sinfulness was no different from that of the impure and the gentiles many religious Jews of that day despised. Central to John's baptism was the idea that everyone had to come to God as a sinner in need of forgiveness. When we understand this background for the baptism performed by John, we realize how shocked he undoubtedly was when Jesus came to him to be baptized. Matthew alone records key details regarding this part of Jesus' baptism:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. (Matthew 3:13-15)

John fully recognized the identity and righteousness of Jesus as the One he was to announce, and John also knew that the baptism he performed was one of repentance from sin (Acts 19:4). Jesus had no sins and no need of forgiveness, of course (2 Corinthians 5:21; etc.), so it is understandable that John felt his baptism was not appropriate for Jesus. Why then was Jesus baptized? Jesus' statement that his baptism would "fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15) indicates a plurality of purposes, and there were indeed a number of reasons that his baptism by John fulfilled various aspects of God's will. We can summarize those reasons by saying that in being baptized, Jesus:

1) Endorsed the baptism of John who was rejected by the religious authorities of that day: "the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John" (Luke 7:30). This was important, as John's ministry fulfilled a number of Old Testament prophecies.

2) Submitted himself to the call and command of a servant of God regarding personal behavior. As part of his overall perfect obedience, Jesus obeyed and taught others to obey what God's appointed servants decreed: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you" (Matthew 23:2-3).

3) Identified directly with the sinful people of Israel and of the world, for whom he would act as sin-bearer: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus identified with sinners in this way just as he did in his substitutionary death as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

4) Fulfilled the ritual requirement of washing placed on all the priests before beginning his own ministry. This was also necessary to serve as a perfect high priest for humanity: "We do have such a high priest ... who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being ... that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven" (Hebrews 8:1-5).

5) Showed the important link between baptism and the receipt of the Spirit of God. On the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit was made freely available, the apostle Peter stressed this same link: "Repent and be baptized ... in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

6) Provided an opportunity for God to publicly reveal and confirm him as his Son just as the heavenly voice confirmed: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

7) Gave an example regarding the practice of baptism for future Christians to follow: "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps"

(1 Peter 2:21). This truth lay beneath the commission Jesus gave his disciples directly before his ascension: “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Following the baptism of Jesus, we are told that:

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 alighting on him. (Matthew 3:16)

It is not clear if bystanders saw this descent of the Spirit of God in bodily form, though the Baptist evidently did (John 1:32), and this was a pivotal part of Jesus’ baptism. The opening of the heavens not only manifested the relationship of the Father and the Son, but also foreshadowed the opening of the way to God that would later be confirmed in the tearing of the veil of the temple (Matthew 27:51).

We might wonder why Jesus, who was conceived by the Spirit of God, and doubtless always had the Spirit within him, might need the Spirit to be given to him at this point in his life. The answer is doubtless both practical and symbolic. Practically, it might be that Jesus was given an extra anointing of the Spirit to equip him to face the temptations he would undergo and to do the work he would be doing (Luke 4:1–2). Symbolically, Jesus’ baptism tied together the ritual of baptism itself and the receipt of the Holy Spirit as an example for the lives of future Christians (Acts 2:38).

Jesus himself made this connection between baptism and the receipt of the Spirit when he stated: “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5). The Old Testament prophets had predicted a time when God would pour out his Spirit on the righteous when he established his kingdom (Isaiah 44:3; Ezekiel 39:29; Joel 2:28). The prophets also predicted a symbolic outpouring of fire on the wicked (Isaiah 26:11; 65:15; 66:24; Jeremiah 4:4; 15:14; etc.) and this duality of end-time blessing and punishment was specifically mentioned by John in connection with baptism:

“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Matthew 3:11)

Many first century Jews believed that because the voice of prophecy had apparently ceased centuries before, the Spirit of God was no longer available in their era and would not be available again until the end times. John’s words and the Spirit-event of Jesus’ baptism thus both signaled that the kingdom of God was about to dawn, and that the one through whom the Spirit would come – the promised Messiah – was at hand. Many Jews also believed that although prophecy had ceased, God might still speak to humans – if not by a prophet, then by means of a heavenly voice or sign. The gospel accounts of Jesus’ baptism showed that all these major means of divine communication – the words of a prophet (John), a heavenly sign (the dove), and a divine voice (the heavenly voice) – attested to the identity of Jesus as the Messiah at his baptism.

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CONCEPTS AND APPLICATIONS:

Now that we have examined the background of New Testament baptism and the reasons for the baptism of Jesus by John, we can better understand the concepts that lay behind the ordinance in the time of Jesus by looking more closely at the significance of the Hebrew term *mikveh*.

This was the name for the large baths used for ritual washings, but the word *mikveh* itself had several meanings in ancient Hebrew. First, it signified a “gathering together” of water such as a pool, cistern, bath, or other container or body of water. The word could also signify – perhaps with the idea of gathering together positive thoughts and facts – something waited for, a confidence, or hope.

We see this second meaning, for example, in the book of Jeremiah where the prophet exclaims of the Messiah “You who are the hope [*mikveh*] of Israel, its Savior in times of distress” (Jeremiah 14:8). In a remarkable passage Jeremiah then pulls together these two meanings of *mikveh* – as both water and hope. After stating that one who turns away from the Lord will be like a dried-out plant in a desert waste, the prophet then contrasts this by saying that one who trusts in God will be like a tree that flourishes because it is planted by the water (Jeremiah 17:7-8). A few verses later, Jeremiah then continues by saying:

LORD, you are the hope [*mikveh*] of Israel; all who forsake you will be put to shame [literally, “dried out”]. Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the LORD, the spring of living water. (Jeremiah 17:13)

This verse is particularly interesting because the ancient rabbis differentiated six different categories or “degrees” of purity of water that could be used for baptism (see Note 2). These levels of baptismal waters ranged from standing water in pits, cisterns, and pools, to the highest, purest, type which was called “living water” as it flowed continually from an unending pure spring or source. This shines additional light on the fact that just as Jeremiah called the Lord “the spring of living water,” the New Testament tells us:

Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. (John 7:37-38)

In these verses, the separate threads of living water, the Spirit of God, and the messianic hope are all drawn together. Biblically, the idea of baptism involves all of these concepts (1 Corinthians 12:13; etc.), as well as those of repentance and the demonstration of faith (Acts 19:4; etc.). As we saw above, there were also many reasons why Jesus underwent baptism. These included to support John, to teach us the link between baptism and receipt of the Spirit of God, to display obedience, to serve as an example for us, to provide an opportunity for God to reveal his Son, and not least to be identified with sinners – while fulfilling the ritual requirements of the law in order to serve as a purified high priest for sinners.

Seen in this way, we realize that far from being a ritual footnote to his ministry, Jesus’ baptism was a profound moment of teaching from which we can learn and an event of the greatest significance in Jesus’ own life. It was directly after his baptism that Jesus resisted Satan, called his first disciples, and began to publicly teach, heal the sick, and perform miracles. It is no exaggeration to say that his baptism was the culminating point of preparation for everything that the Son of God would accomplish in his earthly ministry, as well as the public announcement that his ministry was about to begin.

* Note 1: Although today many may think of baptism being performed by pouring or sprinkling water on an individual, biblical baptism refers to complete immersion in water and this was the kind of baptism performed by John as well as the purificatory washing done by the Jewish priests and others who wished to enter the temple and by new converts to Judaism.

* Note 2: Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Mivaoth, Mishnah 1-8.

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics: In what ways was the baptism administered by John like and unlike earlier Jewish baptismal washings?

Beneath the Surface: Think about the various reasons that Jesus underwent baptism – do these reasons have anything in common? What do the reasons show us about the attitude of Jesus?

Everyday Applications: Read the twelve biblical verses mentioning baptism given at the end of this paragraph and make a list of the things that baptism symbolizes in order to fully understand the meaning of the ordinance and to be better able to explain it to others. If you wish to pursue the topic further, simply look up all the verses on baptism in a topical Bible or use the search feature on any Bible website and look up “bapti” (to find all occurrences of “baptize,” “baptizing,” and “baptism”). The scriptures on baptism include Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:5; Luke 3:21-22; John 3:5; Acts 2:38; Acts 8:12; Acts 19:4; Acts 22:16; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12; 1 Peter 3:21.

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