

LIFE BIBLE STUDY

SESSION OBJECTIVE: MATTHEW 3:1-17

To understand some of the similarities and some of the differences between John the Baptist's and Jesus' baptisms.

A Story of Water and Fire

I always enjoyed going to the movies as a kid, and it's an experience I still enjoy as an adult. The thrill of a new story, character development, and plot twists have always excited me. I enjoy the whole experience from start to finish. Usually, we purchase some kind of candy and drink combination, and if it is an extra special movie we might even buy some popcorn. Of course, one of my favorite parts of the movie experience is the



previews. I'm not really sure why, because they aren't as meaningful anymore. With the advent of YouTube and other means of streaming media, often times previews debut on the internet long before we see them on the silver screen. They are a fun part of the experience though, and I always look forward to watching them. They also serve a practical purpose in that, if I am running late to a 7pm movie, I know I have at least until about 7:20pm before it actually begins.

The fact remains, however, that previews are not why I go to a movie theater. They are a fun part of the experience, but that's not what makes me show up. It's the movie. The main event! The previews are great, but they are only a taste of a movie. A glimmer. A short and quick picture of what the real thing might be like. It's the real thing that I am there for.

Matthew chapter 3 begins with an important character of the New Testament, and in many ways, he is much like a preview at a movie. John the Baptist is not the central reason for why people read the New Testament.

He is not the guarantor of salvation, he does not purchase redemption with his blood, nor does he die and then come back to life. He is not the main event. But he does play a role in the main event.

“John the Baptist... is not the main event. But he does play a role in the main event.”

A Forerunner Fulfilled

John the Baptist not only plays a role in the story of Jesus, but a necessary one. As we have seen already, Matthew is interested in showing us how the Old Testament is fulfilled in various ways through the Messiah, and chapter three continues to add examples.

MALACHI 3:1; 4:5

The first connection is from Malachi 3:1, where we see John the Baptist act as a forerunner to the Messiah.

“1 Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,” says the LORD of hosts.”

“5 Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD.”

This first reference is perhaps a bit tricky because Matthew doesn't actually reference it here. However, in the same account in Mark 1:2-4 and Luke 1:17, it is mentioned. Matthew doesn't neglect to make the connection, however. In Matthew 11:13-14 Jesus makes the connection that John was in fact this Elijah figure. The clearest example is in Matthew 17 at the Transfiguration, where Elijah is there with them on the mountain, but Jesus alludes to the fact that it was John.

ISAIAH 40:3

The next connection is a direct quote from the Greek Old Testament (LXX). Matthew quotes Isaiah 40:3 and applies it to John the Baptist.

3 A voice is calling, “Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.”

Matthew explicitly tells his readers in verse 3 that this verse is referring to John the Baptist.

The Differences Explained

One of the main thrusts of this passage comes in verse 11, when John explains the differences between himself and the Messiah. There are two major differences identified.

THE BAPTISM

The first difference is the type of baptism that each of them bring.

John: “As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance.” (v.11a)

Jesus: “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (v.11b)

John's baptism is a practice of water baptism, and most certainly one of submersion. The practice of John baptizing Jesus in the Jordan river seems to indicate as much. The purpose of the baptism is to signify that repentance has been established. Jesus, on the other hand, comes with, “the Holy Spirit and fire.” This is a perplexing statement and has been the subject of much discussion over the course of time. The problem is not with what is meant by a baptism of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' baptism of the Holy Spirit corresponds to Isaiah 11:2, Ezekiel 36:25-39, and Joel 2:28, and is confirmed by 1 Corinthians 12:13. The confusion arises with the addition of the word, “fire.” What does the baptism of fire mean? There are two possibilities.

1. Fire Resembles Judgment: The first explanation ties to verse 12, where Jesus is pictured as a judge with a winnowing fork, ready to separate the wheat from the chaff. The chaff it says, “is burned up.” Perhaps the intended meaning is that Jesus comes with a baptism of the Holy Spirit for those who repent, but those who are unrepentant suffer judgement through a baptism or submersion into fire.
2. Fire Resembles Purification: Of course, one issue with equating fire to judgment here is that it seems like only one baptism is being spoken of. A, “Spirit-fire” baptism. If that is the case, then it seems unlikely that the fire refers to judgment since, “there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). Fire does also refer to purification. To add weight to this interpretation, one might recall the reference of fire in Joel 2:30, one of the corresponding Old Testament passages.

Both of these options are reasonable and find strong support in the text. It would be left up to the reader to decide which fits the best.

THE ROLE

The second difference is the roles that Jesus and John play.

John: “I am not fit to remove His sandals.”

Jesus: “His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

On the one hand, John is not even worthy to remove the sandals of Jesus. There is a cultural context here, in that only slaves would be relegated to such behavior. John is saying, “I’m not even worthy to be Jesus’ slave.” On the other hand, Jesus is seen as the Master, issuing fiery judgment on all of those who are a part of the, “chaff.” John makes these distinctions to set up the reality that he is merely a forerunner, but that the essence is coming. He is the preview, but the actual movie is about to begin.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Matthew 3:1-3. Now, read Isaiah 40:3. How does Matthew 3:1-3 fulfill or provide a connection to the Isaiah prophecy? What things are the same? What things are different?
2. Read Malachi 3:1; 4:5. Now, read Mark 1:2-4 and Luke 1:17, as well as Matthew 11:13-14. Why do you suppose Matthew, Mark, and Luke all took the time to highlight John the Baptist in their Gospel accounts? How important was he to the narrative, and why?

Day Two

1. Read Matthew 17:1-13. How does the death of John the Baptist foreshadow Jesus’ fate? (Hint: Jesus tells us in Matthew 17).
2. Read Matthew 3:4-6. Describe in your own words what is happening, and what things are significant. Why?

Day Three

1. Read Matthew 3:7-10. What role does John play in these verses? In your own words, what is he saying to the Pharisees and Sadducees?
2. Read Matthew 3:11-12. Now, read Isaiah 11:2, Ezekiel 36:25-39, Joel 2:28-32, John 14:26 and 1 Corinthians 12:13. How important is the promise of the Holy Spirit to believers in Christ? Why is it considered a promise? Who has made the promise?

Day Four

1. Read Matthew 3:13-17. Summarize this in your own words, and make note of any details that stand out to you. Also, write down anything that is confuses you.
2. Why do you suppose Jesus was baptized? Why does Jesus say He must be baptized?

Week 5 Discussion: Baptism, Baptism, Baptism!

There is such great disparity between John the Baptist and Jesus, and yet, it is in this passage that Jesus is baptized by John, and His reasoning is so simple: “to fulfill all righteousness.” In other words, though Jesus had no sin to repent of, He had no need of being baptized as a result of a repentant heart, Jesus saw that baptism was a righteous thing to do, and so He did it, and then commanded His followers to do it as well.

1. Icebreaker: Have you ever been baptized? If so, share your experience with the class. If not, share why not.
2. Baptism is, “the outward reflection fo the inward change.” It’s a symbol. Both the New Covenant baptism in Christ as well as John’s baptism of repentance signify something that has already happened. With that in mind, is baptism an acceptable practice prior to salvation? Why or why not?
3. What do you think keeps people from being baptized? What are some common objections to it?
4. How important is baptism? How important was baptism to Jesus?
5. Have you ever led anyone to Christ? If so, what was that like? Did you baptize them afterwards? If not, why not?

Takeaways:

1. John the Baptist plays an important role in Messiah story. He fulfills many OT prophecies, acts as a prophet, and announces the coming of Jesus. He also makes clear distinction between himself and Jesus, and the baptisms they bring.
2. The practice of baptism was important enough even for Jesus. Jesus was baptized, and He commands all of His followers to baptized as well as a result of genuine, saving faith in Him.

PRAYER REQUESTS: