**The Baptism of John the Baptist**

**Introduction:**

1. As we read through the Bible, we pass through several different culture changes: patriarchal times (Abraham is a nomad), to Egypt (Israelites are slaves in a quite civilized land), to Israel under the LOM, to Israel in captivity in Babylon.
   1. These transitions, for the most part, are quite smooth – we see them coming:
      1. God is doing something with Abraham, so following his family to Egypt is appropriate; Israel has disobeyed, and Babylon had been prophesied to come for centuries before they came.
      2. Even the transition from the LOM to the New Covenant is smooth – Jesus spends 3½ years prepping us for it, and the transition is detailed in Acts.
   2. But the transition in culture is quite abrupt between Malachi and the gospels! We go from Israel under Persia to Israel under Rome (we skip an entire empire!).
   3. And we see several things in the gospels that are new: synagogues, Pharisees, Sadducees, (and specific to our theme…baptism).
2. Regarding baptism specifically, where did it come from? There was nothing like it in the OT, really (not even the washings fully foreshadow it).
   1. And yet, when John goes around preaching it, the people come from all over Palestine to be baptized by him. They seem to understand what he’s teaching.
   2. No one objects and says, “Wait a second, John. The LOM doesn’t require this!” Even the Pharisees and Sadducees come to be baptized by him!
3. Today, I want us to examine the Jewish culture at the time, and what was going on in Israel at the time, and I think this will help us better understand what John was doing.
   1. I also believe that when we understand John’s baptism, it will help us understand baptism in general a little better.
   2. So let’s open our Bibles to **Luke 3** and begin our study.

**Body:**

1. The cultural and religious context of John the Baptist:
   1. **Lk. 3:1-2** – The historical information here is crucial to understanding John’s baptism. He preached at a time when Israelites were slaves in their own land.
      1. During John’s life (and Jesus’ thereafter), pagans were everywhere in Israel. They were in the market places, on the streets…even in the governor’s house.
      2. This caused them some difficulty regarding their worship: **Lev. 15:1-7; 19-22** – these are just a couple of examples of the rigor of ritual purity under the LOM. Anyone with a discharge, and all who touched them, were unclean.
         1. When Israel lived in its own land in freedom, one could reasonably expect to keep clean. When someone was unclean, they’d let others know.
         2. However, with Romans and pagans everywhere, in John’s day a Jew couldn’t go to the market w/o possibly contacting someone unclean, and who didn’t care that they were. There was no warning, no way to know.
      3. Because of this, the Jews in general (and not even the especially strict ones) took precautions:
         1. **Mk. 7:1-4** – they washed *everything*. Hands. Pots. Pitchers. They felt that going to the market defiled them. They had to get the gentile impurity off!
         2. Mikvehs – pools were dug out and constructed everywhere (i.e. the Pool of Siloam; the Pool of Bethsaida). Jews immersed themselves regularly.
            1. This is why John’s baptism wasn’t a weird thing to the Jews – they were doing this regularly anyway!
         3. They felt that they were surrounded by uncleanness, so they washed even more than the LOM required, just to make sure. They did this in anticipation of the coming Messiah. They wanted to be ready.
   2. **Lk. 3:4-6** – The OT had prophesied of a messenger who would come to prepare the way for the Lord, for the Messiah. John was that messenger.
      1. But we need to see that he came during a time when people were already preparing – they knew they needed to be righteous when the Messiah came, so they spent a great deal of time washing off the gentile filth around them.
      2. It is important to understand how the Jews read these prophecies, though.
         1. The imagery here is of a king coming, and his slaves and citizens literally smoothed the roads out before him, filling holes and removing obstacles.
         2. The obstacles the Jews believed needed to be removed were the gentiles.
2. **Lk. 3:3, 7-14** – John’s preaching and message:
   1. John did come, smoothing the way for the Lord – but in a way few Jews expected.
   2. The odd thing about John’s message was not the baptism part (they did that all the time) – it was the repentance part.
      1. When the Jews immersed themselves in the Mikvehs, they did so to cleanse *other people’s filth* off of themselves.
         1. In their minds, they were the victims of someone else’s sinfulness and uncleanness. They had only become defiled accidentally.
         2. Not only that, they were washing themselves so that the Messiah would find them pure of gentile filth when He came, and would remove those pagans from their midst – finally solving the problem!
      2. John taught something radically different.
         1. He called the Jews *themselves* a “*brood of vipers*.” He told the Jews *themselves* that they needed to repent, and that they needed forgiveness.
         2. Essentially, John was saying, “The problem here is not the presence of pagans in the land – it is your own wickedness, Israel!”
         3. This was especially emphasized in what he taught to the people who came to him ready to repent.
            1. **v. 12-13** – Tax collectors were simply told to collect no more than what they were due.

This is not the advice most Jews would have given them. Most would have said, “Quit serving those pagans, and be a loyal Jew! How dare you collect God’s people’s money for our oppressors!”

* + - * 1. **v. 14** – Soldiers (likely Jews in the Roman army) were told “don’t extort money, don’t accuse falsely, and be content with your wages.”

Again, the advice of your typical Pharisee would have been different: “Quit fighting for the pagans! Fight for God.”

* + - * 1. **v. 11** – This applied to everyone, not just those working for the pagans.

The Pharisee who had multiple tunics, but failed to share, was just as bad as a dishonest tax collector!

The Sadducee who had more than enough food, but failed to share, needed to repent just as badly as the extortionist soldier!

* + - * 1. Again, the pagans were not the problem. Israel’s wickedness was!
      1. As a matter of fact, John said that even being a descendant of Abraham didn’t matter if the person didn’t have the right heart.
         1. **v. 7-9** – Repentance was the way to flee the wrath to come, not being Abraham’s descendent.

He said that if God wanted to create a whole new generation descended from Abraham, He could from rocks – after all, He created the first bunch from a man made of dust of the earth!

He said that many descendants of Abraham would fall victim to the divine pruning and burning – God’s axe was ready!

* + - * 1. Even Abraham’s descendants needed nothing short of forgiveness; or, to put it in the radical language of Jesus…a new birth.

1. The significance of John’s message and baptism:
   1. It was an indictment on Israel’s temple worship, and foreshadowed the end of the old covenant.
      1. It was a “*baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*.” Those baptized by John were forgiven as the result of their repentance and baptism.
      2. This said a lot about God’s attitude at the time regarding the temple worship.
         1. It seems He was as displeased as many of the Jews were with the fact that the priesthood was broken – He did not send the Jews there for forgiveness.
         2. This also, of course, foreshadowed the new covenant where animal sacrifices would not be necessary.
            1. This is the first time forgiveness was offered without blood being shed in advance. This meant that blood must be shed in the future.
   2. It placed baptism at the forefront of people’s minds, so that when Jesus continued baptizing (**John 4:4**) and when He gave the Great Commission, everyone knew exactly what He was talking about.
      1. It is easy to read **Mt. 28:18-20** and **Acts 2:38** in isolation, and forget that these statements were made less than 4 years after John’s teaching in **Lk. 3**.
      2. Everyone in Israel knew someone who had been baptized either by John or Jesus, so this command to baptize all future believers was not abnormal.
      3. By the time the Great Commission was given, the Jews had been connecting baptism in water and the forgiveness of sins for 3.5+ years.
   3. It helps us understand our own baptisms:
      1. We all need baptism. A lot of Jews thought they were “good people” (read: children of Abraham), but John called them a “brood of vipers.”
      2. Baptism is not some magic action that just takes care of everything – true repentance is necessary also, or the person just gets wet.
      3. Those baptized were fleeing from wrath…we still are!
2. Similarities and Differences between John’s baptism and Christian baptism:
   1. Both were baptisms of immersion in water.
   2. Both involved confession – however the confessions were different. John’s was confession of sin; Jesus’, while involving confession of sins, is also confession that Jesus is the Son of God.
   3. Both were necessary only once – the forgiveness was permanent. This set these washings apart from all Jewish washings, which were administered daily.
   4. John’s baptism anticipated the coming of Christ and the kingdom. Jesus’ baptism is based on the fact that He has already come, and been exalted as King.
   5. John’s baptism did not give one the gift of the Holy Spirit; Jesus’ baptism does.