

LESSON #3 CHAPTER 1:19-34

John the Baptist - Prepare the Hearts for Christ

Divine Attribute: Holiness

Theological concept: Baptism of the Holy Spirit

Geographical location: Bethany across the Jordan

Chapter Structure

1:19-28 The Ministry of John the Baptist

1:29-34 The True Baptizer Jesus Christ

Spiritual Principles:

P1 A true preacher is one that prepare men's heart to receive Christ

P2 Jesus Christ is the true Baptizer

A. Today's lesson...

As the curtain of the Gospel of John is unveiled, presented before us is a prophet that dressed like an ancient prophet – his clothes were made of camel's hair and he wore a leather belt around his waist - John the Baptist. This is because he was raised up by God to give testimony for Jesus Christ, "*And this is the testimony of John*" (1:19)

Most of us know John the Baptist as the one who prepares the hearts for Jesus Christ. He rebuked sin fearlessly and was afraid of power, as a result he was brutally killed by Herod. John the Baptist was respected for his ministry and uprightness. But seldom do we hear people called him a great man. In this lesson, we hope to be better acquainted with him, who was the illumination of the people, the conscience of the age and the witness to the Truth! In addition, we hope to have a biblical understanding of the concept of "the baptism of the Holy Spirit".

B. 1:19-28 The Ministry of John the Baptist

1. The Backdrop

John the Baptist was the relative of Jesus, he was older by six months. His father Zechariah was a priest.

The Jews at that time were familiar with baptism. Baptism is used as a rite of purification, such as the Essenes who copied the scriptures. As they deemed the copying duty sacred and requires absolute purity, they regularly cleansed themselves in a water pool to ensure moral and religious purity. Baptism is also used as the rite of initiation for the Jews to convert a gentile into the Jewish faith.

John was an eschatological figure to the people of his time. He proclaimed that the Kingdom of God is coming with judgement. He called on people to mend their way, change their way of life so as to enter the Kingdom of God. Those who are willing to meet the challenge he baptised them as a demonstration of their determination to repent.

Thousands of people from Judea, Galilee and Jerusalem flooded to him to hear his preaching and to receive his baptism for the forgiveness of sin (Mt 3:5). This is because after the disintegration of the Hasmonaean dynasty in the year 63 BC, and Israel became a province of the Roman empire, there was a revival of the ancient hope of a Messiah from the line of David to restore the nation of Israel, especially those *who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem* (Lk 2:38).

John's baptism became a movement, and the Jewish religious leaders were nervous about it. There are three reasons for the tension. First, while the area of Jordan river became crowded, Jerusalem became quiet; second, only the Messiah has the power to draw such a big crowd. And if John is the Messiah, should he not come and show his presence to the Sanhedrin or temple authorities first? Third, the Jewish religious leaders baptize the Gentiles proselytes, but John baptize the Jews! Therefore, they sent a group of priests and Levites to investigate: Is John the Messiah? If not who is he, and by what authorities did he baptize Jews?

2. *John the Baptist is not Christ*

¹⁹ when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"

As everyone was expecting the Messiah to come soon, they wondered in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. (Luke 3:15) If John keeps silent, many would be happy to take it as he was, and he would have a greater mess of followers and admirers. But verse 20 said that John "*He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ"*". He does not pursue vain glory nor borrow glory. His ethics of testimony is our example.

Reflection: When people compliment me out of courtesy or ascribe undue glory to me, do I become smug? When I share a testimony for God, do I subconsciously honour myself? A heart that loves vain glory engender dishonesty. Lord, please uproot the love for vain glory from my heart and replace it with a heart that thirst for your righteousness!

²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No."

Why did the Jerusalem envoy ask John whether he was Elijah and "the Prophet"? Because there are three eschatological figures in the Old Testament. (Eschatology means end time when God will come personally to judge sin and restore Israel).

First, the Messiah will come and deliver Israel out of the Gentile governance, enmity and ravage, and restore the Kingdom of Israel;

Second, before the Messiah arrives, God will send Elijah to bring about a revival (Mal 4:5); Not that Elijah would resurrect but that a prophet with the power of Elijah would be raised up;

Third, before Moses' departure, he exhorted Israel not to seek God's will through pagan divination. Instead, God would give them a great prophet to make God's heart known to them, like Moses did. (Deut 18:15)

God also promised that before He restores Israel to glory, He would sprinkle water on His people and cleanse them (Ezekiel 36:25). That was why the religious leaders do not approval John's baptism if he was not one of them. John denied to be any of them: I am not the Messiah, I am not Elijah, I am not the Prophet. John the Baptist humbly acknowledged his unimportance (even though in Mark 9:13 Jesus affirmed that John was the Elijah John never saw as the eschatological Elijah)

3. *Who is John the Baptist?*

²² So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

The Jerusalem envoys were agitated and they questioned John not because they wanted to know the truth, but because they have to make a report concerning him. They were the priests and Levites yet they serve men but not God.

Reflection: When we inquire, is serving God our motive, or serving man? Are we questing after truth or showing off our intelligence, or worse, to counterattack?

²³ He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight[a] the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”

John’s reply shows that he was clear about his calling. John was the first prophet after 400 years of divine silence. His birth was a special grace. God revived the barren womb of his mother and planted him there, from the point of foetus conception throughout the entire pregnancy, God filled him with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:14,40). He was so prepared in order to “to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Luke 1:17) He is to be the voice prophesied in Isaiah chapter 40, “A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” This voice is not to be found in Jerusalem, but in the wilderness. John read the Old Testament and he found his place in God’s salvation plan! So when he reached 30, he made a decision not to serve as a priest in the temple, but in the wilderness as the voice. He left his father’s house and lived in the wilderness, living on locust and wild honey.

Furthermore, John the Baptist is the key person that connects the Old Testament and the New Testament. Jesus said that he was the last prophet that foretold Christ – “all the prophets and the law prophesied until John” (Mat 11:13). He prophesied that “This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’” (1:15, 30) He pointed at the Nazarene carpenter and testified, “behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (1:29) His prophecy was a testimony. The prophets in the Old Testament looked at the Messiah from afar, while John met Christ face-to-face. In this way, John’s prophecy was the last foretelling of the Old Testament regarding Christ, and was also the beginning of the foretelling of Christ in the New Testament. John reckoned Jesus as the pre-existent Christ before Peter did, and even before any of Jesus’ disciples was called! In this way, John is greater than all the prophets and yet the humble baptiser did not see himself to be so.

The goals we set for ourselves often have ‘self’ as motive. But for children of God, the goal of our life is already set by God. To know our place in God’s plan is a great blessing. Once we know it we should accept it boldly without reservations. Our plan for life should follow God’s plan for us. Commit ourselves to God and rely on Him. Then we will not depart this world regretfully because we have done things that we ought not do or because we have not done things that we ought to do.

Reflection: When I read the bible, am I able to find my place? What am I doing in this place in this time? What is my role in this age? What does God want me to do in placing me now and here?

4. *Make straight the way of the Lord*

²³ He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight[a] the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”

In Isaiah chapter 40 the prophet proclaimed that the time has come for God's glory to fill the earth and Messiah, the King of God's kingdom will come into His people's midst,

A voice cries:

*"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
4 Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
5 And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

All the great palaces of the world has a boulevard that leads to the grand entrance of the palace, such as the Buckingham Palace, the Tiananmen Square etc. The boulevard is usually broad, levelled and straight. When the king returns to the palace in a royal carriage, his people will receive him at the sides of the boulevard. Therefore, "*make straight the way of the Lord*" means to prepare for the arrival of the king. A levelled and straight road must be there for the king to enter the palace.

So mountains will have to be made low, valleys will have to be filled up, crooked path have to be made straight. God knows that sinners' heart is crooked and not straight. A prideful heart will block the glory of God and needs to be made low; a heart filled with self-abasement will fail to see God's mighty acts and needs to be filled up; a crooked heart the Lord will not come near and needs to be straightened.

How did John the Baptist prepare the heart of sinners for the Messiah? Through preaching and through water baptism. He preached that the Kingdom of God is on its way! The Day of God's restoration for Israel is coming. He fearlessly rebuked sinners, warned them of the impending eschatological judgement, and urged them to repent and turn to God for the forgiveness of sin.

"Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." Mat 3:10

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit in keeping with repentance." Mat 3:7,8

Whoever was awakened by his preaching, John baptised them as an expression of the desire to turn from evil and do good. Therefore John's baptism is also known as "the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin" (Mk 1:4)

A true preacher preaches to help people to remove pride, self-abasement and falsehood in the heart so that the Lord may enter their hearts. On the other hand, pulpits that preach only God's blessing and not repentance in order to draw a large crowd are being unfaithful to the Head of the church!

P1 A true preacher is one that prepare men's heart to receive Christ

(Note: Though John the Baptist reckoned that Jesus is Christ, like many godly Jews he thought Jesus has come to carry out judgement and to establish his throne. Hence John was expecting judgement and political deliverance. This is why when he learned that Jesus was doing was teaching

and perform miracles, he was not sure whether Jesus was the promised Messiah, *"Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"* (Mt 11:3)

5. *John exalted Jesus*

²⁴ (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) ²⁵ They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know,

To the Jerusalem envoy, John did not have the authority to baptise since he was not one of the three great eschatological figures, and nor was he appointed by the religious leaders.

As a matter of fact, the Old Testament did not say that the Messiah, Elijah or the Prophet would baptise people. John did not violate the law. The religious leaders were not defending God's law but their own safe history. They were the people God rebuked through his prophet Isaiah,

*"These people honour me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.*

They worship me in vain;

their teachings are merely human rules." (Mt 15:8,9 Isa 29:13)

John was a threat to them, and they felt a strong sense of insecurity.

Reflection: When we see someone as a threat, we will be blind to the good in him and will underscore the bad. The next thing we do will be to demean him. Thus let us be very careful, for we are not building up our brother but tearing him down. Our brother is the work of God.

Reflection: Let us beware of this: we thought we know the truth and we make casual comments and become critical. A French proverb says, "The moment you start criticising people, you are introducing yourself." May the Lord grant us humility to learn the truth.

Let us look at John's response. He did not say, "why can't I baptize?" nor did he question their authority to stop him. Neither was John angry at their opposition. He kept his composure and replied them truthfully with patience "you thought I am a threat. There is a much greater threat coming!" ^{1:26} John was certain that baptism was God's commission for him and he would obey God regardless. He disregarded their threat and continued with his ministry. Let all church leaders be mindful of this: when a man seeks to please people, everything he does will be wrong.

Reflection: Do not be angry at your opposition, he has the liberty to oppose you. If you are angry, could it be that you care too much for yourself? If it is, then you are still living for yourself. Let us live for truth, for God and for other people.

²⁷ *even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."* ²⁸ *These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.*

There was a Rabbi's teaching that said "Every service which a slave performs for his master, a disciple will perform for his teacher, except to untie his sandal-strap." Untying someone's sandal

strap was considered a low-grade service that only a slave will do for his master. Yet John thought himself unworthy to perform it for the Coming One. So we see that even though his ministry was one of thousands people, John exalted Jesus far surpassing himself!

Reflection: When we see ourselves to be important, we will desire recognition from others to motivate ourselves, and we will become prideful. Let us always contemplate the great accomplishment Jesus has done for us on the cross, and we will realize how insignificant our service is. This is help humble us and rely on God instead. With such attitude we will be able to rejoice even when work becomes difficult.

C. 1:29-34 Jesus Christ, the True Baptizer

1. *John's knowledge of Jesus*

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

The next day presumably means the day after John met the envoy from Jerusalem. Some weeks probably had passed since Jesus received baptism from Jesus. He had been away since then and now he is back. The moment John saw Jesus, he drew the attention of the crowd from himself to Jesus and introduced him as the lamb of God.

"The lamb of God" in the Bible represents not only God's deliverance but also substitutional death and redemption by blood. There are three such images in the Old Testament.

First was the leather coat of Adam in Genesis 3:21, *"And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them."* Here the skin garment was provided by God to cover the shame of sin. An animal, could be a lamb or a ram, was sacrificed for the consequence of man's sin.

The second was in Genesis 22:8,13, *"Abraham said (to Isaac), "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together." and "And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son."* The lamb was provided by God as a substitute for Isaac as a burnt offering, Abraham's beloved son.

The third was in Leviticus 16:34, *"And this shall be a statute forever for you, that atonement may be made for the people of Israel once in the year because of all their sins." And Aaron did as the Lord commanded Moses."* Israel had to offer a male goat as an atonement for their sin on the 10th day of seventh month annually.

Then God revealed an important truth about these sacrifices for us in Hebrews 10:3-5,

"But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. 4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

5 Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,

"Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,

but a body have you prepared for me;"

So when John said, "*behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world*" it is no doubt that he understood Christ alone as the atonement for sin provided by God himself!

30 This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.'

John knew that this relative of his was no ordinary man. After the baptism of Jesus, he now knew that Jesus, who was born six months after him, exists before him! So John saw Jesus as the King of the Kingdom of God, the Messiah prophesized in the Old Testament, the slaughtered lamb and the pre-existent Son of God. This is the John's Christology.

Reflection: Who is Jesus Christ to you? How do you see him? is he the "buddha" that remove ill fortunes and grant wishes? Is he the executor of justice? Is he a 'god' that comes and goes at your command?

If you see Him as your redeemer, how often do you show your gratitude and do you find comfort in the eternal life He gave you? If you see Him as the Lord of your life, do you seek His will in all things? If you see him as your King, how conscious are you his people, and do you walk in the way of His Kingdom? If you see him as your God, do you ascribe to him the worship due God at all time?

2. *The Baptism of the Holy Spirit*

And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33 I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' 34 And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

We could say that John's most important baptism is the baptism of Jesus, because Jesus was baptized so "*that he might be revealed to Israel.*" (1:31) When John baptized Jesus, he witnessed the Spirit of God descended on Jesus in the form of a dove (Mt 3:16) and a voice from heaven saying, "*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.*" This is the great moment in mankind's history where the Holy Father, Holy Son and the Holy Spirit appeared at the same time at the same place! This is a beautiful picture of the Trinity!

Though the Gospel of John did not record the baptism of Jesus in detail, it captured one important testimony given by John the Baptist: John baptised with water, but Jesus is going to baptise his own with the Holy Spirit. This is a special revelation from God.

What does it mean by Jesus baptize us with the Spirit? This is also known as the baptism of the Holy Spirit. "Baptism" in Greek means "to dip". Baptise with water means to dip in water and be cleansed. John knew that water cannot wash away the stain of sin in our conscience. He knew that his baptism was a symbolic cleansing. He knew his baptism was not adequate to make sinners fit for the Kingdom of God. Sinners need the baptism of Christ, a baptism with the Holy Spirit.

There are two common errors in the understanding of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

- 1) The baptizer is the Holy Spirit;

- 2) The mark of having the baptism of the Holy Spirit is the ability to speak in tongue, healing, exorcism, perform miracles...etc. This is the theology of the Pentecostal in the 1950s.

We ought to understand the biblical meaning of the baptism of the Holy Spirit so that we would not be easily misled by the erroneous theology of the charismatic movement. Baptism of the Holy Spirit is that Christ bestows His Spirit to those who belong to him to sanctify them by giving them a new birth and helping them in the pursuit of holiness, as indicated in verse 7:38,39,

"38 Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" 39 Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified."

Baptism of the Holy Spirit began only after Jesus was resurrected. As we saw in Acts, the Spirit was given on the first Pentecost after Jesus' ascension. The first batch of Jesus' baptism was the disciples, who were empowered by the baptism to witness for Christ.

Today, Christ cleansed us with the Holy Spirit¹ by giving us a new birth, and by sealing us with the indwelling of the Spirit (Eph 1:13). We are justified by faith, which means we are sanctified in our position before God. Though we still have sinful nature and may still sin, we now have a new nature that desires a holy life. The indwelling Holy Spirit will assist us to turn from sin. So you see, the person who is able to cleanse our soul and conscience is Jesus Christ. He is the true Baptizer!

P2 Jesus Christ is the true Baptizer

Dear brothers and sisters, if your faith is true you have already received the baptism of the Holy Spirit; it took place not at your water baptism but at your conversion – when you accept Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour, because it is when the Holy Spirit regenerates you that you received the faith. The mark of true faith is the desire for a holy life and for knowing God's heart.

D. Closing

John the Baptist began his ministry at the age of 30, a year before Jesus began His. John the Baptist's ministry didn't last long, not more than one and a half year, yet he made a great impact to generation and generation of believers. This is because he accepted God's purpose for his life and faithfully carried it out to the end, and became the first martyr for Christ in the New Testament. God permitted him to rest from the earthly labour at a young age because he has accomplished the purpose God has for his life – to prepare people's hearts for Jesus.

The passage in this lesson is the testimony of John the Baptist in the first and second day of the new-creation account. We shall see that it leads to the manifestation of the glory of the pre-existent Christ and the disciples saw and believed him. That is the seventh day.

Today we received this great knowledge of Christ from the special revelation of God in written words, and we have also seen the glory of the resurrected Christ. Let us keep our faith, hold on to the promise of eternal life, and live in the position that God has purposed for us and serve Him to the end of our life, live for Christ as John the Baptist did. Amen!

¹ Besides cleansing us with the Holy Spirit, Jesus also cleanse us with the Truth and with His blood.

