

# The Introduction and Baptism of Jesus

by John F. Walvoord

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*John F. Walvoord's sermon explores the significance of John the Baptist's ministry and the baptism of Jesus as pivotal moments in the introduction of the Messiah to Israel.*

**Topics:** "Baptism Of Jesus", "Repentance And Faith"

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## Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the preparatory ministry of John the Baptist, highlighting how John's message of repentance and the imminent kingdom of heaven was a stern rebuke to the hypocrisy and shallow religion of his time. John's baptism symbolized confession of sins and commitment to a new holy life, challenging the prevailing Jewish belief in salvation through lineage. The ministry of John marked a spiritual crisis in Israel, calling them to accept or reject their King, Jesus Christ, whose coming John prophetically announced. The baptism of Jesus was unique, setting Him apart for His role as Prophet, Priest, and King, and anticipating His sacrificial death on the cross.

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## Transcript

Preparatory Ministry of John the Baptist, 3:1-12

For four hundred years since the close of the Old Testament, no prophetic voice had been raised in Israel. To be sure, God had spoken by angels to Zacharias and Elizabeth, to Joseph and Mary, and to the Magi, but no human voice had spoken for God, except that of the child Jesus in the temple (Lk 2:41-50). Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, came John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness of Judea (cf. Mk 1:1-8; Lk 3:1-20). Clothed in a long garment made of rough camel hair, bound with a leather belt, and eating locusts and wild honey, John's garb was appropriate to his office and was similar to that of Elijah (2 Ki 1:8) and which, apparently, was the customary dress for prophets, even those who were false prophets (Zee 13:4). As Tasker points out, Matthew assumes that his readers are familiar with John the Baptist and does not give his background as Luke does (Lk 1:5-25, 57-80).<sup>16</sup>

The message of John was like that of Elijah, as he heralded his exhortation to Pharisees as well as Sadducees and to all who came: "Repent; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." His role was that of a herald coming before the king. Matthew finds John fulfilling the prediction of Isaiah 40:3-5, that there would be a voice crying in the wilderness to prepare the way before the Lord. Like the servants of a king who would smooth out and straighten the road in preparation for their sovereign's coming, so John was preparing the way spiritually for the coming of Christ.

John's message was a stern rebuke of the hypocrisy and shallow religion of both the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Unquestionably, he was attacking the established religion of his day and demanding sincerity and repentance instead of hypocrisy and religious rites. His call to repentance is backed up by the succinct announcement, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand."

What did John mean by "kingdom of heaven"? While the precise phrase is not found in the Old Testament, it is based on Old Testament terminology. Nebuchadnezzar, for instance, referred to God as the "King of heaven" (Dan 4:37). Daniel had predicted that the climax of world history would come with the advent of the Son of man, who would be given an everlasting kingdom. This was likewise to be fulfilled by the prediction of Daniel 2:44 that "the God of heaven" would "set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed." Matthew, alone of New Testament writers, uses "the kingdom of heaven" and rarely uses "the kingdom of God," which is often used in parallel passages in the other gospels and throughout the New Testament. Most expositors consider the two terms identical.

Although the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are similar, there seems to be some distinction. The kingdom of heaven refers to that which is obviously in its outer character a kingdom from above and seems to include all who profess to be subjects of the King. The kingdom of God is more specific and does not seem to include any but true believers who are born again. In Matthew 13, the kingdom of heaven seems to include both the good and bad fish caught in the net and the wheat and the tares in the same field, whereas Nicodemus is informed that the new birth is necessary to enter the kingdom of God (Jn 3:5). All agree that those in the kingdom of God are also in the kingdom of heaven, however.

Eschatologically and dispensationally, a threefold distinction must be observed in the use of the term "kingdom of heaven." First, in John the Baptist's ministry, it is announced as at hand, meaning that in the person of the King, Jesus Christ, the kingdom was being presented to Israel and to the world. Second, in Matthew 13, the kingdom in its present mystery form is revealed, that is, the rule of God over the earth in the hearts of believers during the present age when the King is absent. These are mysteries because they were not anticipated in the Old Testament doctrine of the kingdom. The third and climactic form of the kingdom will be when Christ returns to set up the kingdom of heaven on earth, in fulfillment of Daniel's prophecies and countless other passages of the Old Testament that picture a golden age, when the Son of David will reign over the entire world in righteousness and peace. Only the premillennial interpretation of the concept of the kingdom allows a literal interpretation of both Old Testament and New Testament prophecies relating to the future kingdom.

The ministry of John the Baptist signaled a spiritual crisis in Israel. Would they accept their King, or would they reject Him? The ministry of John the Baptist was to prepare the way by calling Israel to repentance.

The phenomenal success of John's ministry is evident in the thousands that came out to see him. Estimating that between 200,000 and 500,000 must have responded to his call for repentance and baptism,<sup>17</sup> Lenski, in keeping with his Lutheran concept of baptism, argues that the very numbers of those who repented make impossible baptism by immersion of all of them.<sup>18</sup> He interprets baptism as referring to Jewish rites of washing rather than immersion. The number of those baptized, however, is not given in Scripture, nor is it confirmed by other evidence. And this issue of immersion versus affusion depends on the definition of baptism itself, that is, whether it is used in its primary sense of immersion or submersion, or in its secondary sense of placing in or initiation.

The more important question than the mode of baptism, however, is the meaning of the baptism of John. It is clearly not Christian baptism, as it does not signify initiation into the body of Christ; neither is it symbolic of a work of the Holy Spirit, as John himself refers to it as a work of Christ. It is rather a religious rite, signifying their confession of sins and commitment to a new holy life, such as was proper for Jews in the old dispensation.

The ministry of John the Baptist was very pointed. He challenged the prevailing Jewish concept that they were saved simply because they were descendants of Abraham. He declared that God is able to raise up children unto Abraham from the stones of the earth, certainly a dramatic picture of supernatural, spiritual resurrection. He declared that the ax is already in hand to cut down every tree that does not bring forth fruit. By this he meant individual Jews as well as Judaism as a dead ritual.

The climax of John's thundering message was that he was only the forerunner. After him was to come a greater Prophet whose shoes he was unworthy to remove. This coming one would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire and would bring judgment on the nation like one who, in threshing, separates the wheat from the chaff. In thus describing Jesus Christ, John was speaking prophetically. Although he knew Jesus, as his mother, Elizabeth, was a cousin of Mary, at this time he had not identified Jesus as the Messiah, although he may have had some knowledge of His call as a Prophet.

In this third chapter of Matthew, three baptisms are mentioned: (1) that of John the Baptist, a baptism of repentance; (2) a baptism of the Holy Spirit, which would be brought and administered by Christ; (3) a baptism with fire. These should not be confused. The baptism of repentance, administered by John, was in preparation for the coming of Christ and was succeeded by the baptisms administered by the apostles. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was not initiated until Acts 2 and the day of Pentecost and symbolized entrance into the body of Christ (1 Co 12:13). The baptism with fire seems related to the second coming of Christ, for only then will the wheat and the tares be separated and the tares, like the chaff mentioned by John the Baptist, burned with fire (cf. Mt 13:30, 38-42, 49-50).

All of the baptisms signify initiation into a new situation of separation to God for the righteous or separation unto judgment for the wicked. The apt figure of the threshing floor, where the wheat and the chaff are tossed into the air with a wooden shovel to allow the wind to separate the two (the wheat falling to earth while the chaff blows away), is symbolic of the coming separation between that which is true and that which is false in religion.

#### Baptism of Jesus, 3:13-17

All four gospels give the account of the baptism of Jesus (cf. Mk 1:9-11; Lk 3:21-22; Jn 1:31-34). When Jesus came to Galilee to be baptized by John, He was immediately identified, according to John 1:29, as "the Lamb of God, [who] taketh away the sin of the world." John alone records the announcement after His baptism that Jesus was the one of whom John had been preaching: "This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me" (Jn 1:30). Matthew alone records John's protest that Jesus did not need to be baptized, and John consents only when Christ says, "Thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness" (3:15). When Jesus was baptized, Matthew, along with all the other gospels, records how the Spirit of God descended like a dove upon Christ and how the Father's voice from heaven identified Jesus, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

The tendency to identify the baptism of Jesus as one of repentance or as one similar to Christian baptism can be justified only on superficial connection. The baptism of Jesus Christ was unique, an initiatory right,

setting Him apart to His role as Prophet, Priest, and King, and anticipating His death on the cross. No other, before or after, can share this baptism.

This chapter of Matthew is noteworthy, first, because Matthew passes over all the incidents of Christ's childhood, including His appearance in the temple at age twelve (Lk 2:41-50). His presentation is thematic, not biographical. He is introducing Jesus as the Messiah King of Israel, fulfilling the anticipatory prophecy of the Old Testament and confirmed by the voice of the Father from heaven as God's beloved Son. Those who accept this testimony must respond by worship and obedience.

16 R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Tyndale Bible Commentaries, p. 46.

17 R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, p. 101.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 99-103.

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