

SEED & BREAD

FOR THE SOWER ISA. 55: 1 0 FOR THE EATER
BRIEF BIBLICAL MESSAGES FROM

THE WORD OF TRUTH MINISTRY

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THE BAPTISM OF JOHN

"The baptism of John, was it from heaven, or of men?" This was the question which the Lord Jesus put to the chief priests and the scribes (Luke 20:4). They had questioned His authority as He was teaching the people in the temple in Jerusalem. He did not answer their question, but declared that He would ask them one thing, which if they answered, He would tell them by what authority He did these things. His question put them in a dilemma. If they said "From Heaven" He would have said to them, "Why did ye not then believe Him?" And if they said "Of men," they could have started a revolt, since all held John to be a prophet (Matt. 21 :24-27). So they said, **"We cannot tell."**

There can be no doubt here but that by the word "Heaven" the Lord Jesus meant "God." And if John's baptism was out of God, then it had its origin in God's will and command. His authority to baptize was divine. However, if it was out of men, something he had elected to practice out of the "divers washings" (*baptism os*) that were practiced in Israel, then anyone was free to accept it or ignore it (See Heb. 9: 10).

The rulers in Israel had laid aside the truly important commandments of God, but showed great zeal for the commandments and traditions of men such as "the washing (*baptism os*) of pots, cups, copper vessels, and couches" (See Mark 7:3,4). Yes, some did baptize their couches! In the land of Israel the ceremonial application of water in any manner was held to be especially devout (Mark 7:7-9). These "washings" were called baptisms, but many of them were not out of God. They were merely the traditional practices of men. John did not take one of these "baptisms" and make it a practice of his own.

The title of this study speaks of the baptism which John administered as God's deputy. It has no reference to any ceremony that someone performed in respect to him, it being quite evident that he was not baptized unless he baptized himself. I do not think that John played a childish game with one of his disciples saying: "I will baptize you and then you can baptize me."

This man's name was originally called "John" (Luke 1:63), but when he began his ministry in Israel he is usually called John the Baptist. He is the only person in Scripture who is called by this name. This was not a nickname given him because he baptized. It was a descriptive title that was added to his name by God and it announced his divine authority to baptize. He was John the Baptizer before he ever baptized even one person.

This man was an Israelite, a direct lineal descendant of Abraham through Isaac. He was of the tribe of Levi, of the family of Aaron, and a priest in Israel by right of inheritance from his father Zacharias (Luke 1 :5-25). He would be designated as a Jew due to the fact that he was a citizen of Judea.

John the Baptist had the divine authority and he had the ceremony. Both of these were given to him by God. No one can say today exactly what this ceremony was. It seems to have been a simple dipping into water. Neither do we know what words were spoken. We can rest assured that they would be appropriate to the occasion. We would suppose that his words would have referred to their avowal of submission, and a declaration that they were now identified with the submissive ones in Israel. This was the declared purpose of his baptism: **"I indeed identify you by means of the water into submission"** (Matt 3: 11).

The baptism of John was not just a ceremony, even as the oath of submission taken by those enlisting in military service is not just a ceremony. Those who avowed submission in view of a coming divine government were by John's act set among the submissive ones in Israel. Those who were identified as such by his act in their behalf, showed fruit immediately by (confessing their sins, an act that probably had to do with an acknowledgment of their previous lack of submission to the precepts of God.

John's baptism, the water ceremony he performed upon men, was a decisive and irrevocable step, which once it was taken committed the baptized person to a course of action which would result in the most serious punishment if he failed to follow through.

When John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, that is, to be baptized by him, he refused to have anything to do with them. These were the men whom the Lord later charged that they made the commandment of God of none effect by their traditions. John castigated them severely, for there was nothing in their lives that indicated a submissive attitude. They were told to produce some actions that would at least demonstrate a desire to be submissive.

The outstanding act in John's ministry took place when the Lord Jesus came from Galilee to Jordan to be baptized by him. The record of this event has been the ground for a great controversy in Christendom that still persists today. Why was Jesus baptized? Why did He need to be baptized? There are two related questions that are continually asked. Such questions arise out of the misconceptions concerning baptism, that are constantly being declared through Christendom. The superstitious reverence for this water ritual that is found everywhere today is back of these questions. **If, as so many think, that baptism washes away one's sins, then of course the baptism of Jesus was uncalled for.** He was not a sinner and there were no sins that needed to be cleared away. If as others say, "baptism bestowed forgiveness" it would be meaningless to the Lord Jesus. I believe that all these concepts of the purpose and goal of John's baptism are wrong.

While those who were baptized by John did acknowledge their sins, there would have been no sin to confess if none were there. The father and mother of John would have had none to acknowledge if they were baptized by him (Luke 1 :6). His baptism was not specifically for sinners. It was for all in Israel alike. And while John did herald the baptism of submission with a view to the remission of sins, this remission of sins was national and future. It will be when the whole nation submits as a unit, when their iniquity is forgiven and their sins remembered no more (Jer. 31:34).

When John was asked why he baptized he waited for a day before he gave the answer. He pointed to the Lord Jesus who was coming toward him and, after declaring Him to be "**the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world,**" made the statement that it was "**that He should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water**" (John 1:31).

These words declare the purpose of John's ministry, and they reveal that it was to and for Israel. He had not come to start a new religion, or form a new party in Israel. His mission was restricted to Israel, and it was his task to make Jesus known to his own nation. He was commissioned to use this water ritual as an effectual means for preparing all Israelites to receive Jesus of Nazareth as their long- promised Messiah.

In the difficult time when John the Baptist began his ministry there were 2,500,000 Israelites living in the land called Palestine. They were described by the Lord as being "**the lost sheep of the house of Israel**" (Matt. 15:24), and the divine service of John was focused on them. These were the people whom John was to prepare for the ministry of the Christ, "**to make ready a people prepared for the Lord**" (Luke 1: 17).

The first word in the message that God gave John to herald was "submit." (See my studies showing the *metanoeo* means "submit" in Issues No. **SB106, SB107, SB108**). When the entire record is followed out it will be seen that it was God's immediate

purpose to make a sharp division in the people of Israel who were then living in the land. This was not to be a physical division, nor was it to be a moral one between the good and the bad. Every Israelite in the land would be seen by God to be in one of two classes, the submissive and the unsubmitive. Therefore, John's call to them was: **"Submit! for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand."**

The "kingdom of the heavens" which John announced is "the kingdom of God." In Matthew 19:23,24 these two terms are used interchangeably by the Lord Jesus. Both terms speak of God's government, His long promised rule over the world, a rule that would bring special blessings to Israel. In view of its imminency, a definite commitment of submission to it was called for. This submission had to be in advance of its arrival and before they knew what demands it would make upon them. They were called to have the "after-mind" (*metanoia*), that is, to have the mind now that they will have then, to submit in advance.

Their first act of submission was to accept the baptism that was performed by John. This was a water ceremony that God had given him, and when he performed it on any Israelite they were then in God's sight among those who had professed submission. This laid upon them great responsibility, and failure to live up to it incurred drastic consequences. I will try to make this point clear by means of an illustration, but in doing so I will ask my readers to remember that no illustration is ever a perfect and complete representation.

I lived through all the days of the second world war, and the day after Pearl Harbor the sharp division between the military and the civilian population began to be evident. Men by the thousands flocked to the recruiting stations, and each day thousands were added to the military. And how were they added? It was done by a very simple ceremony which was administered by a recruiting sergeant, or by some officer who had the authority to do so. This ceremony, the oath it contained, and the authority to administer it were given by the United States Government as prescribed by the Constitution. In this oath there is a promise of submission. So, once a man steps forward, raises his right hand, repeats the oath, he becomes identified with the military, he is no longer a civilian. Any failure to live up to this commitment could be followed by very drastic consequences.

Our Lord wanted to be identified with the submissive ones in Israel. He was ever submissive and desired to be related to those who were submissive. **"I come to do Thy will O God,"** were His words as to His own submission. The ceremony of John would not add to this yieldedness. It would identify Him with all others who were submissive. Thus He fulfilled all righteousness.

John the Baptist was a divinely commissioned herald. It was his duty to announce what God told him to announce. He would have been unfaithful if he had changed the message by addition, omission or alteration. The first word of his proclamation was *metanoete*. This means "be submitting," and it indicates a state or condition, something that would be true of them every day of their lives.

Submission is an attitude toward God that His Spirit produces in men. Today my heart goes out to those who have never sought, nor even desired, this attitude toward Him. Yet all we can do is in meekness seek to instruct those that oppose themselves in the hope that God may give them an attitude of submission, the fruit of which shall be the acknowledging of the truth. See 2 Tim. 2:24-26.

End Issue No. SB137