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5 Following the Messiah: The Baptism of Jesus

Opening:

1. You have viewed the video "Following the Messiah Episode 3 (the first half) at www.appianmedia.org and have worked through the study guide (Lesson Five) available at www.appianmedia.org/free-download.
2. This study focuses on the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan River.
3. Assuming that you have been baptized, give a description of your baptism. What was it like? What were your thoughts? How did you come to be baptized?

Into the Text:

1. The baptism of Jesus is recorded in Matt. 3:13-17; Mk. 1:9-11; Lk. 3:21-22. Related information is added in John 1:29-34.
2. Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee to the Jordan (Bethany beyond the Jordan, more specifically) to be baptized by John. John had been sent by God to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. Matthew quotes Isa. 40:3 identifying John as, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight!"

John was a different character. He is described as having a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. His message was a message that called on people to, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven was at hand."

People from the sects of the Pharisees and the Sadducees were coming to him for baptism. Tax collectors came. Soldiers came. John demanded that they bear fruits in keeping with repentance. Tax collectors were commanded to collect no more than what they had been ordered to. Soldiers were commanded not to extort money from people, to stop accusing people falsely and to be content with their wages. The crowds were warned to take no comfort in being children of Abraham. John said, "The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

John spoke of the Messiah as "baptizing with the Holy Spirit and fire." He said, "His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; be He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

John's message was clear and forceful. "Repent or be burned up!" John may appear harsh to some today, but he was trying to save men from their sins and get them ready for the coming of the Messianic King. He wanted to help people avoid the judgment that was coming. And so, while his message may have seemed harsh and

direct it was a message of compassion!! John understood something of the immediacy of the situation and called on people to repent while they had the opportunity.

3. Why was he calling on people to be baptized? Lk. 3:3 says he was, “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” The Jews of the first century placed great emphasis on ceremonial purity and washed themselves thoroughly before worshiping at the temple. A visit to the city of Jerusalem reveals many sites where the Jews took ritual baths that symbolized cleansing from sin and guilt. The “mikveh” or ritual bath was known in the Jewish community at Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. John’s practice was similar but different in that it was in recognition of the immediacy of the coming of the Kingdom. People were getting ready for the Kingdom by cleansing themselves from sin and guilt.

4. “But wait,” you say. “Jesus had no sin (Heb. 4:15; 2 Cor. 5:21). Why is He being baptized? He had nothing to repent of. He had no sin to be cleansed from.” Yes you are exactly right. So why was Jesus baptized?

Perhaps John had the same problem that you and I have. When Jesus arrived to be baptized by him John tried to prevent Him, saying, “I have need to be baptized by You, and do you come to me?” Jesus said, “Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt. 3:14-15). That’s what it says but what does that mean?

On one occasion the chief priests and elders were questioning Jesus’ authority. They asked, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” (Matt. 21:23ff). He had been teaching in the temple and had cast out those buying and selling and changing money. He had been healing the blind and the lame, and was accepting the praise of the people when they called out “Hosanna to the Son of David.” “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked.

Jesus said, one thing I will ask you, the baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?

Jesus recognizes that the baptism of John is from heaven. In His baptism He shows His alignment with the purposes of God. He fulfills all righteousness. But something else is happening here too. He is identifying Himself with sinners, the very ones who need forgiveness. Additionally, He validates what John is doing and what people need to do to embrace the coming kingdom.

5. What happened next put heaven’s stamp of approval on Jesus. Matthew says, “Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he (John) saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.” Jesus was validated as God’s own son. John later testified of Jesus, “This is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit. This is the Son of God” (Jn. 1:33-34). I

would say, “all righteousness has been fulfilled,” as validated by this stamp of heaven. Wouldn’t you?

Even though He had no sin He identified with the purpose of God and with the sinners who did need forgiveness!! Incredible that the Son of God has identified with me and has joined me in what I need to do!

6. We have studied how Jesus must have learned the Scriptures. It must have been incredible to read and understand that the passages were about you and your part in the plan of God. It must have been equally incredible to hear the voice from the heavens say, “This is My beloved Son.” The statement is probably made to John, but for Jesus to hear this statement confirmed what He had been reading in the Scriptures. Later, Satan is going to tempt Him saying, “If you are the Son of God. . .” The statement seems to be designed to create doubt in the mind of Jesus. If Jesus has arrived at the conclusion that He is the Son of God by faith in what is said of Him in Scripture, how would Satan’s temptation be powerful?

7. I know there are those who debate whether baptism is sprinkling, pouring or immersion. I am not going to enter that debate. It is pretty clear that Jesus was immersed. No need to be at the Jordan River if baptism is sprinkling or pouring.

8. I know some today reason that although baptism is significant it is not necessary. Still, on the day of Pentecost when the people realized they had crucified the Christ and asked, “What shall we do?” Peter said, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38).

If you had heard John preach his “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3). What would you have done? If you had heard Peter say, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins” (Acts 2:38) what would you have done?

I don’t think I would want to argue with them and say, “I don’t need to be baptized.” I don’t think I would argue, “Baptism is not necessary.” I don’t think I would say, “All I need to do is pray the sinner’s prayer.” Where is that in the Bible anyway? Where was anyone told to do that?

Don’t get me wrong prayer is important. Jesus prayed after He was baptized (Lk. 3:21). Prayer is powerfully significant. No doubt about that! It was while He was praying that the Holy Spirit descended and the voice from heaven spoke. But John was not preaching prayer for forgiveness of sins. Peter was not preaching prayer for forgiveness of sins.

Application:

1. What part of Jesus’ baptism stands out most to you? Why?

2. If you had been John, how would you have responded to the voice from heaven identifying Jesus as God's Son? Do you believe He is God's Son?
3. When reading the Scriptures do you see yourself as part of the unfolding plan of God? What does this mean to you? How does it affect your life?
4. What do you need to do to identify with the purpose of God in your life? How does repentance and baptism associate one with the kingdom and purpose of God?