

TUTORIAL
1.38

God sent John to teach and to baptise. John baptised Jesus

See Tutorial 1.6 notes for overall instructions.

The portions of Scripture referred to in this tutorial are: **Matthew 3:1-17, John 1:29.**

Last time

Joseph married Mary after an angel explained that the child she was expecting was the Messiah, God's Son. After Jesus' birth, wise men from the east arrived to worship Him.

King Herod failed in a vicious attempt to kill the young Deliverer. Growing up in Nazareth, in many ways as a normal boy, Jesus was also exceptional: He was fully God and enjoyed a wonderful relationship with God His Father. At age 12 He amazed the Jewish religious leaders and His parents with His depth of understanding and insights into God's Word.

John tells the people to repent

We pick up the Narrative with Matthew, who tells us more about the message of John, specially appointed by God to prepare the way for the Messiah. John has now based himself in the wilderness area east and north of Jerusalem, down to the Jordan river. (Matthew 3:1-6) He gradually gains a reputation and people start coming in increasing numbers to hear him. In some ways his message is similar to many of the Old Testament prophets. It is polemic, a fearless indictment of people's sin and self-righteousness, particularly the religious leaders.

And it is a call to *repentance*. In other words, a call for them as individuals and even as a community to see themselves as God does. To recognise that their piety and good works cloaks a terrible depravity of heart.

Repentance would mean abandoning their useless efforts to follow God's law and make themselves acceptable before Him...to forsake their pride in being God's chosen people and recognise their true identity as part of Adam's lost, rebellious, condemned race...to acknowledge their desperate condition and need for salvation. John and his message had been clearly foretold by Isaiah in words that Matthew quotes, "He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, prepare the way for the LORD's coming! Clear the road for Him!" John's lifestyle, like his

message, is reminiscent of the prophets from the past. He dresses roughly, for the wilderness, in felt clothing made from camel's hair. He eats locusts and honey, the simple food of the rural poor. His entire life is devoted to his work, his message of preparation for the Messiah.

More and more people come from Jerusalem and southern Palestine...from all over the Jordan Valley, the text says, to see and hear this rather enigmatic character. Many are moved by what he has to say. His no-compromise, straightforward, tell-it-like-it-is message gets through to them. It resonates as the truth. They're sinners before God. They need His mercy.

This inward faith and repentance is acknowledged outwardly by having John baptise them. Of course, like anything humans *do*, having John submerge them in the river does not somehow wash their sin away or influence God's view of them. It is merely a public, symbolic action that they've now aligned their thinking to God's view of them and that they are trusting Him to save them, that they are ready and waiting for the arrival of the Messiah.

John lays it on the line with the religious leaders

Not everyone who comes to hear John does so humbly and ready to admit their sin. (Matt. 3:7-10) Members of the two leading Jewish religious factions have come from Jerusalem. Usually at odds with each other, they seem to have formed an uneasy alliance to check out what this radical is preaching in the wilderness, and why the people are flocking to him. Some are the ultra-conservative Pharisees, committed to rigorous observance of the law. The others, the Sadducees, are politically motivated and liberal in their interpretation of Scripture. They are dominant in the priestly and temple hierarchy.

John sees them standing among the crowd watching the baptisms and he denounces them for their spiritual arrogance. He depicts them as snakes trying to slither away from the fire of God's anger. But there's no humble repentance and turning to God for mercy. If so, there'd be a change in the way they live and relate to others. But no, their spiritual arrogance remains intact for all to see. They pride themselves on being Abraham's descendants and think that will keep them safe from judgment. But God is not impressed by that. He looks at reality, at what's in a person's heart, in how they approach Him...whether it's on their terms or His. They're like fruit trees that get cut down right at the roots, and are chopped up and burned because they don't produce anything worthwhile. All their following of laws and regulations and trying to keep themselves ceremonially pure is worse than useless. Their religious zeal is worthless. No matter how hard they try, there's no escaping their sin – it's who they are, it's who all humans are. They need God's mercy, to be saved. They need the Deliverer.

John's message about the Messiah, and Jesus' baptism

John is keen to keep the focus off himself. There's someone far, far greater coming after him and John isn't after any reflected glory. In fact, he says, he's not even worthy to be the servant who carries His sandals. (Matthew 3:11-16) Sure, John has baptized people physically in the Jordan, but the Promised one will eclipse this by seeing that those who believe in Him, will be "baptised" – submersed in and controlled by – the Spirit of God Himself. John has to accept people's responses as genuine, but the coming one will be able to right look into hearts and minds and see who's genuine and who's not. John has a mandate to give a general warning to people about the results of their sin, but the Messiah will have the authority to pass sentence and send unbelievers to eternal punishment.

Matthew now describes an incident that on the surface might seem puzzling. Jesus comes to John to be baptised. Why would He do this? Isn't John's message and baptism all about repentance from sin? But Jesus never does anything to offend God's perfect standards. In every way He's completely aligned to God's divine character. In fact He shares it entirely. He fulfills perfectly God's will and purposes. So why does He come to be baptised? John wonders this same thing and, in fact, tries to talk Jesus out of it. Jesus' response is simply that it has to happen because it's what God wants. A large percentage of the Jews – with the notable exception of the religious hierarchy – have accepted John's message and submitted to his baptism. Even though Jesus has nothing for which to repent, no changes in perspective and life needed, He humbly identifies with this group of the faithful. Not to do so may well have appeared as a refusal to obey God or perhaps would be seen as questioning the validity of John's prophetic message. So John does go ahead and baptises Him.

Now Matthew records in his Narrative a remarkable and significant incident that takes place. As Jesus is coming out of the water God's Spirit comes down and "settles" on Him, the text says. Despite being God Himself, in His physical life on earth Jesus is taking a stance of complete reliance on His Father and the Spirit for the wisdom and strength to do the things they intend. In complete contrast to Adam, who rebelliously chose to tell his own Story, Jesus willingly, gladly, chooses God to write and tell His Story here on earth. He then makes Himself available to share that Story with others as directed by God's Spirit. The Father, knowing all of this, and seeing the humility and obedience of Jesus makes an incredible declaration that will go on to impact all of history. He says, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy." God is delighted and completely satisfied in what He observes in Jesus. This is the kind of human being and the kind of relationship He has been seeking. And it thrills His heart.

Jesus is the Lamb of God who deals with sin

Another of Jesus' biographers, authorised by God, is also called John. In his account of this event, he records that when John – the other, baptising one - sees Jesus coming toward him, he announces, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

It's hard to see how the significance of this can be lost on the Jews, but we only later hear of two individuals who respond and follow Jesus as a direct result.

The sacrifice of lambs and other animals has, of course, played a prominent role in Israel's history. Lambs are sacrificed daily at the temple. The blood of lambs is annually taken into the Most Holy Place and sprinkled on the Mercy Covering. John is now stating clearly that Jesus will be sacrificed and that this will deal with the problem of sin, once and for all. All the blood that has run out as numerous animals have been killed down through the centuries cannot pay for sin. It was only ever intended to indicate that the person involved is conscious of their sin and their need for God to withhold His righteous judgment until a final payment can be made.

Now, John says, that final payment is going to be made. And it will be with the life of Jesus, God's own Son, who brings Him nothing but delight. The climactic chapter – if not the final one – in God's Story is unfolding.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. In light of the truth we've covered in the Narrative so far consider what God means when He tells people to repent.
 - Look up the Hebrew and Greek words that are translated in English as repent.
 - In what ways, if any, do you think normal English usage ("sincere regret or remorse") falls short?
 - How, in your experience of being taught the Bible, has repentance been described? Is it accurate and adequate?
 - Do you think that in essence repentance is the same for believers and unbelievers, or should a distinction be made?

2. Consider John's declaration that Jesus is the Lamb of God. How important do you think that would have been for Jews in that day? How about for our culture today? Think of a personal friend or acquaintance: in terms of them coming to faith in Christ, what value (1to10) would you put on them understanding John's statement? Please explain.



ACTIVITIES

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1. Put together a short Power Point presentation that you would use for teaching this particular part of God's Narrative to a small group. Include images, maps, text etc. Around 8 slides.