

Bi132 The Gospels

Lesson Bi132-8 Ministry of John the Baptist

Before any important project should be started, someone should have a plan. Without a plan and good preparation, not much can be accomplished. God had a plan for the life of Jesus and the plan included a forerunner—someone to go before him and prepare the way. Jesus needed the assistance of someone else in order to complete God’s plan. The person called to have that ministry was John, called ‘the baptizer’ or ‘the Baptist.’ He prepared people morally and spiritually for the message of Jesus. John was about six months older than Jesus. You will remember that he was the son of Mary’s cousin Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah. God had been waiting and working in the lives of both John and Jesus for some 30 years, leading up to this important time.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the Desert of Judea.

John went into all the country around the Jordan River preaching, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near.” He preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah the prophet, who centuries earlier had referred to the voice of one calling in the wilderness, “Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God’s salvation” (Isa 40:3-5 and Luke 3:4-6).

John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People came to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River, the principal river in all Palestine. It began in the northern snows of Mount Hermon and ended in the Dead Sea. Its closest point to Jerusalem is about 32 kilometers (20 miles).

Many Pharisees and Sadducees came to where John was baptizing. The Pharisees were a legalistic religious group who kept themselves separate from most other Jews. They prided themselves in strictly keeping both the Law of Moses and the unwritten traditions of the elders. But they were often hypocritical and envious. The Sadducees represented the wealthy Jews. They were more worldly and politically-minded. They did not believe in angels, the resurrection, or the oral tradition taught by the Pharisees.

John said to all of them, “You are a nest of poisonous snakes!” You see, they came not to be baptized, but to criticize the message John was preaching! He further said to them, “Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Live lives in keeping with repentance, and do not say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. Every person that does not produce the fruits of real repentance—love and mercy—will face the judgment of God” (Luke 3:7-9).

Consider this question for a moment, “If you were part of the crowd who heard the message of John in the wilderness, what would your reaction have been?”

“What should we do then?” the crowd there asked.

John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.”

Even the tax collectors, a hated group of people, came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”

“Don’t collect any more tax than you are required to,” he told them.

Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”

He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. But John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the straps of his sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He is ready to harvest and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:10-18). And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

John preached a message of ‘repentance from sin.’ What does this mean? He called people to recognize they were sinners and to turn away from that sin. God always grants forgiveness when he sees repentance. The sign of this change of attitude and direction in life was that they were immersed, or baptized in water. John’s audience knew about baptism for Gentile converts to Judaism. They had not heard that the descendants of Abraham, Jews, needed to repent and be baptized.

Another reason for baptism was to show their anticipation that the Messiah was soon to appear; and that he would bring judgment on the wicked and reward to the righteous—whether Jews or Gentiles. John must have been a powerful preacher. All types of people came to him in the wilderness to be baptized. His message convinced people of their need to be spiritually ready when the Messiah would appear.

This story is **important** because it shows us how people should prepare themselves to be ready for the reign of the Messiah which will come soon. This preparation is through repentance and turning from a life of sin to a life directed by God, beginning with baptism in water.

The **main truth** of this story is that God will receive any type of person who turns away from their sin and puts their faith in his Son, Jesus the Messiah.

Let’s **review** this lesson—

1. What type of people did John come to prepare for the coming of the Messiah?
A. [Pause for 5 seconds.] If you said, "John the Baptist prepared people who would respond in faith to Jesus' message," you are correct.
2. What message did John preach to the people?
A. [Pause for 5 seconds.] If you said, "John preached a message of repentance and forgiveness from sin," you are correct.
3. What did John say when he described the coming Messiah?
A. [Pause for 5 seconds.] If you said John's words were, "One more powerful than I will come; the straps of his sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire," you are correct.

Your **assignment** for this lesson is to learn this story by memory and then tell it to someone who has never heard it. Then ask this question, "What would your reaction be to the preaching of John the Baptist if he were coming to preach in your village tomorrow?" This question is asking you to think about what people heard about John, before actually hearing his message. What do you think were the rumors about him and his preaching?