

**The unabridged writings of Fred Morris, Manna Publications**

**The meaning of...**

# **JOHN'S BAPTISM**

**To the reader:** Keep your Bible beside you. Always read your Bible first, then read these notes. Check the references and read them also. Invite a friend to study with you. You will be blessed.

## **JOHN THE BAPTIZER**

**Read: Matthew 3:1-12**

There are two Johns in the New Testament and we need to be sure we know which one the Bible is talking about here.

John the apostle and disciple of Jesus wrote this Book, the Gospel of John. And he wrote these chapters about the birth and ministry of John the Baptist or Baptizer who came to announce to the world that the long-awaited Messiah, Jesus Christ, was about to appear.

**Read: Malachi 4:5-6**

Many hundreds of years before this the prophet wrote, "See I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers...." (Malachi 4:5-6).

This Old Testament prophecy was written, not about Elijah the prophet, but about John the Baptist, or John the Baptizer as he is often called. He was born and lived at the same time in history as Jesus Christ, the Messiah of Israel.

Jesus explained to His disciples that John the Baptizer came in the "spirit and power of Elijah" (Matt 17:12-13). He came to prepare the people to receive their Messiah, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. But the Jews did not recognize John when he told them to "repent" of their sins, nor did they receive his message. They "did to him whatever they wished," Jesus said.

At another time Jesus told Peter, James and John the apostle, "If you are willing to accept it, he (John the Baptizer) is the Elijah who was to come" (Matt 11:14).

### **TALK ABOUT**

1. Why did God send John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus?
2. Did John succeed in doing that?
3. Which Old Testament prophet was John like?

## **THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIZER**

John was born to Zechariah the priest and Elizabeth, a cousin to Mary the mother of Jesus. Both of John's parents were descended from Aaron, the first High Priest of Israel (Exodus 28:1). They were born into the priestly tribe of Levi and Zechariah served God in the temple.

Elizabeth had waited long to have a baby son, but God did not bless her with a child. Then, one day, while Zechariah was serving at the Altar of Incense in the temple, an angel stood beside him and said, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah: your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John...many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord...Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their

God. And he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah...to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:11-17).

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man..." The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not be able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words..." (Luke 1:18-19).

All this happened "in the time of Herod king of Judah" (Luke 1-5; 57-80).

### **TALK ABOUT**

1. Who said that John the Baptist and "the Elijah that was to come" were one and the same person (Matt 11:14)?
2. How did God tell John's father about the son that his wife Elizabeth would bear (Luke 1:11-17)?

## **JOHN AND JESUS WERE RELATED**

John was born five months before Jesus. When he was eight days old, Zechariah and Elizabeth took their newborn son to the temple to have him circumcised. They were going to name him after his father, but his mother said, "No. He is to be called John."

Her family argued, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name. Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would name the child. Zechariah asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, 'His name is John'."

"Immediately Zechariah's mouth was opened and his tongue loosed and he began to speak, praising God. The neighbours were all filled with awe. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, 'What then is this child going to be?' For the Lord's hand was with him."

Zechariah's song filled the temple courts. Read it for yourself (Luke 1:67-79).

## **JOHN'S LIFESTYLE**

### **Read: Mark 1:2-6**

God the Father said to the Son, Jesus Christ, 'I will send My messenger ahead of You, who will prepare your way - ' (Mark 1:2; Isaiah 40:3).

John came out of the wilderness of Judea into public view dressed like a prophet. The prophets were God's messengers. Matthew tells us how John looked: "John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist" (Matt 3:4). John lived like a prophet, too. "His food was locusts and wild honey."

Crowds came out of the city and the villages around Jerusalem to hear John preach. Some walked up to 20 miles to hear the prophet. John preached, Prepare your hearts to receive Jesus. John called the people to repent of their sins and receive their Messiah. For the people to receive the salvation which Jesus Christ would bring they must "repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15).

The prophet Isaiah made this plain when he said, that John would make "crooked paths into straight paths" for Jesus; "every valley filled in and every mountain and hill would be made low" (Isaiah 40:3-5).

The crooked ways that held the people back from worshipping the living God must be taken away (by repenting of their sins) and their hearts made ready for God's salvation. This message was for Jews and Gentiles also.

## **A BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE**

When the people repented, John baptized them in the Jordan River. He put them under the water. So John preached a "Baptism of repentance."

Every person is a sinner (Romans 3:23) and every person must confess their sin and repent of it to be saved. Paul wrote, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).

John told the people, "After me will come One more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:7-8).

### **TALK ABOUT**

1. Who gave John his name (Luke 1:13)?
2. How did the people know that John was a prophet?
3. Why did John call everyone to repent (Romans 3:23)?
4. Who came preaching the "Good News" after John was put in prison (Mark 1:15)?

## **JESUS WAS BAPTIZED BY JOHN**

### **Read: Matthew 3:13-17**

Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized by John. Jesus had not come to hear John preach. And He had no sin to confess and repent of. Jesus was the sinless Son of God. John hesitated: "I need to be baptized by You," he said to Jesus, "and do you come to me" (Matt 3:14)?

Was John seeking a baptism by the Holy Spirit and by fire which he had preached (Matt 3:11). Perhaps, in the presence of Jesus Christ, John felt unclean. That was how Isaiah felt when he looked into the temple and "saw the Lord" (Isaiah 6:1-4).

John witnessed to the great crowd that he was not their Messiah, though they all thought highly of him. He pointed them to the One who was to come.

Jesus waited. "Let it be so now," Jesus replied. "It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."

It was the will of God. It was to fulfill all that was written of Him. It was consecrated by a voice from heaven.

As Jesus came up out of the Jordan, John saw heaven torn open and he saw the spirit of God, in the form of a dove, come down and rest on Jesus. "And a voice from heaven said, 'This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased'." (Matt 3:16; Psalm 2:7).

All who heard knew that Jesus was the Christ, the Saviour, the son of God; God come in the flesh (Gal 4:4) who would save men and women from their sins.

"Jesus did not suddenly become God's son and receive the Holy Spirit only at the time of His baptism. He had always been God's Son from before the beginning of the world (John 1:1-3). At His baptism, Jesus was made manifest as the Son of God publicly before men" (Thomas Hale, Applied New Testament Commentary).

## **SADDUCEES AND PHARISEES**

Many believed John's message and were baptized, but many did not. The Pharisees, who were the religious leaders in Israel did not believe. John saw them coming to try to trick him or argue. They said they had Abraham as their ancestor and that was enough. They did not need John's message. But they were false teachers and deceived the people. On the outside they looked very religious, but on the inside they did not honour God (Read what Jesus said about them in Matthew chapter 23).

John said to them, "You brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' ... out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham" (Matthew 3:7-9).

They thought to themselves, "We are the true descendants of Abraham and God promised to bless us above all the other peoples" (Genesis 12:1-6).

God did not want an outward show, but a heart that loved Him and obeyed His word. That is what "fruit unto repentance" means. A true Jew is a person who puts his or her faith in Jesus Christ and does God's will (Romans 2: 28-29).

### **TALK ABOUT**

1. Who were the leaders in Israel?

2. Did they believe John's message?
3. What did Jesus say about the Pharisees (Matt 23)
4. Who is a true Jew?

## **GOD'S PLAN FOR THE CHURCH**

### **Read: Matthew 3: 9 - 12**

John told the Sadducees and Pharisees exactly what God would do with them. He said, "The axe is already laid at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

He was speaking in a figure of speech. The Pharisees' system of worship and teaching were like a great tree that had taken root and spread all over the land. Because the Pharisees and Sadducees did not bear the good fruit of faith and repentance (Matthew 7:17-20), God would cut them off and cast them away as you would a dead tree.

The true Christian church would be established and built up as Jesus promised (Matt 16:18). To grow strong in the midst of persecution, the Christian church needed power from God. This is what John promised here. He said, "After me will come One who is more powerful than I.... He (Jesus) will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matt 3:11).

Jesus would come to save us from our sins. But He would also judge those who did not repent. He would have a fork used for winnowing grain in His hand - this was a sign of judgment. With this well-known tool, He would clear His threshing floor (the smooth floor where they threshed the grain and separated it from the husks), gather His wheat into the barn and burn up the chaff.

This is a picture of the gospel as it operates in the world. The world is like a threshing floor. Everyone who accepts Jesus Christ by faith is like a grain of wheat. That person is carefully gathered into the Kingdom of God, the one who rejects the gospel will be judged and cast into the fire (Matt 13:49-50).

## **JOHN HAD DISCIPLES**

### **Read: Acts 19:1-22**

Paul understood that being baptized and receiving the Holy Spirit always went together. Sometime baptism came first (Acts 8:15-17), sometimes the Holy Spirit came first (Acts 10:44-48). At other times, the person's confession of faith came first. The order did not really matter.

At Ephesus Paul met twelve seekers, disciples of John the Baptist. He asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" (Acts 19:2) They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

Paul asked, "What baptism did you receive?" They answered, "John's baptism." Paul did not say, "That is not good enough." He agreed that John's baptism was for repentance. Men must repent of their sin to believe in Jesus Christ and then they should be baptized.

You don't have to be baptized to be saved. You should be baptized as a witness to others that you are giving you life to follow Jesus and to obey the command in Acts 2:38. Paul told these followers of John to believe the One who came after him, Jesus Christ. "On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 19:4-5).

#### **TALK ABOUT**

1. What did John mean when he said, "the axe is already laid to the root of the trees...?"
2. What kind of 'fruit' does God want from us who believe?
3. Do you have to be baptized before you can be saved?

## **JESUS' TESTIMONY OF JOHN**

### **Read: Matthew 11:1-15**

Jesus had been teaching His disciples about serving their fellow men, the Jews. He told them "Don't go to any of the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matt 10:5-6). In God's plan, the Jews would hear the gospel first and have first opportunity to believe in Jesus Christ and His kingdom (Matthew 15:24).

When they had themselves received the Messiah, the Jews were to carry the gospel to all the other peoples on the earth. Instead, they rejected the Messiah and crucified Him (John 1:11; Acts 2:14-40).

Now John the Baptist was in prison. He had told King Herod that it was wrong for him to marry Herodotus. She was the wife of Herod's brother Philip and, legally, Philip was still married to Herodotus.

John, full of the Holy Spirit, had rebuked Herodotus and she was angry. She had Herod put John in the dungeon below the palace (Mark 1:14). Herod hesitated to kill John because he feared the people."

#### **TALK ABOUT**

1. Where did Paul meet the disciples of John?
2. What question did he ask them (Acts 19:3)?
3. What did they answer?
4. Did John baptize them again? Why was this necessary?

### **JOHN IN PRISON**

#### **Read: Matthew 11:1-11**

In prison John heard only a little about Jesus and the miracles He was doing in Galilee. John might have thought, like other Jews, that the Messiah would set them free from Roman rule (Luke 24:21). And John began to wonder if Jesus was the Messiah of Israel, or if he had been mistaken.

So he sent two of his disciples to Jesus to ask Him, "Are You the One who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Luke 7:19) Surely, if Jesus could heal the blind and raise the dead, He would break open the prison doors and let John go free!

Jesus gave John's disciples this message, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is preached to the poor....." (Matt 11:4-5). John, being a student of the prophets would know these words by heart, as they were spoken by Isaiah (Isaiah 61:1-3).

#### **TALK ABOUT**

1. Why did John doubt that Jesus was the Messiah?
2. What did Jesus tell John's disciples?

### **JESUS SPOKE ABOUT JOHN**

#### **Read: Matthew 11:7-11**

After John's disciples left to take Christ's message to their master, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John.

Jesus asked the curious crowd, "What did you go out into the desert to see?" He answered for them: Did you go out to see a reed swayed by the wind? Was John easily moved by public opinion or adversity? No! Did you go to see a man dressed in fine clothes? No! John denied himself for the sake of the gospel (Mark 8:34). Did you go out to see a prophet? "Yes...and more than a prophet." He is the one the prophets of old wrote about (Malachi 3:1). "I tell you the truth...there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Matt 11:11).

Jesus spoke of the kingdom of grace. John lived before the gospel came in all its perfection, and power. So it was, even as John had said: "He who comes after me has surpassed me because He was before me" (John 1:15).

John belonged to the Old Covenant. He was the last prophet. He did not see Christ's death and resurrection and he did not receive the Holy Spirit as the disciples did (John 20:22). He came, ministered to the people and passed on. All this happened before the veil in the temple was torn in two, opening the way into the very presence of God (Matt 27:51).

## **MEN TAKE THE KINGDOM BY FORCE**

Jesus told His disciples, "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come" (Matt 11:7-14).

God honoured John by making his ministry successful. Men and women confessed their sins, repented of them, and entered the kingdom of heaven. Some were in such haste that they fell over one another to enter. Jesus told the Pharisees "the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him" (Matt 21:31-32).

### **TALK ABOUT**

1. When John preached at the Jordan River, who came to him to be baptized (Matt 3:13)?
2. What did John say to Jesus (Matt 3:14)?
3. The Pharisees came, too. What did John say to them (Luke 3:7-8)?

## **THE DAWN OF THE NEW TESTAMENT DAY**

With John's death the Old Testament age began to die. John shone like a candle in the darkness. When the sun of righteousness rose, (Malachi 4:2) the candle was put aside. All the prophecies of Christ's coming were out of date when John proclaimed, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

John understood this and told his disciples, "He (Jesus) must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30). Few great men see their role so clearly.

Moses and the prophets had passed on. John was beheaded by Herod, but "the word of the Lord endures forever" (1 Peter 1:25). It is the word of the gospel which we preach.

The New Covenant between God and man is this: God gives us the promise of eternal life in heaven. With that, He gives us a new spirit, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit administers the New Covenant to us. His Spirit living in us gives us the power to overcome sin, to love and obey God and to live and witness for Jesus Christ.

For the New Covenant to be fulfilled in you and me, all we must do is to believe in Jesus Christ. So this New Covenant is far superior to the old one. "By calling this covenant 'New,' He has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear" (Hebrews 8:13).

## **THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AND THE HOUSE OF JUDAH**

God told Jeremiah that He would make the New Covenant with "the House of Israel and the House of Judah" (Heb 8:10). When Jeremiah gave the people this prophecy, the two kingdoms were divided, with Israel in the north and Judah in the south. God's New Covenant was for both kingdoms, or all the descendents of Abraham through faith (Gal 3:7-9; 29). No one would be left out.

For the sake of preserving their dispensational interpretation of prophecy and their theories about the nation of Israel, many committed Christians still drag the corpse of the Old Covenant along behind them. They are like Paul under the Law. He cried out, "What a wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death" (Romans 7:24). Indeed, there was no one who could help him!

When Paul looked up, He saw Jesus, "the mediator of the New Covenant" (Hebrews 8:6). His salvation and rest must be in Jesus. "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ," he

wrote, “because through Christ Jesus the law of the spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death” (Romans 8:1-2).

The Spirit of Life set Paul free from the condemnation of the law. Jesus Christ had died in his place. Jesus had suffered in His own body, the punishment the law said he deserved.

#### **TALK ABOUT**

1. Why do some people cling to the Old Covenant?
2. What did John say about himself (John 3:30)?
3. What did Paul say about those who trust in Jesus (Rom 8:1)?

### **THE OLD WAS PUT AWAY FOREVER**

#### **Read: Hebrews 8:6-13**

God put the Old Covenant away when He brought in the New. It is gone forever. Hebrew Christians might have been holding on to the Old Covenant. This was a mistake, so the writer made it quite plain: Jesus is the Mediator of the New Covenant which is built on better promises (Hebrews 8:6-7).

Everything that was physical under the Old Covenant, pointed to the spiritual reality which would come under the New Covenant. That is why Paul wrote to the Colossians: “Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are all a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is in Christ” (Col 2:16-17).

You have come to Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant (Heb 8:6; 12::24}. In Him the union between God and man was made perfect. He is called “the Messenger of the (New) Covenant” (Malachi 3:1), because He came to establish and proclaim it.

### **PETER’S SERMON AT PENTECOST**

#### **Read: Acts 2:14-41**

Before He went back to heaven, Jesus told the disciples, “I am going to send you what the Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49).

After the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, Peter preached his first sermon (Acts 2:14-41). It is one of the greatest sermons ever preached, so study it carefully.

The crowd who heard Peter preach that day were moved in their hearts and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Peter answered, “Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:37-38).

#### **TALK ABOUT**

1. Why did Jesus tell the disciples to wait in Jerusalem (Luke 24:45)?
2. What happened at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4)?
3. What does a mediator do?
4. Who is the Mediator of the New Covenant (Heb 8:6)?

### **PAUL SPOKE TO JOHN’S DISCIPLES**

Paul had promised to return to his friends at Ephesus. He went back to that city to teach those who had believed. Some disciples there had heard John preach and had believed John’s message.

Paul saw that these disciples of John were still waiting to believe in Jesus Christ. When he explained the gospel to them, they believed and were “baptized into the name of Jesus” (Acts 19:5-6). But they lacked one thing and Paul asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed” (Acts 19:2-3)?

They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?"

These disciples replied, "John's baptism." Have you had that seal or guarantee of God's presence with you since you believed (Eph 1:13)?

There are some who think they have the Holy Spirit when they do not. There are those who pretend to have gifts given by the Holy Spirit, but have only the works of the flesh. Each person should ask him or her self, "Do I show forth the gifts of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23)? And do I walk in step with the Spirit (Gal 5:25)?"

## **THE HOLY SPIRIT CAME ON THEM**

When he heard this he said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the One coming after him, that is, in Jesus" (Acts 19:4).

When they heard this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Paul "placed his hands on them. The Holy Spirit came on them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied."

These twelve were a very small group. They had been cut off from the main source of Christian teaching which was in Jerusalem. They did not know:

- a) The Spirit had been given at Pentecost (Acts 2:3-4).
- b) The Church's letter about law-keeping (Acts 15:6-21).
- c) The witnesses who had gone out from Antioch.

## **PAUL TAUGHT AT EPHESUS**

For three months Paul spoke in the synagogue at Ephesus, "reasoning... about the Kingdom of God" (Acts 19:8 NASB). He taught that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh and that He died on the cross to save all who would believe in Him from their sins. Many had only heard about John the Baptist.

John's baptism was a very good thing, as far as it went. It was ordained by God, but it pointed to the One, Jesus Christ, who would follow John and baptize with the Holy Spirit (John 15:26-27).

Some hardened their hearts and spoke evil against "The Way," so Paul left them. He went to the lecture hall of Tyrannus. Paul taught there every day for two years "so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10).

After his day's work was finished, Paul went from house to house to meet with the believers (Acts 20:20). He also wrote a letter to Corinth and visited that city (2 Corinthians 2:1). God added signs and wonders to Paul's ministry, so that even handkerchiefs (sweat-rags) and aprons that touched him were taken to the sick and their sicknesses were cured and the evil spirits left them (Acts 19:11-12; Hebrews 2:4).

### **TALK ABOUT**

1. What question did Paul ask the disciples of John?
2. How did they answer his question?
3. How did Paul minister to John's disciples?
4. What happened when Paul laid his hands on them and prayed?
5. Where did Paul get such great power (Acts 19:11-12)?

## **THEY WOULD BE CHRIST'S WITNESSES**

### **Read: Acts 1:9-11**

Jesus taught His disciples for 40 days after His resurrection. He answered their questions. He said it was not for them to know "the times and the dates" of His return which "the Father had set by His own authority" (Acts 1:7). It was far more important for them to wait in the city for the promised Holy Spirit (Luke 24:45).



Filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, they would be Christ's witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts1:8).

Their witness would be great and very far reaching - "to the ends of the earth." There would be no place on this earth where the gospel was not preached. Then the end would come (Matt 24:14). They watched as Jesus left them and disappeared in the clouds.

Two angels stood beside them and said, "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

He would come again on the clouds (Matt 24:30). And all believers are to "Watch! And be ready."

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