

The Gospel of John – The Ministry of John the Baptist

Today I will continue the study of the book of John by looking at John 1:15-34. This Scripture says:

- (15) John bare witness of him, and cried, saying, This was he of whom I spake, He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for he was before me.
- (16) And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace.
- (17) For the law was given by Moses, *but* grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.
- (18) No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared *him*.
- (19) And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou?
- (20) And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ.
- (21) And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No.
- (22) Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself?
- (23) He said, I *am* the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias.
- (24) And they which were sent were of the Pharisees.
- (25) And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet?
- (26) John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not;
- (27) He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose.
- (28) These things were done in Bethabara beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing.
- (29) The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.

- (30) This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me.
- (31) And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water.
- (32) And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him.
- (33) And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost.
- (34) And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God.

This certainly won't be the last that we talk about John the Baptist, but it's really the most focused on the ministry of John. Verse 15 begins by telling us the purpose of John's ministry – to bear witness of Jesus Christ. Luke gives a much more detailed account of John's ministry. John refers to himself in verse 34 as the fulfillment of a prophecy of Isaiah that said that there would be a voice of one crying in the wilderness to make straight the paths of the Lord. John's purpose, then, was to prepare a people for the coming of Messiah. He was to be the first to testify that Jesus is the Christ.

John's ministry was one which brought into the picture the grace of God. The religious leaders of the day were very legalistic in their way of worship. Grace was not something that they could really comprehend. John's message was also one of repentance. He came preaching that people should repent because the kingdom of Heaven is at hand, or near. In other words, the kingdom of Heaven could be manifest in their lives through the Messiah.

Continuing on we find that the Jewish leaders, when they heard of John's fame, sent people out to question John with regard to his identity. They first asked if he was Christ. He denied this because, of course, Christ would come after him. This had been the point of his message if they had only been listening.

They next asked if he was Elijah. This is an interesting question that deserves a little explanation and a little time because, without proper understanding one might think that the Scripture contradicts itself. Here John said that he was not Elijah the prophet. You see, the Jews were looking for the literal body of Elijah. In Luke 1:17 we're told that John went forth in the spirit and power of Elijah. So while he was not literally Elijah he was spiritually Elijah, and the role he filled was the one predicted to be filled by Elijah. Matthew and Mark both record an account of the disciples asking Jesus about why the scribes and Pharisees said that Elijah must come first. Jesus said that Elijah had already come, and they understood that he was speaking of John the Baptist.

Another character is then brought into focus in verse 21. They ask him if he is “that prophet.” It is not entirely clear who they're talking about here. It is believed that there was a tradition held that Jeremiah would be resurrected before the coming of Messiah. It

is also possible that they were not recognizing that the Prophet in Deuteronomy 18:15 was the Messiah himself. In any event John didn't fill the role.

Once John clarified his position they then asked why he baptized. You see, they recognized that baptism was a representation of a cleansing. They recognized that John didn't have any authority to cleanse. John, though, was preaching cleansing through the grace of God by repenting of ones sins.

Since the time of John baptism has become a controversial topic. I'd like to take a moment to look at a Scripture in Acts 19:1-5, which says:

- (1) And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples,
- (2) He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost.
- (3) And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism.
- (4) Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.
- (5) When they heard *this*, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

In this Scripture we see that John's baptism was not what saves people. If that had been enough then the Ephesians would have already been saved. It is faith in Jesus Christ that saved them, and then baptism was administered AFTER salvation in order to give an outward sign of an inward change.

There are churches that try to track their history back to the ministry of John the Baptist. Unfortunately this is a fallacy because they Church, as such, did not exist in John's day. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus talks of the Church in the future sense. It is something that Christ would build upon confession of faith in him.

Finally, John points out that it's not his baptism that is important, but Christ's baptism. It is the baptism with the Holy Ghost. This, then, is the "one baptism" referred to in Ephesians 4:5.

I encourage you to email me at john@intotheword.org if you have questions about this lesson, and you can now follow us on Facebook.

Yours in Christ,

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