



THE WORK OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Reading: Matthew 3

John the Baptist was sent to “*prepare the way*” for the Lord Jesus Christ (Luke 1:16-17). His work had been prophetically foretold by two of the Old Testament prophets, Isaiah (40:1-8), and Malachi (3:1), as is shown in Mark 1:1-5 and Matthew 3:1-7. When John was asked why he was baptising, he replied that he was the one spoken of in Isaiah 40:3 (cp John 1:22-23). God had sent him to baptise (John 1:33).

The Message of John Foretold by Isaiah (Isaiah 40)

Isaiah foretold the message that John was to preach. John was spoken of as “*the voice of him that crieth in the wilderness*” (v3), and we are given the message that this “*voice*” was to proclaim in verses 6-8.

- All **flesh** is grass—**it withers and dies**. With these words he proclaimed **the mortality of man**.
- The **Word of God shall stand for ever**. This principle is explained in 1 Peter 1:23-25.

John Preaches Baptism (Matthew 3:1-6)

John was teaching that man must acknowledge that he is a sinner and therefore worthy of death (Romans 5:12, 21; 6:23). However, he also taught that those who acknowledged that God’s ways were right and endeavoured to conform their lives to the teaching of the Word of God would live for ever (1 John 2:15-17; 1 Peter 1:22-25).

Thus when people came to hear John and understood his message we are told that:

- 1 **they confessed** their sins. They acknowledged that they were sinners and that God’s way was right.
- 2 **they repented**. They had a change of heart and were willing to change their ways as well. They ceased to do their own will and endeavoured to do the will of God.
- 3 **they were baptised**. They submitted to being immersed in water by John, publicly declaring their desire to change. In so doing they acknowledged that as sinners they were worthy of death. In a figure they died to their old way of life, which was contrary to God’s way, and now committed their lives in service to Him.

The Pharisees Come to John (Matthew 3:8-12)

The Pharisees were the religious leaders of the day, and many of them were notably self-righteous. The word “Pharisaical” has come into the English language, meaning “self-righteous”. When they came to John to examine what he was doing, John was quite frank with them. He called them a “*generation of vipers*”, by which he indicated that they were reckoned among the “*seed of the serpent*” of Genesis 3:15. So long as they continued to be motivated by self interest, they were not honouring God. They had a great need to repent.

It is interesting to note that three years later Jesus also called the same people “*serpents*” and “*a generation of vipers*” (Matthew 23:33).

John told these people that it was necessary for them to bring forth “*fruits meet for repentance*” if they were to be accepted of God (Matthew 3:8). So it is today. When a person is baptised he/she must first acknowledge past waywardness by repenting, and then seek to walk in God’s ways (Romans 6:3-8).

Jesus Comes to John to be Baptised (Matthew 3:13-17)

When people came to John to be baptised they were asked to confess their sins and repent. It was upon this confession that John would then baptise them. However, when Jesus came to John he had no sins to confess or to repent of. Because of this John felt unworthy of asking him to submit to baptism and said: “*I have need to be baptised of thee and comest thou to me?*” Jesus replied, “*Thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness*” and so John baptised him.



Why was it that John agreed to baptise Jesus? It was because Jesus acknowledged that what John was teaching was right. He believed that “*all flesh is grass*”—that is, all people have a brief and passing glory, like the flower of the field that fades and dies. “*The flesh profits nothing*”, Jesus later said (John 6:63). Human nature is inclined to satisfy its own impulses, and every thought or desire that is not honouring to God is sinful. Sinful thoughts and inclinations must be crushed—“put to death”. This is symbolically achieved in baptism. But this is of no value unless we allow the word of God to change our thoughts and bring every desire into harmony with His will. Belief in the living **word of God** will strengthen us to obey Him and lead to **eternal life**. Baptism was a public witness to this belief.

Jesus, who bore the same nature as all mankind with its inherent weakness to sin and mortality, had a daily struggle to resist temptation (Hebrews 4:15; 2:18). Jesus is called “*the Word made flesh*” because he was the embodiment of all that God had written in His word. His thoughts and actions were in total agreement with his Father’s (John 1:14). He always did the will of his Father, upholding His word in his life and by it overcame the natural tendencies that are so strong in all Adam’s sons. That which Jesus indicated in his baptism was a foreshadowing of what he would accomplish in his life and finally in his crucifixion. It was a condemnation of sin by perfect obedience to God, even unto death (Romans 8:3; 1 Peter 1:21-25).

It was upon Jesus’ public confession and baptism, when he acknowledged God’s ways to be right, that God declared: “*This is My Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased*”.

John, Imprisoned and Killed

Not long after the baptism of Jesus, John was thrown into prison by Herod, because he condemned him for taking Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife. When Herodias saw an opportunity to have John killed, she grasped at it and John was executed about one year before the crucifixion of Jesus (Mark 6:17-29).

Summary Points

- 1 The work of John, as forerunner to Jesus, was foretold in the words of **Isaiah 40:3-8**. His message was summarised in the words:
 - “*All flesh is grass*”—it inevitably withers and dies
 - “*The word of God shall stand for ever*”
- 2 John called upon those who believed his message to be baptised. Baptism was a public declaration, by those who confessed and repented of their sins, that God’s ways were right (**Matthew 3:6**).
- 3 Jesus, in his baptism upheld the principle that “*all flesh*” is worthy of death, and that men should forsake that way and walk in God’s way as taught in His word (**Matthew 3:15**).
- 4 Because of his public declaration that he would commit his life to serving God, God acknowledged Jesus as His beloved Son (**Matthew 3:17**).

Lesson 19—Questions

1. Isaiah foretold the teaching of John the Baptist in these words: “*All flesh is grass*” and “*the word of our God shall stand for ever*”. What do these phrases mean?
2. When men believed John’s teaching, what three steps did they take to show they were willing to obey God?
3. What quotation in the Bible was John referring to when he called the Pharisees “*a generation of vipers*”?
4. Why was Jesus baptised by John?
5. How did God acknowledge His pleasure in Jesus’ obedience to baptism?