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## SESSION FIVE

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# Jesus' Baptism

### SESSION SUMMARY

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This session introduces John the Baptist—the prophet who prepared the way for Jesus' earthly ministry. John prepared the way by preaching a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and by baptizing people as a sign of their allegiance to God. Jesus chose to be baptized, even though He was sinless, in order to identify with His sinful people and provide an example of righteousness. Baptism symbolizes our union with Christ in His death and resurrection and marks us as God's people.

### SCRIPTURE

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Matthew 3:1-17

# THE POINT

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**Jesus' baptism foreshadowed His death and resurrection.**

## INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

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### Option 1

The word *baptism* can often bring confusion. In the church, maybe you've seen baptisms performed by a pastor, who says something like, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Buried with Him in baptism, raised to walk in new life." But what does this mean, and why are baptisms an important part of a believer's life?

- **Describe a typical baptism at your church. What typically goes through your mind as you watch the pastor baptize someone?**

When we're baptized, we identify with the life of Jesus. First of all, Jesus was baptized before He began His ministry, so we follow His example. Second, baptism by immersion is a symbolic demonstration of a believer's identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. Baptism is not salvation, but is a believer's public acknowledgment of a decision to live for Christ. In Jesus' case, His baptism identified Him as the Son of God.

### Option 2

When you hear the name John the Baptist, what comes to mind? A wilderness man, dressed in clothes of camel's hair and eating locusts? Jesus' relative, who leapt in his mother's (Elizabeth) womb when Jesus' mother, Mary, came to visit? The man who preached repentance to the Jews before Jesus' ministry began? The one who baptized Jesus?

- **What is your response to hearing the different descriptions of John the Baptist?**

Maybe the most important description of John the Baptist is the title *forerunner*. As it sounds, a *forerunner* is one who comes before someone else and prepares the way for that person. In John's case, the call was to prepare the way for Jesus, the Messiah (Isa. 40:3). Can you imagine what it would be like as the one tasked with preparing the way for Jesus? No wonder John hesitated to baptize Jesus, instead exclaiming that it should be Jesus who baptized him. However, for righteousness' sake and for Jesus to identify with His people, John had to baptize Jesus—not the other way around.

- **What surprises you about the fact that John baptized Jesus? Why do you think this was so surprising to John and to us?**

# HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

## THE POINT

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**Jesus' baptism foreshadowed His death and resurrection.**

## CHARACTERS

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- **Jesus** - the eternal Son of God; second person of the Trinity
- **John the Baptist** - the forerunner to the Messiah; prepared the way for Jesus' earthly ministry

## PLOT

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Today's session introduces us one the *ordinances* of the church, baptism. An *ordinance* is *something that we are commanded to do by Jesus as we go about the task of making disciples*. Jesus chose to be baptized, even though He was sinless, in order to identify with His sinful people and provide an example of righteousness. Baptism symbolizes our union with Christ in His death and resurrection, and identifies us as God's people.

## JOHN THE BAPTIST LED THE WAY

Jesus' ministry began when He encountered John the Baptist. In the Book of Matthew, John the Baptist was introduced as the forerunner to the Messiah, who constantly insisted that he was not the Messiah. John was the messenger who prepared the way for Jesus.

**<sup>1</sup> In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, <sup>2</sup> "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." <sup>3</sup> For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'" <sup>4</sup> Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup> Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, <sup>6</sup> and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. (Matt. 3:1-6)**

The prophet Isaiah spoke about John the Baptist as the one crying out, telling people to prepare the way for the Lord (Isa. 40:3). How did John prepare people to receive Jesus, the Messiah? John, as the forerunner, made them aware of their need for the forgiveness that only Jesus can provide. He challenged them to repent.

John preached in the wilderness, so His lifestyle might seem strange. He dressed in camel hair and consumed a diet was locusts and honey. These are the hallmarks of a person who lived in the wilderness. However, the most important feature of John the Baptist's ministry was not his strange clothing or diet, but his preoccupation with the message of repentance. John came from Elijah's place with Elijah's message (2 Kings 1:8). He was the prophet tasked with preparing the way for the Lord.

## 99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

### Baptism (p. 34, PSG)

*Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Savior, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to the believer's faith in the final resurrection of the dead. Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper.*

## TIMELINE

### JESUS' BAPTISM

*The meaning of baptism in the life of the believer.*

### JESUS OVERCOMES TEMPTATION

*Where Adam and Eve and the early Israelites failed, Christ succeeded.*

*\*Special session*

### WHO IS HE?

*The disciples learn Jesus' identity and the purpose behind why He came.*

The people's response to John's message was tremendous (vv. 5-6). They flocked to John from Jerusalem and the whole region of Judea. Andrew was also one of John the Baptist's disciples, which means his influence had reached all the way north to Galilee.

## **JOHN THE BAPTIST PREACHED REPENTANCE**

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What did John, the forerunner, say as he prepared the way for the Messiah? Take a look at this conversation between John and the religious and political leaders—the Pharisees and Sadducees:

**<sup>7</sup> But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. <sup>9</sup> And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. <sup>10</sup> Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.**

**<sup>11</sup> “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Matt. 3:7-12)**

A group of Pharisees and Sadducees were there beside the Jordan where John baptized. The Gospel of John indicated that these religious leaders were sent from Jerusalem to investigate John and ask him who he thought he was. Seeing them, John poured out a stream of prophetic words. He called them a “brood of vipers.” This was a phrase that Jesus, John's cousin, would also use to describe the Pharisees (Matt. 12:34; 23:33).

John also attacked their confidence in Abraham, just as Jesus would later do (Matt. 8:11; Luke 13:28; John 8:39). John longed to see the fruit of repentance in their lives. If they failed to repent, their “trees” would be cut down and thrown into the fire (v. 10). In other words, judgment would even come to the religious leaders if they did not repent and believe.

- **Why wasn't it enough for the Pharisees to rely upon the faith of their fathers when it came to their own lives?** (*p. 35, PSG*)

John's sermon eventually shifted to the future and to Jesus (v. 11). At first, he compared the two of them—John baptized with water, and Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

In Judaism, ritual immersion was mandated before a person entered the temple area and on various other occasions. Baptism was an external symbol of an internal reality and was also used to initiate Gentiles into the Jewish community. Once other conditions were met, immersion symbolized being born into the Jewish community; one was said to be “born again.”

John's baptism embraced all these images and more, but the fact that John baptized Jews was a sign that more was going on than initiation here. John was concerned about the heart of the person. A baptism of repentance was a unique innovation of John the Baptist.

## JESUS IDENTIFIED WITH HIS PEOPLE IN BAPTISM

Jesus had come from Galilee to the place where John baptized. In the Gospels, Jesus often surprises us—saying what we don't expect and doing what we wouldn't imagine. This moment is no exception. Jesus asked John to baptize Him.

**13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." 16 Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; 17 and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matt. 3:13-17)**

John had just spoken about his inferiority to Jesus, so he protested baptizing Jesus. It should be the other way around, right? Jesus should have baptized John. Once more Jesus was misunderstood.

Jesus' first words in the Gospel of Matthew are in verse 15. A character's first words are significant in any book, and these words are no exception. Jesus told John that it was necessary for Jesus to be baptized for the purpose of fulfilling righteousness. What did Jesus mean? How did His submitting to a baptism of repentance fulfill righteousness? What did Jesus ever do wrong that He needed to repent?

In submitting to John's baptism, Jesus was not repenting. He took His place alongside those of us who do need to repent. He radically identified with His sinful people. In essence, He said, "I will take my place alongside sinners, I will identify with them even to the point of dying on the cross so that they might eventually be set free from their sins."

As Jesus came up out of the water, He saw heaven opened and God's Spirit descending on Him in the form of a dove. This same Spirit would soon drive Jesus into the wilderness to be tested (Mark 1:12).

Jesus took the calling of His Father upon Himself, a calling which would ultimately lead Him to the cross. The moment of baptism represented Jesus' acceptance of His calling, and it represented God's acceptance of His perfect Son. Jesus could have exercised His moral superiority over John the Baptist, instead He humbly submitted to His Father and was baptized, although He had never sinned.

## TIMELINE

### THE CALLING OF THE DISCIPLES

*Jesus invites ordinary people to follow Him.*

### BORN AGAIN

*Nicodemus encounters Jesus and learns about the new birth.*

### THE ECLIPSE OF JOHN'S MINISTRY

*John the Baptist points others to Jesus.*

In response, God spoke the words all children long to hear from their fathers. These were words Jesus needed to hear as He looked up and saw the wilderness He was about to enter. In essence, the Father said, “I love you” and “I am delighted in you.” He confirmed Jesus’s identity as His Son. His identity as God’s Son was also the identity that Satan would immediately seek to attack and destroy in the wilderness, only a few miles away from the Jordan River.

## CHRIST CONNECTION

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The process of identifying with Christ doesn’t begin and end with baptism. Being baptized is only the first step. Baptism ushers us into a radical commitment and identification with Christ’s body, the Church.

Jesus’ radical identification with sinners through His baptism and crucifixion is a model for His followers. We are called to follow His example. We are to stand with the poor. We are to be lights to the world, even as He was the Light of the world. We are to take up our crosses, as Jesus took up His. As Jesus identified with us, so we identify with Him. In doing so, we gain a greater sense of unity with Jesus’ body, the church. Though we had no right to expect anything from Him, Jesus gave us everything. Though the world has no right to expect anything from us, for His sake we are to offer everything, including our very lives.

# YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

## GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **How would you explain to someone the significance of baptism based upon this session?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why do you think John the Baptist emphasized the need for personal repentance? Why should Christians stress the importance of personal repentance today?** *Repentance is of central importance in the Christian life. Through repentance, we not only agree that a different course of action is needed, but we also take the next step and turn away from our sin and toward Christ. Repentance is something that we not only do at the start of the Christian life, but something we also do daily in our fight against any remaining sin in our lives.*
- **What does it mean to you to know that Jesus identifies with sinners?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How has this session strengthened your own understanding of baptism?** *Answers will vary.*

### HIS STORY

*God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.*

### YOUR STORY

*Where your story meets His.*

# YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



## HEAD

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John's message of repentance hit a nerve. He was the first prophetic voice to speak to God's people in generations. Even Peter, whose brother Andrew was a disciple of John the Baptist, was affected by John's message. His heart softened at John's exhortation to repent, shown in the way Peter fell to his knees and confessed to Jesus that he was a sinful man.

- **How does repentance make us ready to hear from God's Word?** *This is partially because we agree with God that something needs to change within our lives.*
- **Why is it important to recognize our need to repent continually in our walk with Christ?** *Growing to become more like Christ will involve continual repentance within one's life.*



## HEART

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Maybe it seems that John was harsh with the Pharisees, but he was also incredibly humble. He claimed that he was not worthy to loosen the Messiah's sandals. John not only preached a message of repentance, but he also demonstrated the humility that must accompany such repentance. His example teaches us that until we are humble, we will never see our need for repentance.

- **Why is it important for our actions to match our words?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How might cultivating a humble heart prevent us from being like the Pharisees?** *Pride tends to distort reality. It blinds us to the truth of our own hearts and deceives us into thinking only of ourselves. Unlike pride, humility does quite the opposite. A humble heart and spirit sees reality clearer each day, recognizing the need for God's forgiveness and help in the fight against sin.*



## HANDS

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In our own time, the "way" is still being prepared. This time, the prophet John isn't the one preparing the way. Instead, the Holy Spirit is the one who convicts us of sin and softens our hearts as He leads us to repentance. The way prepared for sinners is a path to repentance, demonstrated through baptism. And baptism is the call for all who repent and turn to Jesus.

- **How does baptism provide a picture of salvation through Christ?** *Answer to this can be found in the session content.*
- **In what areas of your life has the Holy Spirit been convicting you lately? How will you respond to His conviction?** *Answers will vary.*

## ▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

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### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to [lifeway.com/TGPRescueSpr17](http://lifeway.com/TGPRescueSpr17))**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

**[GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources](http://GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources)**

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit

**[MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject](http://MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject)**