

S T U D Y G U I D E

Covenant Baptism

Marked for Life

R.C. Sproul



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The Baptism of John

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

The first pages of the New Testament introduce us to a charismatic figure named John the Baptist. John is a fiery preacher who comes proclaiming a message of repentance and calling multitudes of Jews to be baptized in preparation for the advent of the kingdom of God. Because baptism implied a purification of uncleanness, his actions infuriated the religious leaders of the day, who refused to undergo the rite. Then Jesus Himself, the spotless Lamb of God, came to John and asked to be baptized. In this lecture, Dr. Sproul explores John's baptism and what it means for Christians today.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To be able to explain the Old Testament background that provides the historical context for the baptism of John.
2. To be able to explain the fundamental difference between John's baptism and the baptism instituted by Jesus.

QUOTATIONS

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

—Matthew 3:1–2

John prepared the way of the Lord and his ministry was preparatory, transitional, and introductive. So was his baptism. We may no more identify the baptism of John with the ministry and mission of Christ.

—John Murray

LECTURE OUTLINE

A. Introduction

1. We are told in the New Testament that as Christians we are to be united, sharing one Lord, one faith, and one baptism.
2. Obviously baptism is a very important aspect of Christian worship yet, a great deal of controversy surrounds this sacrament.
3. Christians are sharply divided about numerous questions related to baptism.
4. One good reason why Christians debate this issue is their recognition of its importance.
5. It is impossible to read the New Testament and not recognize that baptism is a very important element of the Christian faith.
6. Christians who take their faith seriously will take baptism seriously and will want to do everything they can to understand it rightly.

B. The Coming of Elijah

1. We first encounter baptism in the New Testament in the ministry of John the Baptist.
2. The context in which the New Testament apostles understood the advent of John is that of the Old Testament prophecy concerning one who would come as the herald of the Messiah.
3. John's chief responsibility in God's plan of redemption would be to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah.
4. It is important to remember that Old Testament prophecy had ceased with the prophet Malachi—whose book is the last canonical book of the Old Testament.
5. In the last paragraph of his book, Malachi talked about the coming day of the Lord, which would not take place until Elijah first appeared.
6. For four hundred years after Malachi, the Jewish people looked for the return of the prophet Elijah.

C. The Baptism of John

1. When John appears on the scene, the authorities ask him whether he is Elijah, and he says, "No."
2. John's response is all the more cryptic because even though he says that he is not Elijah, Jesus elsewhere tells us that in a certain sense he is Elijah.
3. There is not a direct correlation of identity between John and Elijah, but there is a point of continuity in that the ministry of Elijah is reintroduced in the person of John the Baptist.
4. Though we read about the ministry of John the Baptist in the pages of the New Testament, his ministry still belongs to the period of Old Testament redemptive history.
5. John's ministry is to announce that the period of Old Testament redemptive history is about to end and that the kingdom of God is about to break through.

6. In the Old Testament, the kingdom of God was always something of an ambiguous event to come at some point in the future.
7. In the ministry of John, the kingdom is said to be “at hand.”
8. John tells the Jews that in order to get ready for the coming of the Messiah, two things must happen: they must repent of their sins, and they must be baptized.
9. The call for the Jews to be baptized was scandalous to the religious leaders of the day.
10. In the Old Testament era there was a practice known as “proselyte baptism.”
11. Proselyte baptism was for Gentile converts to Judaism.
12. Gentile converts had to undergo this ritual purification ceremony because as Gentiles they were considered to be unclean.
13. No Jew ever had to undergo baptism because as children of Abraham they were not considered unclean.
14. John comes onto the scene, and he informs the Jews that God is calling His own people to be washed for the remission of their sins.

D. John’s Baptism of Jesus

1. In the midst of John’s preaching, he sees Jesus approaching and proclaims, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”
2. John says that while he baptizes with water, Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit.
3. John is surprised when Jesus asks to be baptized.
4. Jesus then indicates that He is not being baptized for His own sins but for the sins of those whom He represents.
5. It is important to remember in all of this that John’s baptism is not New Testament baptism.
6. There are points of similarity, but John’s baptism is essentially preparatory.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. We first encounter baptism in the New Testament in the ministry of _____.
 - a. Malachi
 - b. Elijah
 - c. John the Baptist
 - d. Jesus
2. Which book is the last canonical book of the Old Testament?
 - a. Malachi
 - b. Elijah
 - c. Micah
 - d. Habakkuk

3. According to Old Testament prophecy, which prophet was to return before the coming of the Messiah?
 - a. Malachi
 - b. Elijah
 - c. Elisha
 - d. Isaiah

BIBLE STUDY

1. Read Malachi 4:5–6. Does the New Testament consider John the Baptist to be the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy (cf. Matthew 11:13–14; 17:12–13)? How would you explain John the Baptist's comments in John 1:21 in light of the above?
2. The story of Elijah is found in the Old Testament in 1 Kings 17 through 2 Kings 2. What are the points of continuity between the ministries of Elijah and of John the Baptist?
3. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance (cf. Mark 1:4). Read Matthew 3:13–17, which tells of John's baptism of Jesus. Since Jesus did not need to repent, what was the purpose of His baptism?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. According to Malachi 4:5–6, Elijah was to be sent by God before the coming of the day of the Lord. If John the Baptist fulfilled Malachi's prophecy, what is the relationship between his ministry and the day of the Lord?
2. John the Baptist came preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matthew 3:2). In light of discussion question 1 above, is there any relationship between the kingdom of heaven and the day of the Lord? How would you explain the relationship?
3. Isaiah 39 is a prophecy of the Babylonian exile, while Isaiah 40 is a prophecy of the future restoration of Israel. John the Baptist quotes Isaiah 40:3 in Matthew 3:3 (Luke includes more of the quotation from Isaiah 40 in Luke 3:4–6). In the context of John the Baptist's ministry, what is he proclaiming to the people of Israel by quoting Isaiah 40 and proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven is at hand?

APPLICATION

1. John the Baptist came preaching a message that the world still needs to hear today—a message of repentance, and a message that pointed away from himself toward another, Jesus Christ. Take time to focus on the continual need for humble repentance before God.

2. Take the time this week to read the accounts of John the Baptist's ministry in the different Gospels (cf. Matthew 3; Mark 1:1–11; Luke 3; John 1:6–34).

FOR FURTHER STUDY

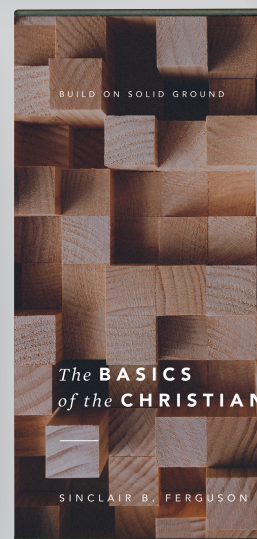
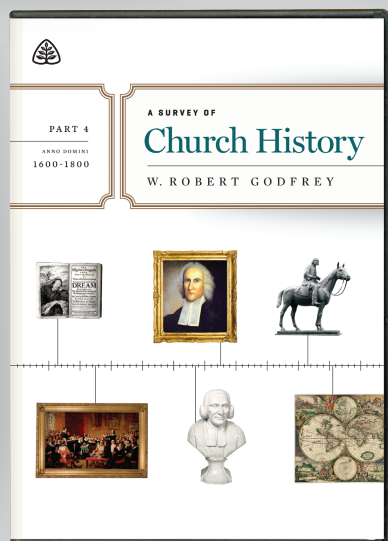
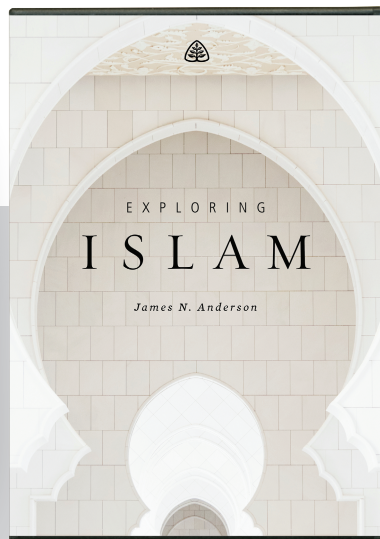
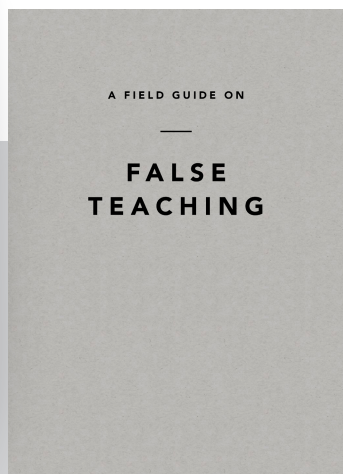
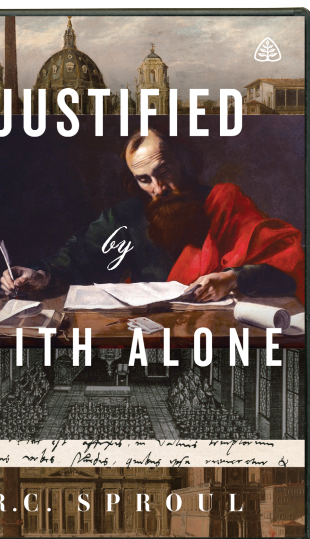
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