

THE LORD'S BAPTISM

Matthew 3

In order to get a full picture of John the Baptist and his work as a background for teaching this lesson, the teacher should read also Matthew 11:7-15; 14:1-12; Mark 1:1-11; Luke 1:5-20, 39-45, 57-80; 3:10-14; John 1:19-30. The prophecies in Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 4:5-6 should be marked so that they can be found quickly and read to the classes.

Doctrinal Points

Baptism represents repentance and reformation, which must come before regeneration.

Notes for Parents

Many times in the Old Testament it was prophesied that when men had departed so far from the Lord that He could no longer reach them in any other way, He Himself would come into the world as the Messiah, the anointed one, to be their savior. As the time of the Advent drew nearer, they were also told by the prophets that a messenger would be sent before the Lord to prepare His way.

When a person has become deeply confirmed in bad habits, he cannot be made over all at once. People have been known to commit suicide because they were suddenly brought face to face with themselves as they really were and realized the full weight of their sins all at once. We need to recognize our evils little by little and fight them one by one, and gradually form good habits instead of bad and at last come to love the good.

John the Baptist was the messenger sent before the Lord to prepare His way, and John's message was, "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The kingdom of heaven is always at hand for every one of us who wants it, if we will do this first work of repentance. John's baptism was a symbolic picture of the

cleansing of our outward lives by learning and obeying the precepts of the Word. And the further baptism which he said the Lord would give, the baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire, pictures the entrance of the pure spirit of the Lord into our minds and of His unselfish love into our hearts after we have opened the way for Him by putting our outward lives in order. If we do our part, the Lord will always do His.

Why was the Lord baptized? He had committed no evils of which He needed to repent. John's words in verse 14 of our chapter express this thought. The Lord's answer to John in verse 15 is addressed to us also. The Lord is our example. He wished to be baptized because we should be baptized, and even if we understood no more about baptism than this, His words and example should settle any doubt in our minds as to the importance of baptism for us and our children.

But we do know more about baptism. In itself it is a holy symbol expressing the desire and intention to live a Christian life. When a grown person is baptized, he makes this profession for himself. When an infant or child is baptized, the parents promise to do all they can to bring up the child in the Christian life. Outwardly baptism introduces the person baptized into the body of Christians in the world. But it does more than this. Because it is a sacrament performed with words taken from the Bible, it also connects the person with Christian angels in the spiritual world, and makes it possible for the Lord to reach him in a new way. No one who feels his need of help in living as the Lord would have him live should neglect this divinely appointed means.

Primary

These children can be told a good deal about John the Baptist. Remind them of Elijah and tell them that John the Baptist was like him and that the Lord spoke of John as Elias, which is the Greek form of Elijah. Then tell them about the Lord's baptism and that every Christian should follow His example. The correspondence of baptism can be given in a simple way.

Do you remember where the Lord was born? And you remember that the wicked king Herod wanted to kill Him, and that Joseph and Mary took Him down into Egypt to save Him. They stayed in Egypt until king Herod died. Then the Lord told Joseph in a dream that they might go home. They did not go back to Bethlehem, for that was not their real home. They went to Nazareth, farther north in the Holy Land, and there the Lord grew up.

The Bible tells us that He was obedient to His parents and that He “increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.” He did not make Himself known as the promised Messiah until He was nearly thirty years old. The word *Messiah* means the same as *Christ*, the “anointed one.” Do you remember how Samuel anointed Saul and David by pouring olive oil on their heads, to show that the Lord had chosen them? All through the Old Testament it had been prophesied that someday a Messiah would appear who would be God Himself come into the world. Jesus was this promised Messiah.

Who was sent to tell the people of His coming?

Why was he called John the Baptist?

Where did he live?

How was he dressed?

What was his food?

What did he tell the people to do?

How did he say the Lord would baptize them when He came?

When Jesus came to the Jordan, what did He have John do for Him?

You see, John recognized the Lord and knew how great He was, and at first hesitated to baptize Him because of this. But the Lord had come to show us all how we ought to live, and we all ought to be baptized. So the Lord was baptized. And when the people who were there heard what the voice from heaven said, they knew that the promised Messiah had come at last.

What did the voice from heaven say?

Junior

Have the Juniors look up the prophecies and show them why John the Baptist

was called “Elias which was for to come.” The meaning of repentance should be stressed and the reason why we must repent before we can receive the Lord’s spirit in our hearts. The three kinds of baptism can be explained.

Where was the Lord born?

By what three names is He called in the first chapter of Matthew?

What do they mean?

Where did Joseph take the Lord to save Him from Herod?

Where did they go to live when they came back?

Look up Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1. The story of how these prophecies were fulfilled is told in our chapter for today.

What was the name of this messenger of the Lord?

What was his message?

Where did John the Baptist live?

How did he dress?

What was his food?

What did he do for those who came to him?

In what river did he baptize?

In a Bible dictionary we read the following: “JORDAN (the descender), the one river of Palestine, has a course of little more than 200 miles, from the roots of Anti-Lebanon to the head of the Dead Sea . . . There were fords over against Jericho . . . Higher up were the fords or passages of Bethbarah . . . Thus there were two customary places at which the Jordan was fordable; and it must have been at one of these, if not at both, that baptism was afterward administered by St. John and by the disciples of our Lord. Where our Lord was baptized is not stated expressly, but it was probably at the upper ford.”

How did John tell the people the Lord would baptize them?

The Holy Spirit is a name for the Lord’s own spirit. Water is the symbol of truth, and fire is the symbol of love. The baptism with water is a sign that we want to make our lives clean according to the Lord’s truth. This is hard sometimes because it means trying to find out what wrong things we are doing, admitting them, and not doing them anymore. This is repentance. But after we have made our lives clean in this way, the Lord can come into our minds

and hearts and fill them with His own loving spirit. Then we can be happy in doing right. There is really no other way to be happy, for doing wrong always leads to unhappiness. This is why John the Baptist, with his message of repentance and his baptism with water, had to come before the Lord “to prepare his ways.”

The Pharisees and Sadducees did not want to repent or to do right, but only to be saved from the punishment of their sins. John told them that they could not be saved without repenting and doing right. Sometimes when we have done wrong, we say we are sorry, hoping to escape punishment, when we are not really sorry that we have done wrong but only that we have been found out and may suffer for it; we would do the same thing again if we thought we could hide it. This is not repentance and it will not do us any good. Read verse 12. What do you think are meant by the wheat and the chaff?

The Lord insisted on being baptized by John because He came to show us the right way to live, and it is right that we should be baptized.

Why did John at first not want to baptize the Lord?

After the Lord was baptized what was seen?

What did the voice from heaven say?

The dove which descended upon the Lord was a sign of His perfect innocence. He never actually did anything wrong, but He was tempted to do wrong and had to fight temptation with the truth, just as we do. Our next lesson will tell about His temptation.

Jesus as to His soul was God Himself, but while He lived in the world He was often called the Son of God because He had clothed Himself in a mind and body like ours which was not of itself divine.

Intermediate

More can be done in this class with the meaning of baptism and of repentance and with the meaning of the Lord's being baptized. Show the young people why the voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son,” and connect this teaching with the lessons from Matthew 1 and 2.

The Gospel of Matthew tells nothing of the Lord's childhood after He returned from Egypt except that He was brought up in Nazareth. Our chapter for today tells us how His active ministry began with His coming to John to be baptized. He was about thirty years old at this time.

Read Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1. When the Lord was born, only a few people were in such a state that they could be told of His birth. The great mass of the people—even those who wanted to be good—had lost all knowledge of the truth and were living evil lives, although often through ignorance. In that state they could not have accepted the Lord. They had to be made to realize their evil state and at least make a start at reformation before they could receive the Lord and His teaching, just as the whole Hebrew nation centuries before had had to wander in the wilderness until all the rebellious had died off before they could enter the Holy Land. So John the Baptist was sent before the Lord to preach repentance and to baptize all who wished to cleanse their lives. We cannot learn to do what is right until we see and acknowledge the things that are wrong in our lives and stop doing them. This is repentance. It is often hard work, for we are all selfish, and our minds are clever at finding excuses. John, like the old prophets, was a wild, rough man, clothed in a hairy garment and wearing a leather belt. These are symbols of the hard appearance of the truth when we first try to live it. John's baptism with water—and ours—is the sign of the desire to make one's life clean according to the Lord's truth.

But after we have done this work of repentance, the Lord can come into our lives and fill them with His loving spirit, making it easy and delightful to do right. The baptism with water is the cleansing of the outward life. This is our part. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is the cleansing of our thoughts as the Lord's truth becomes established in our minds. The baptism with fire is the entrance of the Lord's unselfish love into our hearts.

Sometimes we think we are sorry for wrong things we have done when really we are sorry only that we have been found out.

This is not repentance. The Pharisees and Sadducees came to John because they wanted to seem good and to escape the punishment for their sins. But John told them they could not be saved unless they brought forth “fruits meet for repentance,” that is, unless they stopped doing evil. “Cease to do evil; learn to do well” is the rule for everyone who wants to attain the kingdom of heaven.

The Lord insisted on being baptized for two reasons: first, because He came to be our example; and second, because He had to fight temptations by means of the truth, even though He had no actual wrongdoing of which to repent, as the descent of the dove upon Him pictures. The dove, among birds, like the lamb among animals, is the symbol of innocence.

We need not be confused by the fact that in the Gospels the Lord is often called the Son of God. When the Lord chose to be born into the world, He took on through Mary a human nature like ours in which He could meet all the evils which we inherit; only in this way could He overcome them and show us how to do the same with His help. The finite human nature was not God and it was what the people saw rather than the divine soul within. So the record of His earthly life calls Him the Son of God and also the Son of man. Read Isaiah 9:6. This prophecy shows how the Lord, coming into the world as a child, was to rise gradually in the estimation of His disciples from babyhood on, until He could be recognized by them as “the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.”

Basic Correspondences

- baptism with water = cleansing our outward lives according to truth from the Word
- baptism with the Holy Spirit = the cleansing of our thoughts by the Lord’s truth
- baptism with fire = unselfish love from the Lord cleansing our hearts
- the dove = innocence in the mind

Senior

The doctrine of baptism should be elaborated, using the material on its three uses at the end of the lesson, and the meaning of the three kinds of baptism should be given. Call the attention of the young people to the fact that John's ministry bears the same relation to the Lord's which the wilderness journey bears to the conquest of the Holy Land.

The Gospel of Matthew gives none of the incidents of the Lord's infancy and boyhood found in Luke. Chapter 2 closes with the return from Egypt and the settlement in Nazareth, and chapter 3 begins with the ministry of John the Baptist nearly thirty years later. And John appears, as he does in the Gospels of Mark and John, without the preparation which the Gospel of Luke provides in the story of Zacharias and Elisabeth. But the meeting of John and Jesus at Jordan is described in all four Gospels, and the Lord's baptism in the first three.

The Lord's own reason for being baptized is stated in verse 15: "for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness." This is our first and really our most compelling argument for the Christian Sacrament of Baptism. But we are given to know what baptism signifies, why it was instituted, and the use it performs for us. John's message gives us the meaning of baptism: "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The kingdom of heaven is always at hand. The Lord is always at the door of our lives waiting to be admitted. Repentance is nothing else than the cleansing of the life by means of truth from the Word in order that the Lord's spirit may find entrance into our minds and His love into our hearts. And we are told that baptism, through its correspondence, actually does establish a direct connection between the person baptized and the Christian heavens, as well as a recognized membership in the body of Christians on earth.

Nevertheless our chapter also points out that baptism, to be effective, must be followed by the effort to live a good life. The promises made at the time of baptism by the person himself or by his parents or godparents are not idle forms. They must be kept. The way opened by baptism between the soul and heaven must be

kept open and the heavenly life must be cultivated and bear fruit, for “every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.”

John’s baptism with water pictures the reformation of the external life, bringing it into the order of the commandments. This is our part of the covenant. But it is the least part, just as it is elsewhere said of John that the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. We do not save ourselves. We merely enable the Lord to save us. But if we do this small part, the baptism with water will be followed by the baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire, the Lord’s baptism of truth and love. We can all see this from our own experience. If we recognize a bad habit, strive to overcome it with the Lord’s help, and form a good habit in its place, we shall soon realize how much better the good habit is than the bad one and come to love it, wondering how we could ever have done otherwise.

The Lord’s ministry began with baptism because He chose to take on a humanity just like ours, in which He had to fight evils just as we do: to learn the truth from the Scriptures, recognize what was contrary to it and shun this as evil. That He had no actual evil of which to repent, had never committed evil during His childhood and youth, was pictured by the descent of the dove upon Him, the dove symbolizing innocence.

The voice from heaven was the confirmation at the beginning of the Lord’s ministry that the soul within was God. The mind and body taken on from Mary were not the infinite God, but the real person within was. We know, if we think about it, that each of us has a real self which is within and above his body and even the part of his mind that is concerned with his body. In us this real self to begin with is selfish, because of our inheritance from the ancestry of both our parents. Our first impulse is always to serve self. The Lord did not have this deep interior selfishness because He had no earthly father. The Lord’s “self” was divine unselfish love for all mankind. So, although in the outer self which He took on from Mary He could be attacked by all the hells, and although He fought the hells in this outer plane just as we have to, He always

conquered. At first all men saw of Him was the outer man, just as when we meet a new acquaintance, all we see at first is his outward appearance and the things he wishes us to see of his thoughts and feelings. But as we come to know this friend, gradually the real person comes out into view whether he wishes it or not. So the Lord was not at once called the Father or God, but the Son of God and also the Son of man. It was not until near the end of His earthly life that he could openly say He was the Father (John 14:9). Read Isaiah 9:6 to see how this was prophesied.

Adult

The best discussion topics are the connection of the Old and New Testaments through John the Baptist, the meaning of his message, the three kinds of baptism, and the reason why the Lord wished to be baptized.

In connection with this lesson it is helpful to read Matthew 11:7-15 and 17:10-13 and John 1:19-30, and in the *Arcana* number 9372 (see the excerpt below). We see that John testifies of himself that he is the fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 40:3, and that the Lord testifies that John is the fulfillment of the prophecy in Malachi 4:5-6. In the letter, then, John is a very important link between the Old and the New Testaments. The prophecy in Malachi tells us that the Lord sent John to prepare the people so that the coming of the Lord should not smite the earth with a curse. How could the Lord's coming be a curse to anyone? Suppose a person has lived an evil life and has forgotten all he ever knew of what is true and right; then suddenly he sees—really sees—what true human life should be, and sees himself in all his blackness with no knowledge of how any change in himself could be accomplished. Would not this realization seem to curse him and perhaps even drive him to self-destruction? Indeed men have been known to commit suicide because they suddenly awoke to the realization of some great evil for which they had been responsible. The people of Bible days had fallen into a state in which they were wholly corrupt, with no knowledge of right remaining

in their minds. If those who might still be affected by good had not been prepared beforehand, the Lord's coming would have struck them like a bolt of lightning. They had first to be turned from their evil ways so that heavenly influences could surround them by means of which they could approach the Lord. In the same way, we have to be led to see the evils in ourselves one by one and to correct them; our interior evils are hidden from us until we have gained spiritual strength by correcting the exterior ones.

The work of pointing out our external evils and calling us to repent and turn from them is done by the letter of the Word. This is our "John the Baptist." In the Scripture story all the prophets represent the Word, but particularly Moses, Elijah, Elisha, and John the Baptist. This is why John is called "Elias which was for to come." It is why he dressed the same way as Elijah (II Kings 1:8), the camel's hair garment representing the letter of the Word and the leathern girdle or belt the external things which tie it together and connect it with the spiritual sense, the places, for example, where the spiritual sense appears in the letter. It is also why he ate locusts and wild honey, which represent the most external truths and their delight. John lived in the wilderness of Judea because that was a picture of the state into which the church had fallen. John's message, "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," is the message of the letter of the Word, with its commands and prohibitions and its promise of blessedness if only we will obey. Read Luke 3:10-14 and see how John singled out the particular sins of the different classes of people who came to him and bade them turn from them. This is what the Word should do for us. It is not repentance to confess that we are sinners and not single out and correct any particular sin. Repentance is not saying we are sorry; it is refusing to repeat the sin and learning to hate it. If we refuse to do this first work, which is our part of the covenant, the Lord cannot fulfill His part and bless us with His spirit, for His spirit cannot enter where sin is. How often we close our eyes to our own evils or spend our time trying to find excuses for them when the one thing necessary is to acknowledge and get rid of

them! How prone we are to blame other people for our unhappiness, when unhappiness always comes from within ourselves! "A man's foes shall be they of his own household."

Baptism with water is the correspondential sign of this repentance. It pictures the cleansing of our outward lives according to the Lord's truth. The Jordan was the symbol of the truths which give entrance into the Holy Land of spiritual living, the simple truths of the letter of the Word, summed up in the ten commandments. So John baptized in Jordan, just as Naaman was cleansed of his leprosy when, in obedience to Elisha, he washed seven times in Jordan. All the washings of the Old Testament had this meaning, and in the Christian Church baptism takes the place of circumcision and all the ancient Hebrew ceremonial washings, as the Holy Supper takes the place of all the ancient Hebrew sacrifices and feasts. The baptism of an infant is a sign that the child's parents intend to bring him up according to the Lord's truth, and it is a symbol of entrance into the Christian Church. And because the Sacrament of Baptism is carried out in accordance with the letter of the Word, it connects the child with heaven through correspondences and places the child, as to his spirit, in the Christian heavens. So baptism affects both the parents and the child. This is why the people present at a baptism feel the heavenly sphere.

But John speaks of another baptism, with which the Lord will baptize, the baptism "with the Holy Spirit and with fire." We have said that except as we repent of our actual evils, the Lord's spirit cannot come in and bless us. The baptism with water must come first. But as we repent and correct our outward lives, the Lord's spirit does come in to take the place of the selfish spirit which prevailed before. This is the baptism with the Holy Spirit. And finally we come to love to do right because unselfish love has entered our hearts from the Lord. This is the baptism with fire. Repentance is our part. The Lord never fails to perform His part. "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me" is a prayer which we should all know and use.

The Lord taught us, by His own example, that baptism is a

necessary step in a truly good life. John recognized the Lord as the Messiah, the one whose shoes he knew himself unworthy to bear, and hesitated when the Lord came to him to be baptized. But Jesus told him, “Suffer it to be so now; for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.” With us baptism symbolizes repentance. The Lord needed no repentance; He had committed no sin. But in His assumed humanity were all the tendencies to evil which men had ever had, and He had felt and fought these by means of the truths of the letter of the Word, just as men do. He was cleansing His assumed humanity by means of the truth and bringing it into divine form. So it was fitting for Him to fulfill also the external symbol of the internal work He was doing, and He was baptized by John in Jordan. His baptism was a sign that He was accomplishing in the outer plane of His life the glorification which is the prototype of our regeneration. The dove and the voice from heaven were the signs—correspondential signs—of the inner results of this work, that divine wisdom and love flowed into His humanity as fast as He drove out evil by victories over temptations. The “beloved Son” was the humanity which was being made over into divine form.

Even if we had no understanding of the meaning and uses of baptism, the fact that the Lord insisted upon being baptized should convince us that it is necessary.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 9372: “In the Word there are many who represent the Lord in respect to truth Divine, or in respect to the Word; but chief among them are Moses, Elijah, Elisha, and John the Baptist . . . by the wilderness of Judaea in which John was is signified the state in which the Word was at the time when the Lord came into the world . . . the Word in the ultimate, or such as it is in the external form in which it appears before man in the world, is described by the ‘clothing’ and ‘food’ of John the Baptist . . . by ‘camel’s hair’ are signified memory-truths such as appear there before a man in the world; by the ‘leathern girdle’ is signified the external bond connecting and keeping in order all the interior things . . . by ‘locusts’ are signified ultimate or most general truths; and by ‘wild honey,’ their pleasantness.”

True Christian Religion, n. 677-684: “The *first use* of baptism is introduction into the Christian Church, and at the same time insertion among Christians in the spiritual world . . . That it is merely a sign of introduction into the church, is made clear by the baptizing of infants, who are wholly destitute of reason and are no more able to receive anything pertaining to faith than the young branches of a tree . . . But in the heavens infants are introduced by baptism into the Christian heaven, and angels are there assigned them by the Lord, to take care of them . . . The *second use* of baptism is, that the Christian may know and acknowledge the Lord Jesus Christ, the Redeemer and Savior, and follow Him . . . ‘The name of the Lord Jesus Christ’ means in the Word nothing else than acknowledgment of Him, and a life according to His commandments . . . The *third use* of baptism, which is the final use, is that man may be regenerated. This is the essential use for the sake of which baptism exists, and thus the final one.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. Where was the Lord born? *Bethlehem*
- P. Where was He taken to save Him from Herod? *Egypt*
- P. Where was He brought up? *Nazareth*
- J. How old was He when He began His ministry? *about thirty*
- P. Who was sent to prepare the way of the Lord? *John the Baptist*
- P. How was John the Baptist dressed? *camel hair garment, leather belt*
- P. What was his food? *locusts, wild honey*
- J. What was his message? *Repent!*
- J. Where did he baptize? *Jordan*
- J. What three kinds of baptism did he speak of? *water, Holy Spirit, fire*
- P. Who came to John to be baptized? *Jesus*
- J. How did John feel about it? *unworthy*
- J. What did the Lord tell him? *“It is fitting . . . to fulfill all righteousness”*
- P. When the Lord was baptized, what was seen coming from heaven? *dove*
- P. What did the voice from heaven say? *“This is my beloved Son”*
- I. What do the three kinds of baptism picture? *repentance, reformation, regeneration*
- S. What are the three uses of baptism? *(1) to fulfill righteousness, (2) to point way to repentance, (3) to establish Christian spiritual environment*
OR *(1) that a person be called a Christian, (2) that he may know and follow the Lord, (3) that he may be regenerated*