

Lesson 11

Baptism of Our Lord

The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:4–11

John the Baptist carried out his ministry in the desert region of the Jordan River. The stream's sources are springs supplied by Mount Hermon to the north, which rises to more than 9,000 feet. The river winds a torturous path for 104 miles down to 1,292 feet below sea level at the Dead Sea. It is appropriately named *Jordan*, "The Descender."

John's appearance in a rough tunic woven of camel's hair, cinched at the waist with a leather belt, combined with the wilderness setting to mark him as a prophet (see Zechariah 13:4). That he subsisted on what the desert provided completed the image of this man of God. Some suggest that the "locusts" were pods of a desert plant, but it was not uncommon for the poor of Palestine to eat locusts. They were allowed in the Levitical code (see Leviticus 11:20–22). Legs and wings were removed, and the bodies were dried or roasted, or ground up and baked. Palestine's wilderness country was known for its wild bees, and their hives supplied some of John's nourishment.

145. Why did the evangelists include such details about John's appearance and lifestyle in their Gospel accounts?

John came "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." The Jews were familiar with proselyte baptism for Gentiles, required of those who converted to Judaism. But they were unfamiliar with the need for baptism among Jews.

146. What was the outward action that qualified people for John's Baptism?

147. In his preaching, John was true to the purpose of his ministry as the Way-Preparer for the Messiah. How did John contrast himself with the importance of the One coming after him? How did he contrast their ministries?

148. How would Jesus' baptizing with the Holy Spirit be different from John's Baptism? (See Matthew 28:18–20; Titus 3:4–7; Acts 1:5, 8.)

When Jesus came to John to be baptized, it was not as an act of repentance for His own sins, but it was the right way for Him to begin His ministry. Thus He put Himself in the place of all sinners—“to fulfill all righteousness,” as Matthew’s Gospel puts it. His saving work ultimately would involve Him in the same stance when He would carry our sins in His body and give Himself in suffering and death as God’s atoning sacrifice.

149. Why was the Spirit given to Jesus at His Baptism? (See Isaiah 61:1.) Why did the Spirit descend in visible form like a dove? (See John 1:32–34.) What significance is there in the fact that the Father spoke His affirming words at this time?

150. How does this event underscore the Christian doctrine of God’s revelation of Himself as the Holy Trinity?

“When He came up out of the water” cannot be used exclusively to argue for baptizing by immersion. Jewish tradition included many “baptisms,” religious applications of water. The probability is that John stood in a shallow eddy and baptized by scooping up water and pouring it on those who came down into the water to him. In that case, “came up out of the water” simply means Jesus returned to the river’s bank.

The Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 1:1–5

Genesis, the book of beginnings, speaks of the meaning of life as God’s gift. Chapter 1 uses broad, sweeping terms to praise the Creator for His act of creation. Genesis is one of the five books of Moses, the *Torah*. *Torah* means “law,” but in the Scriptures, its meaning is much broader than just “laws.” It tells of God’s covenant of grace and gives “instruction” about life under the covenant.

151. Hebrew poetry used repetition of key phrases. Which phrases in this account are repeated again and again?

While there is disagreement about the meaning of the word *day* in this passage, those who favor the traditional view are correct. The Hebrew *yōm* means a literal 24-hour day. “There was evening and there was morning” supports this interpretation. While some look at the size and the apparent age of the universe and argue that the “day” of Genesis points poetically to an era, or that “day” is used with various meanings in other parts of the Bible, there is nothing within the context of this passage to suggest a non-literal rendering of *yōm*. If God could create the universe over long eons of time, He could create the universe in six 24-hour days—or, for that matter, in one instant. Key here is trusting God’s reliable, written Word, which shows Him creating the universe from nothing through His Word of power, as He wanted it to be, and leading to His creation of humankind in His own image.

152. What does this passage point to immediately as the effective instrument in God's creative activity? (See John 1:1–3; Hebrews 11:3.) When John plays on this creation account in John 1:1–5, what added insight into this effective instrument of creative activity do we gain?

153. God said, "Let there be light," but this was before sun, moon, and stars were created. What might this "light" be understood to be? How does the New Testament use the theme of light and darkness in talking about our life in Christ? (See Ephesians 5:8–14.) What is suggested by God's calling the light "day" and calling the darkness "night"?

154. How does this lesson tie in with the emphasis of today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 6:1–11

Paul insisted that we are justified by faith in Jesus, and that observance or nonobservance of laws doesn't even enter into consideration in the matter of our being declared right and just by a gracious God for Jesus' sake (see Romans 3:28). Some of Paul's opponents evidently pushed his words to an extreme and accused him of teaching that since we are saved by grace, it doesn't matter how we live (see 3:7–8). They misconstrued freedom from the curse of the Law and made it an excuse for licentiousness. That still happens when a Christian tells himself or herself, "It doesn't matter if I indulge my sinful desires; telling Jesus 'I'm sorry' will take care of that." Some may even persist in deliberate sins and imagine that going to church and Communion unrepentantly and without faith covers their situation and wipes their slates clean. But Paul did not offer a "cheap grace."

In this pericope, Paul makes it clear that faith in Jesus is not just intellectual agreement with some theological propositions, but it is a spiritual dynamic that touches a person's whole life.

155. Why, according to Paul's answer to his own question, can Christians no longer just live in sin? What did Paul say Baptism into Christ does for us?

156. What is the result of our being "buried therefore with Him by baptism into death"?

157. How does our being “crucified and risen” with Christ remove sin’s power to enslave us? (See 1 John 4:19; 2 Corinthians 5:14–15.) How can we live with the fact that though we are baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection and freed from slavery to sin, we still sin in thought and word and even deed?

158. What will help us make progress in expressing in Christian discipleship that we are in fact “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus”?