

Session 8

The Voice in the Wilderness

I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers John the Baptist as the hinge between promise and fulfillment: a nation streams to the Jordan expecting the promised washing, the priests interrogate him about why he baptizes, and John himself testifies that his water is preparation for One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Through Acts 19 the group discovers that the apostles treated John's baptism and Christian Baptism as different in kind, not merely in date.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catechism teaches that with John the Baptist the Holy Spirit begins what he will bring to fullness with and in Christ, and that all the Old Covenant prefigurations find their fulfillment in Christ Jesus, who begins his public life after being baptized by St. John (CCC 720, 1223). John is the last signpost, planted at the river's edge, pointing.

What You Need to Know

Tonight the study crosses from the Old Testament into the New, and the crossing has a tollbooth: a wild figure at the Jordan in camel's hair. Everything the group has built converges on John. He appears at the river of entry (Sessions 5 and 6); his dress evokes Elijah, who parted that river (2 Kings 1:8: haircloth with a leather girdle; Mark 1:6: camel's hair with a leather girdle); and he does the thing Israel had been waiting for since Ezekiel: he washes people. Mark opens his Gospel by splicing Isaiah's *voice crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the LORD* onto John's appearance, and all Judea goes out to him.

Feel the strangeness the group should notice: why does nobody in the record ask John what a baptism is? Ritual washing was already legible to Israel; the live questions were about authority and identity. Crowds stream to a washing in a river as though they had been expecting one. They had. The delegation from Jerusalem (John 1:19–28) asks John three questions: are you the Christ? Elijah? the prophet? And then the tell: *Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?* (John 1:25). The delegation's question suggests an expectation in the air: that when the decisive figures arrive, baptizing may well be what they do. Israel already knew ritual washings, and the prophets had promised a cleansing from God himself; John's rite was legible against that whole background. Israel's leadership, reading Ezekiel 36 and Zechariah 13, expected the last days to open with a washing. John's baptism was legible to Israel because the promise had made it legible.

Now the precision, because tonight's apologetic hangs on it: John's baptism is real, God-sent (Jesus will later ask the chief priests whether it was from heaven or from men, and they dare not deny heaven), and yet John himself declares its limit in the same breath he performs it: *I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit* (Mark 1:8). Water, John says, is his whole inventory. The One coming after him will supply what Ezekiel's promise still lacks: the Spirit put within. John is the promise's last courier, and he knows it; his greatness (none greater born of women, the Lord will say) is

the greatness of a signpost that refuses to be mistaken for the destination: *he must increase, but I must decrease*.

The proof that this distinction is not our invention arrives in tonight's discovery, Acts 19:1–7, and it is one of the most quietly devastating texts in the New Testament for a merely symbolic view of Baptism. Some twenty-five years after the resurrection, Paul finds disciples in Ephesus who had received *John's baptism*. He asks whether they received the Holy Spirit; they have not so much as heard of him. And Paul does not say: no matter, a washing is a washing, the symbolism is the same. He explains the difference, and *they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus*; and Luke completes the scene: Paul lays his hands on them, and *the Holy Spirit came on them* (19:5–6): water and the apostolic laying on of hands, the seed of Confirmation, given together as Christian initiation. The apostolic Church gave Christian Baptism to people who had John's washing, because Christian Baptism confers something John's could not: the Spirit. If Baptism were only a public symbol of repentance, John's version was already a perfectly good one, and Acts 19 is inexplicable.

Tonight's steelman is the modern form of that mistake, and it is enormously widespread among sincere Christians: Baptism is essentially what John's was, a public profession, an outward sign of an inward repentance that already happened. Jesus adopted John's rite; the Church added metaphysics later. The answer is that the New Testament itself draws the line the objection erases, in the Baptist's own sentence and in Paul's own practice, and that the difference is precisely the Spirit. Handle the objectors with honor: many of the people who hold this view love the Lord and take repentance more seriously than many sacramentalists; the correction is not that they value too much, but that they settle for too little.

Pastoral note: John's preaching is severe (brood of vipers, axe at the root), and severity has wounded people in your room; some grew up under religion that was all axe and no river. Let John be what he actually is: the severity of a man clearing a road for mercy to arrive faster. Repentance in John's mouth is not self-hatred; it is making straight the highway for God to come to you.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

Isaiah 40:3 (RSV2CE)

The promise-shaped expectation is visible in the priests' own question at the river:

They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Eli'jah, nor the prophet?"

John 1:25 (RSV2CE)

And John states both his commission and its limit in a single verse, the hinge of the whole study:

I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

Mark 1:8 (RSV2CE)

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom • *Homilies on Matthew*

St. John Chrysostom teaches in substance that John's baptism stood between the Jewish washings and our own: more than ritual purification, for it summoned real repentance; less than the sacrament, for it could not yet confer the Spirit or remission. Its whole office was to lead people by the hand to the One who could, which is why John's constant preaching was not himself but the Coming One.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine • *Tractates on the Gospel of John*

St. Augustine, commenting on the Baptist's testimony that the Spirit's descent revealed *he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit*, teaches in substance that this is the standing difference between every minister and the Lord: John baptized in his own baptism, but no Christian minister baptizes in his own; whether Peter baptizes, or Paul, or even Judas, it is Christ who baptizes. The power of the font was never delegated away; the hands change, the Baptizer does not.

Leader note: This is also the Church's answer, learned through the Donatist crisis, to a fear someone in your room may carry: what if the priest who baptized me was unworthy? The sacrament's worth never rested on him. It is Christ who baptizes.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Thomas Aquinas • *Summa Theologiae III, q. 38*

St. Thomas, treating John's baptism directly, teaches in substance that it was a divinely given preparation rather than a sacrament of grace: it did not itself confer what our Baptism confers, but accustomed Israel to the rite, gathered crowds to hear of Christ, and disposed hearts by repentance, a schoolmaster's washing, walking its pupils to the font it could not itself be.

Catechism Connection

CCC 523 names John the Lord's immediate precursor, sent to prepare his way, and CCC 720 says the theology of tonight in one motion: with John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit begins the restoration to man of the divine likeness, prefiguring what he would achieve with and in Christ; John's baptism was for repentance, while baptism in water and the Spirit will be a new birth. Note how the Catechism's own contrast (for repentance versus new birth) is simply Mark 1:8 restated.

CCC 1223 sets tonight's forward edge: all the Old Covenant prefigurations find their fulfillment in Christ Jesus, who begins his public life after having himself been baptized by St. John. Read that sentence twice in preparation: it means the study's next session is the one every previous session has been about.

Paragraphs for this session: 523, 720, 1223

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

Water plus Spirit (one session from resolution): John's sentence formalizes the gap the whole Old

Testament left open: he has the water; the Spirit is still future tense, standing in the crowd. Do not let tonight resolve what Session 9 exists to resolve.

Elijah and the Jordan (Session 5 callback, developed tonight): same river, Elijah-evoking dress, the forerunner's office; the Elisha story-shape the study has held lightly now wears a camel-hair coat. Let a participant make the clothing connection from 2 Kings 1:8 if possible.

Why did nobody ask what a baptism was? (tonight's quiet apologetic): the priests' question in John 1:25 proves the expectation; Session 7's promise built tonight's crowd. Make sure this lands; it is the seam between the study's two halves.

He must increase (planted tonight, echoed Session 14): John's self-emptying is the baptized life's template. One sentence.

It is Christ who baptizes (planted tonight via Augustine, developed Sessions 9–11): the acting subject of the sacrament. This quietly answers half the objections the study will ever meet.

Session Goals

1. The group can explain why crowds and priests treated a riverside washing as legible: Israel knew ritual washing, and the prophets had taught her to hope for God's own (John 1:25 read as suggestive evidence).
2. The group can state John's own distinction: I with water; he with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8).
3. The group has discovered Acts 19 and can say what the apostolic Church did with disciples who had only John's baptism, and why.
4. The steelman (Baptism as public profession, essentially John's rite) has been given at full strength and answered from the Baptist and from Paul's practice.
5. The Elijah connections (river, garment, office) are on the table, and the room is leaning toward Session 9.

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

10 min • Win questions

15 min • Build: Mark 1:1–8; Isaiah 40; the Elijah costume; Q1-Q2

10 min • Build: John 1:19–28; the priests' question; Q3

15 min • Live discovery: Acts 19:1–7

15 min • Steelman: is Baptism essentially John's rite?

5 min • Send questions

10 min • Live It, memory verse, closing prayer

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: Q2 (the Elijah garment parallel) can be a single leader aside, and the Dig Deeper box. Never cut Acts 19; it is tonight's load-bearing discovery.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, before your Son came to the river, you sent a voice to make the road straight. Send that voice through us tonight: level what is proud in us, fill what is hollow, and make a highway in our wilderness, so that when Christ approaches, nothing in us delays him. Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. Who has been a John the Baptist in your life: someone whose whole role, looking back, was to point you toward something greater than themselves? Did you recognize it at the time?

QW2. John drew crowds into the wilderness by telling them the truth about themselves. Why do you think people walked miles for that? When has severe honesty been a mercy to you?

Build • into the text

Have a reader take Mark 1:1–8. Ask the group to note everything Mark tells us about John before he speaks: the Isaiah quotation, the location, the clothing, the diet, the crowds.

Q1. Mark introduces John with Isaiah 40:3, the voice preparing the way of the LORD. In Isaiah, who is the way being prepared for? So what is Mark claiming about the one John precedes, before Jesus has said a word?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

In Isaiah the highway is for *our God*: the LORD himself returning to his people. Mark hands that verse to John's ministry, which means the One whose sandals John cannot stoop to untie is not merely a great teacher on his way; it is the LORD coming down his own road. The stakes of the next session are set in tonight's first paragraph: the person approaching the water is God.

Q2. Compare Mark 1:6 with 2 Kings 1:8. What is John wearing, who wore it first, and, remembering Session 5, what did that man do at this same river?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Camel's hair and a leather girdle: dress any Bible-formed reader would find evocative of Elijah, whose own description turns on the same leather girdle. And Elijah parted this very Jordan, after which his successor received the spirit he asked for on the far side. John appears in Elijah-evoking dress, at the river of Elijah's story, doing the forerunner's work, and Malachi had promised Elijah's coming before the great day of the LORD. The dress reads as a claim: the last preparation is underway. (Hold the typology with John's own precision: he denies being Elijah returned (John 1:21), and the Lord names him Elijah in the qualified sense of the promised forerunner (Matthew 11:14): the office, not the man.)

Q3. Now John 1:19–28. Jerusalem sends priests and Levites with three identity questions, and then verse 25: *Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?* What does that question accidentally reveal about what Israel's leadership expected?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

It suggests the expectation this study spent last week reading: the questioners seem to assume the decisive figures of the last days might well baptize. Hold the inference with an inference's modesty and its force remains. Washing itself needed no explanation in Israel: ritual immersions had long made it legible; what Ezekiel 36 and Zechariah 13 had added was the hope of a cleansing from God's own hand. The crowds at the Jordan look like Session 7's promise generating Session 8's traffic: a washing at the hands of God's messengers read not as an innovation but as an appointment.

Now put John's own sentence on the table and leave it there for the rest of the night: *I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit* (Mark 1:8). Water: present tense, John's whole inventory. The Spirit: future tense, someone else's gift. Ezekiel promised water AND Spirit; John, by his own testimony, carries half the promise and points at the Carrier of the other half.

LIVE DISCOVERY

The hunt. Tell the group: a quarter century after the resurrection, the difference between John's baptism and Christian Baptism came up as a live pastoral case, and what the apostle did about it settles tonight's whole question. Give them only **Acts 19:1–7**. Have them read it aloud and answer: what did these disciples lack, how did Paul diagnose it, and what did he do?

They lacked the Spirit, had never even heard of him; Paul's diagnostic question was about their baptism; and on hearing the difference explained, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, and the Spirit came upon them. Let the group say the uncomfortable sentence themselves: the apostles gave Christian Baptism to devout men whose only washing was John's.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

Tonight's objection, at full strength, and millions of sincere Christians hold it: Baptism is a public profession, an outward testimony of an inward repentance and faith that have already done the real work: The strongest form of the view knows John's baptism and Christian baptism differ: Christ instituted a new ordinance for his new covenant. But in essence, on this reading, the new ordinance remains what water always was: testimony: an outward sign of an inward grace received by faith; what changed was the covenant addressed, not the water's job. The believer repents, believes, and is saved; then baptism announces it, the way a wedding ring announces a marriage. All the later metaphysics (regeneration, infused grace, character) is the Church embroidering a simple, beautiful symbol of obedience.

Q4. Honor it first: what does this view take admirably seriously? Then test it: if it is correct, what should Paul have said in Ephesus?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Honor what deserves honor: this view takes repentance, personal faith, and public witness with a seriousness that shames many a lukewarm sacramentalist, and every one of those goods is genuinely in Baptism; the Church requires the faith it presupposes. If the correction were you value too much, we should stay silent. The correction is: you settle for too little, and the New Testament itself says so.

For if Baptism is essentially John's rite, testimony in water, then Ephesus destroys the theory. Those disciples had exactly that: a real washing of real repentance, God-commanded, received sincerely. On the symbolic view, nothing is missing; the ring is on the finger. Yet Paul's first diagnostic is *Did you receive the Holy Spirit?*, his second is *Into what then were you baptized?*, and his remedy is not supplemental teaching but Christian initiation: Baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus, completed by the apostolic laying on of hands. The apostle treats the two washings as different in kind, and the difference has a name: the Spirit. Which is no innovation of Paul's; it is the Baptist's own advertisement: I with water, he with the Holy Spirit. The witness-theory of Baptism is, with unintended irony, a theology of John's baptism, held after the One John pointed to has come. And Peter's Pentecost promise seals it: repent, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, *and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*: forgiveness and Gift attached to the washing itself. A wedding ring announces a marriage; this water, on the apostles' showing, is more like the vows: God giving what the sign signifies. The full grammar of that arrives in two weeks with Romans 6; tonight it is enough to let John and Paul draw the line where they drew it.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

For a strong group: John 3:22–30, the last portrait of John: his disciples fret that everyone is going to Jesus, and John answers with the bridegroom's friend image and the sentence that fits every Christian vocation ever since: *He must increase, but I must decrease*. Ask: John said this about baptisms, his versus the Lord's. What would it look like for our parish's programs, and our own spiritual pride, to say it as freely?

Send • out of the room

QS1. John's whole office was making a straight road for someone else's arrival. Whose road are you positioned to straighten right now, and what crooked thing (a grudge, a silence, a bad example) is in the way?

QS2. The Ephesus disciples were devout and incomplete, and did not know it until someone asked a good question. What good question about your own sacramental life have you been avoiding?

Live It This Week

- Pray the Benedictus (Luke 1:68–79), Zechariah's canticle over the infant John, once this week, slowly: the Church prays it every single morning.
- Practice one act of decrease: give away credit, yield the last word, or let someone else be preferred, and offer it silently: he must increase.

- If you have never read your own baptismal rite, find the Rite of Baptism text this week and read what was actually said and asked over you.

Memory Verse

I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

Mark 1:8 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, John prepared your road and handed you his crowds, his disciples, and his river. Give us his honesty about what we are not, and his joy at your increase. Bring to completion in every one of us what the water began, and fill with your Spirit whatever in us is still only wet. Who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Mark 1:1–8 • John's appearance, Isaiah 40:3, the crowds; verse 8 the hinge sentence and memory verse

Isaiah 40:3 • The voice prepares the way of the LORD himself

2 Kings 1:8 with Mark 1:6 • Elijah's garment; Session 5 river callback

John 1:19–28 • The priests' question: verse 25, the expectation revealed

Acts 19:1–7 • Live discovery: Ephesus; John's baptism and Christian Baptism differ in kind

Acts 2:38 • Steelman answer: forgiveness and the Gift attached to the washing (full treatment in Session 13)

John 3:22–30 • Dig Deeper: he must increase

Luke 1:68–79 • Live It: the Benedictus