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## **John the Baptist**

*“See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.”* Malachi 4:5-6

**Key verses:** Mark 1:1-11; Matthew 3:1-12; Luke 2:1-20; 3:1-22; John 1:1-18; 3:22-36

**Key personalities:** God, John the Baptist

**Timeline:** 27-28 A.D., John the Baptist was executed in 29 A.D. During this time, Judea was a province of Rome, who conquered Israel and the Palestine area and the entire eastern European and Mediterranean area. The Herods ruled as governors and constructed a great sea harbor at Caesarea using concrete, and they rebuilt the Temple, Pontius Pilate was procurator of Judea until 36 A.D. Many sects rise up including the Zealots who waged a hopeless war that creates the anti-Jew movement. They ended up losing the entire country in 70 A.D. Rome was besieged by several dynastic emperor successions through means of treachery and murder. *Strabo*, in his work, *Geography*, correctly estimates by local measurements the dimensions of the earth. *Pliny* writes a 37-volume encyclopedia of astronomy, geography, geology, and botany. *Agrippa* builds public baths and toilets. *Apicius* invents cakes and sauces and writes a cookbook. Meanwhile, the Chinese were ruled by the Han Dynasty and developed water-powered bellows to make cast iron, using this technology to build suspension bridges. The Japanese cultivate rice. The world's population was approximately 250 million with 100 million in the Roman provinces. There are over one million Jews.

Malachi 4:5-6 gives us a prophecy 400 years prior, and now John tells us the timing is correct--God sends His forerunner. Yet, the Jews did not accept him as they did not the Prophets who came before. They believed, by their tradition, that they were OK and that their heritage through Abraham saved them. John challenges them with their own Scriptures, as God's previous prophets had, that only the faithful who accept His revelation and Word will be saved.

John the Baptist made it clear: Grace is free and unmerited. However, a response must be made from the faith He gives from the Holy Spirit's work. We have a responsibility to take and build on what He gives us by faith in Christ Jesus through grace. We must also appreciate the opportunities and gifts He presents to us. Now the time is at hand; the final opportunity is through Christ (Isa. 2:3; 65:2-3; Jer. 7:25; 31:31-34; Matt. 3:8-10).

**Key Happenings:** God sent John the Baptist as a forerunner to Christ.

God sent John the Baptist as an introduction to Christ, to be a herald and sign that the Messiah had come. This was so that people might see and believe that Jesus Christ would come, know He is the Light to the world, and He would come to save the lost. John calls for people to repent, to embrace righteousness, to trust and obey, and to become God's child, purging the grip of darkness forevermore. John was not the Light; rather, he was a witness of the Light--a testimony of the new covenant of grace from God to us. Even though Christ made the world and all things, darkness corrupted everything. Sin blinded people from the Truth; they needed His light to know God and to live. John's witness is so that people may now see the Light, the hope and love of God, accept His saving grace so to become the children of God, and be reborn--all of which can come only from God.

To prove and make this happen, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, became a man and lived amongst us. He remains pure and His Light shines to show us the Love and plan of God. John passionately points this all out to the people so they may change their ways, telling them someone greater than he (John) is coming so that all we who trust in Him can receive His rich blessings. God's unfailing love through the faithfulness of Christ is available to us and we can see God by seeing Christ (Matt. 3:1-6; Mark 1:2-6; Luke 7:20).

John the Baptist lived and worked in the wilderness by the river Jordan, perhaps to think clearly and draw closer to God. He had a following and was zealous as well as "successful," as "*People from Jerusalem and all Judea*"...who were ..."*confessing their sins*," went to him to see who was preparing the way for what was to come. (Success is never to be measured in numbers, but in faith and obedience!) John was also bold; the leaders did not intimidate him! Though John's work was short-lived because he was imprisoned and later decapitated, his work was clearly important (Mark 1:1-11; Luke 3:1-22; John 3:22-36).

- John the Baptist was fulfilling prophecy; *make His paths straight*. He came "*in the spirit and power of Elijah*," but was not actually Elijah. (12 Kings 1:8; Isa 40:3; Mal 4:5; John 1:19-23; 3:30).
- He, too, had a miraculous birth and was Jesus' cousin. An angel told Zacharias that his son, John, would "*make ready a path for the Lord*" (Luke 1:16-17)
- *Preaching*. John was determined, and he knew his call and its urgency--to call people to repentance, which literally means to change our minds and ways 180 degrees! This call is to change people; we are to have turn from sin and turn to God.
- *Repentance* was not just the sorrow or emotion, but an actual change! This change allows us to feel the *sorrow* of the hurt we cause not only ourselves, but also the people around us, and even God! When one serves the Lord or has repented, the fruits will be manifested. If not, something is very wrong. OT repentance meant to return to a life of obedience and faithfulness within the Mosaic Covenant. Judas was sorrowful for his actions, but he did not repent (Matt. 4:17; 27:3; 2 Cor. 7:10-11; Gal. 5).
- The call to repent was what Jesus proclaimed (Matt. 4:17; 9:13; 11:20; 12:41; Mk 1:14-15; Luke 24:46-47)! This is the same message the apostles proclaimed (Mt 10:7; Acts 2: 38; 3:4. 19; 17:30; 20:20-21; 26:19-20!
- If we do not understand what it means to repent, we will miss the centrality of the Gospel message! If we do not understand what it means to repent, we cannot be His disciples!
- *Kingdom* meant, "rule" and *heaven* is the source of the rule. In other words, we are to be ruled by God in all aspects of our lives!
- *Witness*. This was a legal term for both Jews and Romans. This meant one who testifies in a court of law or before an official. Isaiah used this term to state how true believers would testify about God to evil nations and at the end of days. Here, John the Baptist's sole mission was to testify about Jesus so people might believe in Jesus Christ (Isa. 43:10; 44:8; John 3:27-30; 10:41; 20:21)
- *All men might believe*. God extends His grace outward and forward to all people. God is not just the God of the Jews; He is the God of the universe--of every and all things. The Jews were instruments of His choosing to be His witnesses; now, John is the witness of Christ who brings the Gospel to all.

- **Jesus is relevant to all people of all times**--all ethnicities, races, ages, and places. The only restriction is to those who are not His--who refused and refuse His offer. Now, through Christ, all have the opportunity to believe (John 17:5, 14-15).
- *Light.* This means what is never-ending and what is true versus what is not true or what comes against it, such as the darkness of sin. In context, this refers to the good news of Christ, the Gospel, and that the true truth is that God so loved the world, He came to save those who do not deserve or merit it (Matt. 11:11; John 3:16; 4:24; 6:32; 8:12; 9:5; 10:7-14; 11:25; 14:6; Acts 19:1-3; Rom. 1:19-20; 2:12-16).
- *John testifies.* John was very public with His ministry and did not hold back. Bringing a testimony is essential to knowing, eternalizing, and showing your faith; it is the active demonstration of the Gospel working. Christ is the One who gives us grace, forgiveness. He gives us our lives, purpose, and salvation. Many prophets often had heralds who would go before them to make advertisement and warning (Matt. 3; John 8:58; Acts 19:3-5).
- *He gave the right.* Only God gives us entrance into His presence and family, and this is by grace alone, the undeserved gift of God (Eph 2:8-9; Titus 3:5; John 2:29).
- *Children of God.* This refers to those who received Christ as Lord and Savior by the action of the Holy Spirit. Our new life in Christ removes us from darkness and the penalty of death into an intimate relationship with Him. This is not by birthright or ethnicity or by human will or works; rather, it is a gift from and of God which we receive and build on (John 3:3-8).
- *Born of God.* This means God regenerates us. He is the One who initiates and presents us with salvation. He is Sovereign as well as pure, holy, and has the perfect, complete, holy means to know who one of the elect is. His way is perfect. Our way, if it were possible, would be extremely flawed and ineffective. He is the only One who can save us; it is by His work and decree (John 3:1-21; 5:24; Rom. 6:4-6; 9:18; Eph. 2:1; 2:5; Col. 2:13; 3:1).

The big finality in John's preaching was that the One to come is mightier, and comes... *to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire* (Matt 13:30; John 16:7-8, 12 13).

John the Baptist was also highly revered by the people--even by some of the officials and leadership. He was more than a prophet, but he was a mere man and not the One who came to save. Jesus, being eternal, actually came before John even though John's human birth and public ministry were first on the scene. He shows us the path to follow--that of Christ as our LORD!

**Key Takeaway:** This message is still needed and required today, because we cannot have salvation without repentance. Grace is free, but grace cannot come into a heart where it is not welcomed, and when being unrepentant, we will not welcome His grace!

Faith is not inherited! Although our parents or congregants of a church can and should model faith for us, we cannot get it from our parents or our church, even though our lineage may be passed down for generations. Faith cannot be gained through tradition. Faith is personal and relational to Christ for each individual person who is in community with the Church, and it is to be real! As parents, we are responsible for bringing our children up in His light and character, but we are also responsible for receiving His grace and modeling His faith!

We can have the faith and confidence that God does keep His word! We can trust Him with all of our needs, worries, and problems, even if we do not understand what God is doing!

**The Call to the Church?** Is church about your needs or about His glory? Do you think much about yourself and little about the things of God? How does this influence how your church is run and its influence to the neighborhood? John the Baptist was the road builder laying the path for the Lord. Great leaders point to Christ and make a path to prepare people to know and grow in Christ. He is already here. But, we can learn obedience, willingness to go all out in faith, and a willingness to endure extreme persecution for the Lord characterized by John. He removed the rocks of sin by tearing them up and exposing them, without fear of reprisal by the arrogant and prideful hypocrites. We are called to do this, too. He was indeed extreme, and God chose John to show a corrupt religious system its errors and point to the truly Righteous Messiah. I wonder if such a person would be welcomed in a church today? Such extreme commitment is considered foolish amongst the world, even with many Christians. We may not be called to eat bugs and curse pious frauds, but we are called to make paths, have obedience in our hearts, minds, and actions and--above all--point to Christ! This does take an extreme stand! Have you heard His call? Have you responded to it? Have you made a stand?

### Questions to Ponder

1. How would you describe John the Baptist? How was he a forerunner to Christ? What does this mean to us today?
2. John's ministry was also one of Reconciliation. Who do we need to reconcile with today?
3. How and when did you first start to trust and obey? What does it mean to you that you are God's child? How does this help you now to escape the grip of sin and darkness?
4. How and why did John the Baptist show people how to see and believe that Jesus Christ is the Light to the world? How would you have reacted, if you were there at that time? How does this motivate us to be good witnesses today?
5. What does it mean to you to repent and embrace righteousness?
6. Having become flesh, God understands our human plight, so we can never say to Him, *but Lord you do not understand*.... So, how can this affect your prayer life?
7. For Christ to be in you, you must yield all of your rights and will to Him. So, how can you start to implement this more fully in your life?
8. What can you do to be better at knowing and showing that Jesus is supreme in you?
9. Are you willing to sacrifice or at the very least be diligent to find Christ, to serve Christ and to worship Christ?
10. We are called to obedience in our hearts, minds, and actions! Moreover, this does take an extreme stand!
11. Have you heard His call, and have you responded to it? Have you made a stand?
12. Are you showing true acceptance of Jesus as your Lord? You can know this by.... (Luke 6:46)?