

"A MAN SENT FROM GOD"
John 1:6-8; Isaiah 40:3

Intro: Some seven to eight hundred years before the Lord Jesus Christ was born, the prophet Isaiah of one who was coming, and he described him in these words:

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness,
Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in
the desert a highway for our God (Isa. 40:3).

That verse is recorded in all four of the Gospels, and applied to John the Baptist.

This is what Matthew had to say. You will find his words in Matt. 3:1-3:

In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in
the wilderness of Judaea,
And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven
is at hand.

For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet
Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the
wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make
his paths straight.

In Mark's Gospel it is recorded in combination with Malachi 3:1, and it reads like this:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the
Son of God;
As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send
my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare
thy way before thee.
The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Pre-
pare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths
straight.
John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach
the baptism of repentance for the remission of
sins (Mark 1:1-4).

Luke gave the fullest account, quoting Isa. 40:3-5, after he had given the historical setting for John the Baptist's ministry. Listen to his words which we find in Luke 3:1-6:

Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberi-
us Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of
Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and
his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and of the
region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch
of Abilene,
Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the
word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias
in the wilderness.
And he came into all the country about Jordan,
preaching the baptism of repentance for the re-

mission of sins;

As it is written in the book of the words of
Esaias the prophet, saying, The voice of one
crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of
the Lord, make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain
and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked
shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall
be made smooth;

And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

The record found in John's Gospel is unique for a couple of reasons. First, for the very fact that it is found in the Gospel of John. John did not ordinarily include facts which were given in the Synoptics. The second reason is that he recorded the words from Isaiah as words which John the Baptist claimed as predictive of himself. Listen to John 1:19-24:

And this is the record [the testimony] of John
[the Baptist], when the Jews sent priests and
Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou?
And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed,
I am not the Christ.

And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias?

And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet?

And he answered, No.

Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we
may give an answer to them that sent us. What
sayest thou of thyself?

He said, I am the voice of one crying in the
wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as
said the prophet Esaias.

And they which were sent were of the Pharisees.

When we put all four of these passages together, from four different writers, we can see that the Holy Spirit left no doubt but that Isaiah was speaking of the one whom they knew as John the Baptist. This attests to the importance of John's ministry in a way which could hardly be surpassed. Without doubt John the Baptist was a very important person in the plan of God for the coming of His Son into the world.

Earlier in John 1 the Apostle had inserted three verses which spoke particularly of John the Baptist, and this adds also to the importance of John and his ministry because these words are recorded along with what the Apostle was saying about the Lord Jesus Christ. All of these facts speak of the great significance of John's ministry in connection with the coming of the Messiah. His ministry was shorter than our Lord's. His ministry ended in martyrdom. But, nevertheless, it was a ministry which we cannot overlook. And as great as it was in

itself, its purpose was to exalt One Who was even greater, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Listen to what John had to say in words I have chosen as a part of my text for tonight:

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.
The same came for a witness, to bear witness of
the Light, that all men through him might be-
lieve.
He was not that Light, but was sent to bear wit-
ness of that Light (John 1:6-8).

I want to call your attention to the words,

I. "A MAN SENT FROM GOD" (John 1:6).

The word "sent" is a participle in the perfect tense. Leon Morris said in his commentary that the perfect points to the permanent nature of John's ministry. "He continues in the character of a man sent" (Morris, Leon, p. 89).

The Lord spoke of Himself in John 17:8 as One Whom the Father sent. We can understand that because He came from the Father in heaven, and came into the world. But we know that John, the Apostle, was not declaring the pre-existence of John the Baptist. What did John the Apostle mean to tell us by this expression.

Well, I think the quotation of Isa. 40:3 in all four Gospels answers that question for us. Isaiah predicted that he would come, and therefore the announcement was made that God was sending one who would prepare the way of the Lord. "A man sent from God" seems to me to be a declaration of fulfilled prophecy! God told Isaiah that he was coming; the Gospel writers bear witness that that prophecy was fulfilled when John the Baptist was born, and especially when he began his public ministry shortly before the Lord began His.

The word sent comes from the same root which gives us the word, apostle. John the Baptist was a man with a mission. His mission was given to him by God. He was "sent" by God to do what he actually did.

Where did he get his name?

I will deal with the birth of John in a later message, but let me get into that now just long enough to remind you where his name came from. When he was born, Zacharias and Elisabeth's relatives and neighbors thought that he ought to be named after his father, Zacharias. See Luke 1:57-59. But when the angel of the Lord appeared to Zacharias in the

temple (he was a priest), the angel told Zacharias that he would have a son, and that his name would be John (cf. Luke 1:13). And it was when Zacharias indicated that the baby's name would be John that the Lord gave back to Zacharias his ability to speak--which had been taken away because he did not believe the angel of the Lord.

John means, whom Jehovah has graciously given (Thayer, p. 310), or Jehovah is gracious. And so the very naming of John the Baptist signaled the grace of God in the coming of the Lord Jesus. He came as a manifestation of the grace of God.

But now, with so much being said about the birth of the son of Zacharias and Elisabeth, a birth predicted hundreds of years before and having its roots in the prophecy of Isaiah, the foundational prophecy of the OT, it is important that we do not make more of this birth than God intended. In our study of John the Baptist's life we are going to see that there were those who felt that he could be the Messiah. This grieved John, but it could hardly be avoided. God had spoken after a silence of about four hundred years! And the first step in breaking that silence was not the birth of the Messiah, but of His forerunner.

So the Apostle said two things about John the Baptist's ministry which we all need to understand--and so does everyone else who studies the phenomenal life of this man of God.

II. THE MINISTRY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST (John 1:7, 8).

A. John the Baptist came as a witness.

Interestingly the Greek word for witness is the word from which we get our English word, martyr. Lit. the first part of verse 7 should be translated simply, for witness. The emphasis is not upon what John was, but upon what he did. He came to bear testimony to Jesus Christ--a true witness. He was "to bear witness of the Light." And it is Jesus Christ Who is "the Light."

John the Baptist was not "sent from God" to draw attention to himself. It seems that he always hated it when people paid more attention to him than they did to the Lord. His mission was to point people, the people of the world, whether Jew or Gentile, to Christ, as he said in His ministry, "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Light is needed in darkness. During the day we don't have lights on in our homes (unless it happens to be a rainy, dark day). But we all turn on our lights at night. We will learn

more about light and darkness in our study of John the Baptist's life, but let me point out that this title for the Lord Jesus Christ, Who is the Light of the world, was given not only because the world is in darkness, but because when the Lord came it was a particularly dark time in the world's history. Heaven had been silent for approximately four hundred years. There were no new prophecies during that time, no new revelations from God. Israel was in bondage to Rome, and it meant suffering and persecution for them. But what was the worst of all was that the Gospel message had been neglected. Legalism had replaced grace. Salvation had become a matter of works. God had His elect who were still looking for the Messiah, but, all in all, the picture of Israel was one of great darkness.

So John was raised up to point to Him Who came as the Light of the world. And we are going to see how wonderfully he carried out that mission. And it was not just a testimony of his life (although that is absolutely essential), but it was to be a ministry of his tongue, his mouth, his lips. He was to declare with words the essential glory of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

But now let me mention the other thing that the Apostle John said about John the Baptist:

B. "He was not that Light."

John the Baptist never forgot this. He never pretended that he was the Light. He was always content to stand aside, in fact he gloried in doing so, in order that the focus of attention on His ministry might be upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

Later on in chapter 1 of John's Gospel we have an event which illustrates the fact that John the Baptist knew that "he was not that Light." I refer to John 1:35-37:

Again the next day after John stood, and two of his disciples;
And looking upon Jesus as he walked, he saith,
Behold the Lamb of God!
And the two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus.

And there is no evidence that John the Baptist objected at all to losing two of his disciples if they were going to follow the Lord Jesus. That was his ministry. That is why God sent him. That was his great joy and delight.

Verse 40 of John 1 tells us that one of those two disciples who left John to follow the Lord was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, and it is generally agreed that the other was the

Apostle John himself. Think of the fruit of John the Baptist's ministry. Andrew went to get his brother, Simon Peter, and it would be impossible to calculate the extent of his ministry as well as the ministry of the Apostle John.

Concl: Now, in spite of all that can be said about John the Baptist, let me say that it is not my purpose in bringing this series on his life to exalt him. Rather I want to do what John the Baptist would want, and certainly what God wants, and that is to exalt John the Baptist's LORD!

And may John be an example to us in our ministry today. Our world is a world of intense darkness also. People are trying to find out who they are, but with all of our psychology the darkness just deepens. The world needs a clear-cut testimony of Christ. There was only One Who was sufficient for human needs in John the Baptist's day, and only One in our day. His Name is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is still the only One Who can take away the sins of the people of the world. Let us be faithful in bearing witness to Him.

A PRIEST, HIS PRAYER, AND AN ANGEL

Luke 1:5-23

Intro: We are indebted to Luke for many details concerning the birth of John the Baptist, as well as the birth of our Lord, which are not contained in the other Gospel records. Luke is only mentioned in three verses in the New Testament: Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philemon 24. In the last verse his name appears as "Lucas" in the KJV. However, from the first few verses of the book of Acts and the first few verses of the Gospel of Luke, we know that the one who wrote the one, also wrote the other. And the traditional view concerning the one who wrote the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, as well as the Luke who is mentioned three times by the Apostle Paul, all are the same Luke, "the beloved physician," as Paul called him in Col. 4:14. This is not the place to try to produce the evidence that Luke, the doctor, wrote the Gospel of Luke, but I can say that those who have studied the Greek of the Gospel of Luke have identified many medical terms in the Gospel—which is evidence which points to Luke.

Just when Luke became a Christian, we do not know. It was probably some time after the Lord's ministry on earth. But we do know that Luke talked to many people who were eye witnesses, and compiled both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts for one man: Theophilus. And we don't know who he was. It seems that many details we would like to have are not given in order that we might not get sidetracked from the main message of these two, very important NT books.

First, let us note:

I. THE HISTORICAL SETTING (Luke 1:5).

It was "in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea." He was called Herod the Great; his son was Herod the Tetrarch. Herod the Great has been described as cruel and crafty. He was responsible for the death of many Jews, and those who survived lived in a constant state of fear as to what he might do next. It was a very dark hour in Israel's history. He was the one who had the boy babies killed in an attempt to do away with the one whom the wise men called, "the King of the Jews." Herod was evidently very jealous of his position over the Jews, was called "the king" by Matthew as well as by Luke, and was not going to run the risk of anyone taking the place he held to so tightly. He probably was ambitious to be the king over all of the people of Israel.

So it was a very dark time in Israel's history. And coupled with this was the solemn fact that there had been no new

revelation from God since the prophecy of Malachi had been written. That covered a period of approximately 400 years!

But, amazingly, the Messianic hope of the Jews had not died out. And we are told about Zacharias and Elizabeth in verse 6 of Luke 1. (Read.) Luke said three things about them:

- 1) "They were both righteous before God."
- 2) They both were "walking in all of the commandments and ordinances of the Lord."
- 3) They were "blameless."

This latter word was the word that Paul used to describe himself when he told the Philippians that in his unregenerate days, as far as the Law was concerned, he was "blameless." This does not mean perfect, but it means that these were people who lived up to the light they had. They sought to do that which was pleasing to God.

In the case of Zacharias and Elizabeth it appears that they were true believers. We cannot explain the fact that they were "righteous before God" in any other way.

So in a day when even for the Jews things were at a very low ebb spiritually, there were those who were waiting for the promised Messiah, people who were genuinely saved.

Many writers have pointed out that both Zacharias and Elizabeth had God-fearing people in their background, and this would have had to include their parents. We know this from the meaning of their names. Giving names to children was very important all through Bible times, and so the names of Zacharias and Elizabeth must not go unnoticed.

"Zacharias" means Jehovah remembers. It is the Greek form of the Hebrew, Zechariah. "Elizabeth" means God's oath, or it has also been translated, God is an oath. Both names pointed back to the Messianic hope which God had given to His people, an oath which God would not break, which He remembered, and which He was fully capable of keeping. Many tell us that it was the dream of many of the young women in Israel that they would be the mother of the promised Messiah.

But there is another detail about the historical setting of this time in the lives of Zacharias and Elizabeth which we need to notice.

Zacharias and Elizabeth had no child--and Jewish women considered this to be a disgrace. It evidently had been a matter of continual prayer by Zacharias and Elizabeth, but now they were so old that humanly speaking they could not have children. They probably had adjusted their thinking to the realization that God was not going to give them even one

child. But it is important to see that they had not turned them away from being faithful to the Lord--as we learn from verse 6. Nevertheless, it had to be the great sorrow of their lives. When Zacharias returned home after his service in Jerusalem, he had a wife to meet him, but no children.

But it is amazing, isn't it, how the Lord often prompts us to pray for the very request He intends to fulfill. And so, even though they probably were not praying for a child as they had prayed before, yet the Lord had not forgotten their prayers. When the angel Gabriel appeared to Zacharias, the first thing that he said was, "Fear not, Zacharias: **for thy prayer is heard.**" God's time had just come even though it too late according to human possibility.

But I am getting ahead of my story. Let us look at:

II. ZACHARIAS' PRIESTLY SERVICE.

If you are reading your Bible this year according to our schedule, and are up-to-date, you read this morning in 1 Chron. 24, verse 10, about the course of Abijah. That was the division of priests to which Zacharias belonged. Twice each year each division of priests would come to Jerusalem to officiate for two Sabbaths and the week between. And F. B. Meyer related in his book on John the Baptist that only once in a priest's life was he allowed to sprinkle incense on the altar of incense, and this was Zacharias' time. And it proved to be the Lord's appointed time to send Gabriel to appear to Zacharias with the wonderful news that he and Elizabeth were going to have a son. And not only that, Gabriel told Zacharias what the name of his son would be. He was to be called, John.

How the heart of old Zacharias must have started to beat with great joy with even the thought that he was to become a father. But as the angel went on, his amazement was only to increase.

Look with me at:

III. THE MESSAGE OF THE ANGEL (Luke 1:13-17).

In verse 14 we see that this son was not only to bring great joy and gladness to his parents, but that "many shall rejoice at his birth."

When in verse 15 the angel said that their sin would "be great in the sight of the Lord," he meant that their son John was to have a very important place in the fulfillment of the promises that God had given to the fathers of Israel. He was

going to be a key person in the unfolding story of redemption. We will see what that was to be in the verses which follow.

— He was not to derive his power from human means, but from the Holy Spirit. He would be filled, controlled, blessed, used by the Holy Spirit in carrying out a ministry which in their day would have been considered impossible. Remember Eph. 5:18.

Their son was to be a great evangelist. In that day the people of Israel felt that all you had to be in order to be a child of God was to be born of Jewish parents. Zacharias' son was going to be used by God to clear up that mistaken idea. He would turn "many" in Israel "to the Lord their God." He would preach repentance of sin, and faith in the One Who would come as the fulfillment of all of those priestly sacrifices. He would be the Lamb of God Who would take away the sins of the world. So John was going to have a ministry that had to do primarily with Israel, but it would go out from Israel to the uttermost parts of the earth.

Note "many shall rejoice at his birth," in verse 14, "and many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord," in verse 16. The nation of Israel was to experience a great awakening and shaken to its very foundation by the preaching of Zacharias' son John.

—

The Old Testament closed with a great prophecy. Let me read it to you. It is found in Mal. 4:5, 6;

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD:

And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.

Gabriel, directed by the Holy Spirit, took that passage, and applied it to John the Baptist, saying that the same spirit and power which made Elijah such a blessing in his day, would be seen in the ministry of John. That is not the only fulfillment of that prophecy, but it is a partial fulfillment. When the Lord read the Scriptures in Nazareth, he selected a passage from Isa. 61 in which he called that day, "the acceptable year of the Lord," but not the introduction to "the great and dreadful day of the Lord." But we are introduced here to the idea of looking for similarities between the ministry of Elijah, and the ministry of John the Baptist.

—

But I want you to be sure to notice what the angel Gabriel, quoting from Malachi's prophecy, had to say about fathers and

their children. John the Baptist would "turn the hearts of the fathers to the children," i.e., to their children, "and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just."

This statement tells us two things about the generation into which John was born, and the generation into which our Lord would be born:

- 1) There had been a serious breakdown of the home. Fathers, who were responsible for the spiritual instruction and spiritual care of their children, had failed to do what God intended for them to do. As a result of John's ministry there would be an awakening especially among fathers, and their hearts would be turned toward their children.
- 2) What is "the wisdom of the just"? It has to be the Word of God. It can't be anything else. Maybe there is a special emphasis here upon the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. But actually no part of the Word could be excluded from this title: "The wisdom of the just."

I know I can't adequately describe how Zacharias must have felt as he received this message. It would have brought great joy to him and to Elizabeth just to have a son, but to have a son such as the angel Gabriel was talking about, was beyond anything that they had ever had in mind in those days when they had prayed so constantly and fervently for a son.

But I must mention one more point before I close. It is:

IV. ZACHARIAS' UNBELIEF (Luke 1:18-23).

Suddenly Zacharias returned to reality. He remembered how old he was, and he remember how old Elizabeth was, and so he asked the angel, HOW?

There is an important lesson for all of us in this. When God promises that He is going to do something, what we need to do is to believe it, not feel that we need to know HOW He is going to do it.

I love Gabriel's answer. Read it in verse 19. (Read.)

I would be the last one to condemn Zacharias for his unbelief because I have been like he was more than I like to remember. He had to remember that the things which are impossible with men are not impossible with God. God waited too long (from a human standpoint) with Abraham and Sarah, but still they had a son: Isaac. God can remove every hindrance that stands in the way of any promise He has ever made, and He intentionally often waits until it is too late from our perspective so that we will know when the blessing comes that it had to be the

Lord Who gave it.

Concl: Zacharias came out from the presence of the angel Gabriel, and from the presence of the Lord, unable to speak! That would be a great handicap to him. But how long would it last? Just until God did what He told Gabriel to tell Zacharias that He would do.

What an illustration this was for Zacharias and Elizabeth of the word that the Lord gave to the people of Israel long before Gabriel came to the Temple to speak to Zacharias. I am thinking about Jer. 33:3:

Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not.

God may have us wait, as He made Zacharias and Elizabeth wait, and our prayers may not have to do with as great an issue as God had in mind for them, but God is faithful. He stands behind His promises which He has confirmed with an oath. And He remembers us, He remembers His Word, and He remembers our prayers. So may the story of THE PRIEST, HIS PRAYER, AND THE ANGEL give us encouragement tonight as we consider God's ways with us.

"HIS NAME IS JOHN"

Luke 1:57-80

Intro: Six months after Zacharias' wife, Elisabeth, conceived, the same angel appeared to her cousin Mary (see v. 36). The Greek word translated cousin simply means a blood relative, without specifying what the actual relationship was. Gabriel came to tell Mary that she was going to have a Child. The Child would not be conceived through Joseph to whom she was engaged to be married, but through the Holy Spirit. And Mary's Child was to be the Son of God (see v. 35).

Shortly after this Mary went to visit Elisabeth, and when Elisabeth heard Mary's greeting, her child leaped within her and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Elisabeth then pronounced a blessing upon Mary, declaring her faith that Mary's child would be the Son of God. And then Mary gave her Magnificat.

Mary stayed with Elisabeth for about three months, and then left shortly before Elisabeth's child was born. That brings us up to our text for this evening: Luke 1:57, and on to the end of the chapter. The verses which follow can be divided into four parts:

- I. THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST (Luke 1:57, 58).
- II. THE CIRCUMCISION AND NAMING OF JOHN THE BAPTIST (Luke 1:59-64).
- III. THE FEAR AND AMAZEMENT OF THE PEOPLE (Luke 1:65, 66).
- IV. THE PROPHECY OF ZACHARIAS (Luke 1:67-80).

Let us now consider the account which the Holy Spirit has given us through Luke, beginning with verse 57 of Luke 1.

The first point is:

- I. THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST (Luke 1:57, 58).

All of her neighbors and relatives rejoiced with her, but they apparently did not recognize in the birth of Elisabeth's child any more than that the Lord had "shewed great mercy upon her." It was as Elisabeth had said in verse 25.
(Read.)

Note: This was a case of fulfilled prophecy. She not only had a child (which in itself was miraculous), but she had a son! God is faithful to His Word, and is able to overcome any and all obstacles to carry out His purposes.

- II. THE CIRCUMCISION AND NAMING OF JOHN THE BAPTIST (Luke 1:59-64).

I am speaking of him as John the Baptist, but at this point he had not been named.

The rite of circumcision was more than a ritual to Zacharias and Elisabeth who, as we have seen, were both believers. The circumcision of their son was a solemn reminder of the covenant made long before with Abraham, and which to them was an expression of their faith in the promised Messiah and Redeemer--Whom they knew to be the Child Who would be born of Mary. At the same time Zacharias and Elisabeth were dedicating their child to the Lord to show their gratitude to God, and their thanksgiving for the blessing they had received. And there was in this a commitment on the part of the parents that their child would live in submission to the Word of God. According to Alfred Edersheim, there may have been a prayer similar to the prayer which is prayed today at the circumcision of boy babies calling upon the parents to raise him for God, and requiring the father to "rejoice in the issue of his loins, and his mother in the fruit of her womb" (I, 157, 158).

The ceremony went along as expected with all solemnity until the priest in charge said something like this: "Our God, and the God of our fathers, raise up this child to his father and more, and let his name be called in Israel, Zacharias, the son of Zacharias" (Edersheim, I, 157).

At this point Elisabeth really did something which probably no one in the group had ever seen. She interrupted the proceedings with the words we find in Luke 1:60. (Read.) The people would have been amazed and, possibly, a little ashamed for Elisabeth--and maybe even apologetic. Some may have felt that this was due to Elisabeth's age, that she would behave in such a manner. Only Zacharias could bring order back into the ceremony.

He, of course, could not speak. So when they asked him what the child's name should be, they gave him a writing tablet and he wrote, **"His name is John."** This is what the angel had told Zacharias nine months before when he appeared to Zacharias in the temple. And so we see in this a special act of obedience to the Lord on the part of Zacharias and Elisabeth, Elisabeth having been informed of this by her husband. She herself had not been told.

We have here further evidence of the godliness of this couple, as stated in Luke 1:6. (Read.) Undoubtedly Zacharias would have delighted in giving his son his own name, but instead his was careful to obey God.

At that moment his mouth was opened, and his first words were

words of praise to God. In commenting upon this Edersheim said,

For, forthwith the tongue of the dumb was loosed, and he, who could not not utter the name of the child, now burst into praise of the name of the Lord. His last words had been those of unbelief, his first were those of praise; his last words had been a question of doubt, his first were a hymn of assurance (I, 158).

The next thing we read about is:

III. THE FEAR AND AMAZEMENT OF THE PEOPLE (Luke 1:65, 66).

For Zacharias suddenly to be able to speak, in addition to the naming of his child, and the fact that they could have had a child at all, were almost too much for the people. The news of his event spread like wildfire throughout the whole area, and it was the subject of conversation for a long time. They said, "What manner of child shall this be!"

However, it does not seem that the prophecy of Zacharias was long in coming. He had had a little over nine months to consider what the angel Gabriel had said to him. We must assume that he had confessed his unbelief to the Lord, and had been cleansed and restored to fellowship. He also knew just exactly what he wanted his first words to be when he was able to speak again.

And so let us consider:

IV. THE PROPHECY OF ZACHARIAS (Luke 1:67-80).

The prophecy of Zacharias has two parts. Verses 67 through 75 give us the first part; verses 76 through 79 give us the second part. The first part is spoken to "the Lord God of Israel"; the second part is spoken to his infant son, John. It is clear that even in the heart of Zacharias the Son of Mary was to be greater than his son, John. And the note sounded in Zacharias' prophecy was the keynote of all of John the Baptist's ministry: "I am not the Christ"; "I am not worthy to unloose His shoes"; "He must increase, but I must decrease." So, even as a child John would have known that Mary's Son was infinitely greater than he was. And it is a clear indication of the strength of Zacharias' faith that at the very moment when he would have been rejoicing in the birth of his own son, he rejoiced even more in the approaching birth of Mary's Son, the Son of God!

Notice with me the main parts of His prophecy.

A. Concerning the Redeemer (Luke 1:68-75).

Zacharias was speaking by the Holy Spirit, and so we have in his prophecy a true word from God. And there were at least two people in Israel at this time who knew what God was doing: Zacharias and Elisabeth. Their understanding may have even been greater than Joseph and Mary.

Zacharias was overjoyed at the realization that the One for Whom the prophets had been looking "since the world began" was at last coming into the world. In verse 68 we see that Zacharias believed that God had come, had visited His people, and His purpose was to redeem, to ransom, to pay the price necessary for their redemption.

In verse 69 he spoke of our Lord as "an horn of salvation." This is not a horn that you would blow, but the horn of an animal. Thayer made this comment:

Since animals (esp. bulls) defend themselves with their horns, the horn with the Hebrews (and other nations) is a symbol of strength and courage (p. 344).

He was speaking of our Lord, the Messiah, as "the author of deliverance" (Ibid.). And it is clear that Zacharias was looking not only for salvation from sin, but salvation from their enemies--a part of the Messiah's work which is yet to come. As "an horn of salvation," the Messiah was fully qualified to see that His work was carried out completely.

From verse 70 on Zacharias was praising the Lord for His faithfulness to His word, citing deliverance from their enemies, but also "the mercy promised to our fathers" which had to do with salvation from sin, and on down through verse 75 where it is very clear that Zacharias was not just thinking about deliverance from Rome or any other enemy, but deliverance from sin!

After praising God for all that was taking place in those days, he turned to speak to the baby John.

B. Concerning John (Luke 1:76-79).

Imagine the priest, Zacharias, speaking for the first time in nine months, and directing his comments to a baby not two weeks old.

The Lord Jesus is called in verse 76, "the Highest." This is a recognition of His absolute Deity.

The baby John's ministry when he became a man was to preach the Gospel so that people could receive the forgiveness of

sins---a message that had all but died out in that day. People heard plenty about the Law, but knew practically nothing about grace and about "the tender mercy of our God" (v. 78). The Lord is given another name in this verse. He is called "the dayspring from on high." This means that He was like the rising of the sun at the beginning of the day, dispelling the darkness and turning people away from the shadow of death.

And all of this saving ministry of the Messiah, which was to be preached by John the Baptist, would bring the "feet" of the people of God "into the way of peace."

Concl: Just in going over these verses it is easy to sense the excitement with which Zacharias spoke as he realized what God was doing in their day. It is apparent that Zacharias could hardly contain himself, realizing that he was the father of the one who would prepare the way of the Lord.

But there would still be a delay. The Messiah was not yet born. John had to grow to manhood, and the same was true of Mary's Son. But verse 80 tells us what was taking place in the days that followed as far as the baby John was concerned:

- 1) Physically, he "grew," grew to manhood.
- 2) Spiritually, he "waxed strong in spirit." God worked in his heart during those first thirty years of his life preparing him for the ministry that was to be his.

And all of this was in preparation for the time "of his shewing unto Israel." The word "shewing" is a word which might be used of the inauguration of a President. Only in John's case we see that he did this for himself as the word of the Lord came to him. Cf. Luke 3:1ff.

When many had given up hope, God had a remnant who were expecting the Messiah to come. Things had been quiet for almost a hundred years. But at that time it was apparent that God was working, that He had not forgotten His promises nor His people. And Zacharias, for one, was overjoyed as he contemplated what God was doing, and that his son was to have such a vital part in the Messiah's ministry.

Such should be our assurance as we wait for the Lord's return.

THE INAUGURATION OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Luke 3:1-6

Intro: Those of you who were here last Sunday night may remember that in the last verse of Luke 1 we have these words describing John the Baptist:

And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit,
and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing
unto Israel (Luke 1:80).

We do not know as much about the first thirty years of the life of John the Baptist as we do about our Lord's first thirty years. As far as the Lord is concerned we know about His trip to Jerusalem when He was twelve years of age, but we don't even know that much about John the Baptist. We can be sure that at the time mentioned in Luke 3:1, both Zacharias and Elisabeth, John's parents, were "with the Lord." They did not get to see how greatly God would use their son. But we know that the years they had with their son were years of the greatest joy it would be possible to have with a child. Luke says that John "was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel."

That "shewing" was his inauguration day. It was not a special holiday set aside by the Jews. And it surely was not a day which the Roman government had set up. John the Baptist proclaimed his own inauguration, but the time was set by the Lord, not by John. The inauguration of this last of the OT prophets did not even take place at the Temple in Jerusalem, nor at any other place in Jerusalem. It took place in country around Jordan. It was not the preparations made by man which made this an outstanding event (for there were none); it was the fact that God was at work. God's time had arrived for the preparations to be made for a far greater prophet than John, the ministry of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

We ought to see in this that the preparations which men make today for something which they hope is going to be a mighty work of God, is not really necessary if the Lord is at work. And we are going to see that this event marked the beginning of a ministry that has to be recognized as one of the greatest works of God of all time. The time for John's "shewing unto Israel" had come!

In the verses I have chosen for my text tonight we have three things:

- 1) The historical setting (vv. 1, 2a).
- 2) The coming of the Word of God to John (v. 2b).
- 3) The preaching of John the Baptist (vv. 3-6).

But let us look, first, at:

I. THE HISTORICAL SETTING (Luke 1:1, 2a).

You will notice that Luke's record covers:

- 1) The Caesar who was in power at the time.
- 2) The tetrarchs who had been appointed by Rome over Israel.
- 3) The high priests who were in Israel at the time.

Hundreds of pages have been written describing the conditions in Israel at the time. It was truly a sad time for Israel. The Jews were in bondage to Rome, and suffered continually from their oppressors--some being worse than others. But none of it was good.

As far as the Jewish leaders were concerned, we recognize the names of Annas and Caiaphas as the priests before whom the Lord Jesus was taken after His arrest. They, along with the scribes, Pharisees, elders, and Sadducees, were not sympathetic in any way either to the ministry of John, not to the ministry of the Lord Jesus. Politically and spiritually things were very bad for the people of Israel.

It is not possible for us to know how many Jewish people remembered, or had even heard about, Zacharias and Elizabeth. Undoubtedly there were some, but it is clear that both John and our Lord spent their first thirty years in relative obscurity. It looked like things were going to go on forever like they had been as far as the people of Israel were concerned. However, as Edersheim pointed out, there could hardly have been a more fit time for the forerunner of our Lord to begin his ministry than in the time when he came.

Now look with me at the last part of verse 2 where we are told about:

II. THE COMING OF THE WORD OF GOD TO JOHN (Luke 1:2b).

This is a statement similar to what we read concerning Zacharias in Luke 1:67.

It is clearly a statement which was used over and over in the OT to designate a man as a true prophet of God. Cf. Jer. 1:1, 2; 2:1; Ezek. 1:3; Hosea 1:1, 2; Jonah 1:1; Micah 1:1; Zeph. 1:1.

This means that John the Baptist's inauguration was from heaven. We are not told how the Word of the Lord came to him, but it came, and there was no doubt in John's mind concerning what God wanted him to do.

Now we are ready to look at:

III. THE PREACHING OF JOHN THE BAPTIST (Luke 3:3-6).

It seems to me that the coming of the Word of God to John the Baptist was slightly different from the call that was given to many of the OT prophets whose words we have considered. To be sure it was different from the message that came from God to Isaiah the prophet. Cf. Isa. 6:8-13.

As we shall see in a moment the Word of God to John the Baptist was, at least in part, the Word which had been given to Isaiah, not about his own ministry, but about one who would come preparing the way for the Lord. And so, perhaps, in some special way the revelation given to Isaiah about a future day was given at this time to John the Baptist in such a way that he knew it was his ministry that Isaiah had prophesied hundreds of years before. John came preaching a baptism in which people would confess their sins, and a baptism which pictures their cleansing from the sins.

Don't you wonder, as you read verse 3, if it were not the case in Israel in that day, that people were very reluctant to speak about sins, and the need for forgiveness. Whatever they heard along this line was certainly tied to the willingness of the religious leaders of the day to forgive their sins--and what they had to do to be sure that their sins were forgiven. But in the ministry of John we have a picture of the defiling character of sin, the humiliation that sinners need to feel because they are sinners, and the cleansing from their sins which only God could provide.

John preached against sin. He showed people their need. He revealed the true reason for God's displeasure with them. And somehow, at least as an encouragement to John himself, the prophecy of Isaiah played a part.

As we are going to see later, John was simply to be a "voice," or, more accurately, "**the** voice." He was to prepare the way for the Lord. There is no need to preach the forgiveness of sins if he could not preach the coming of the Lord.

The prophets frequently spoke in poetic, figurative, picturesque language. The language given to Isaiah, which had now been given to John, was such language. And in making the path of the Lord straight meant, as Matthew Henry pointed out, that through the preaching of John the Lord would use him to make people receptive to the Gospel so that they would welcome Christ. And we see this, don't we, in the ministry of the Lord? The common people heard Him gladly.

But this called for other things. It seems that God used those words about the land to describe the spiritual condition of the people of the land. Note how this fits right into the picture of what would happen.

— "Every valley shall be filled" — This was a time when, for many people, discouragement and depression were their constant experience from day to day. They had been inclined to give up hope, and to feel that things would never be any different or any better for them, for their children, or their children generation after generation. Comparatively speaking, there were not many who were looking for the Messiah. They had lost hope. The coming of the Lord Jesus Christ would fill in those valleys of depression and hopelessness so that once again faith would be restored in the hearts of many.

At the same time "every mountain and hill shall be brought low." While there were many in Israel who were depressed, there were others who were proud. They felt that they were the people of God just because they were Jews. They were the people who had need of nothing. They looked with scorn upon the Gentiles because they were not Jews. They had to be humbled. They had to see that "God resisteth the proud," but that "He giveth grace to the humble." They needed to see that pride was the sin of their hearts, and that they would never see the blessing of God until they saw their nothingness, and repented of their sin, calling out for salvation.

"The crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth." This probably speaks of the effect that sin had had in the lives of the people. It speaks of those obstacles which stood in the way of their blessing. It was through the preaching of John the Baptist that they would hear about the One Who could make all things new. They would hear the true Gospel message of how God can change hearts.

And then the last thing that we read from Isaiah's prophecy was that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

There is much in the OT to show that God never intended that salvation would just be for the Jews, just for the people of Israel. It was to come to them first, and then they were to carry this wonderful message of a Savior and his salvation to "all flesh"—to all nations, to Gentiles as well as to Jews. As the Lord would tell them later, they were to preach the Gospel to every creature. But this verse is more than just a statement of God's purpose. This is a prophecy that from all nations there would be those who would believe the Gospel, and be saved.

Concl: John the Baptist was not given the privilege of a long ministry. Just how long it was, we cannot say-- but it could have been a very short time. But it was a very rich ministry, a very fruitful ministry. He saw God doing a work which most people never expected that they would see. God had not forgotten His Word to Isaiah. Isaiah didn't have the kind of a ministry which he wrote about in the fortieth chapter of his prophecy. But John the Baptist did. He was the one under whom the Gospel was restored. He ministered hope to the people of Israel. It was through his ministry that God moved upon the hearts of the people at this low period in their national life as he pointed the sinners of his day to "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world."

This was a time when God was reviving his truth. And it ought to be an encouragement to us to see how God worked then. The times we live in are very similar. People are not interested in the Gospel. They don't want to hear about salvation. Many are enjoying life as they have it. They have their possessions and their pleasures, and never give a thought to life after death. Others who don't have enough feel that they would really be happy if only they had more than they have. But both are wrong. These are the attitudes of people who are blinded to their real needs, and blinded to the truth of God. But God can lift up those who are down so far that they have lost all hope. And He can humble those who are so lifted up in themselves that they don't realize that their greatest need has never been met. God can remove any obstacle which man sets up, and He can reach the people which seem to us to be unreachable. You have in the Gospels examples of all kinds.

One great secret of John the Baptist's ministry is that God called him to be just a voice, and he was content to be just a voice. He was not out to make a name for himself, but he wanted people to hear about that Name which is above every name.

But let us remember that the blessing which John the Baptist saw was blessing which came from spreading the Word of God. The Gospel is still the power of God unto salvation. We must preach it, believing that through the Word God's purposes will be accomplished. The Word never returns to Him void.

AN OLD FASHIONED PREACHER

Luke 3:7-18

Intro: It is clear from Scripture that the prophets of the OT and the apostles of the NT, were men who stood against the prevailing trend of the times. And I am speaking about the trend among those who professed to be the people of God. The professing people of God have always been inclined to follow the ways of the world. It was that way among the Israelites in the OT; it is easy to see that worldliness was a problem in the NT church. But, in such times as these, God has raised up men who did not go along with the flow of the current--and many of them paid for their stand with their lives.

John the Baptist was such a man. He was a prophet of God (which means that he was a preacher). But it means more than that. The place of John in history was clearly portrayed by the Apostle John, when in speaking of John the Baptist, he said, "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John" (John 1:6). John the Baptist had a very powerful and influential ministry, but it was a short ministry. He was beheaded because of his stand for the truth. He spoke out when others either did not know enough to speak out, or were afraid to speak out.

But what about his preaching?

In the passage which I have chosen as my text for tonight we have an excellent sample of the kind of preaching which he did. It was old fashioned preaching even in his day. He was likened to Elijah by the Spirit of God, and in many respects he was like Elijah. Elijah was one who stood against the popular trends in his day. John the Baptist was certainly unique among preachers. And he was preparing the way for our Lord who also exposed the evils of His day, and pointed the way to eternal life.

I want to take this passage, Luke 3:7-18, and point out the main characteristics of John's preaching. It shook the nation of Israel to its very roots in his day because it was so different from what they were used to hearing. But John wasn't just trying to be different. His purpose was to preach the truth. His object was to please God. And his desire to please God was so strong that it made no difference to him whether people agreed with him or not.

I see five outstanding, old fashioned characteristics of John the Baptist's preaching in these verses. The first is:

I. HE BELIEVED THAT PEOPLE WERE SINNERS (Luke 3:7).

I am referring to the way he addressed many of the people who came to him to be baptized--perhaps most of the people. Note what he said: "O generation of vipers."

— This was just as if he had said, "Oh, you offspring of vipers." So what he said was a term of reproach about their parents. Who gives birth to a viper but vipers? And who gave birth to those vipers but other vipers? And when the vipers to whom he was speaking had children, what would their children be? VIPERS!

What is a viper? It is a poisonous snake. It is the kind of a snake which attached itself to the Apostle Paul in Acts 28:3. The people who stood around were familiar with vipers, and the fully expected that Paul would drop dead in a matter of minutes, or seconds.

John the Baptist used this expression to describe the wickedness of men. And he was in good company in using this expression because the Lord Jesus used this same expression in His preaching. See Matt. 12:34 and 23:33. This describes the nature of man.

— The dangerous part about a viper is its mouth. We learn that when Satan used a serpent to accomplish his deadly purpose when he tempted Eve. The Bible has a great deal to say by way of condemnation of men's mouths. In fact, the Lord said that it is not what goes into a man's mouth that defiles him, but what comes out--because what comes out comes from his heart and defiles him and everyone around him.

We had these words in our SS lesson this morning where Paul was establishing the fact that people are sinners:

 Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their
 tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps
 is under their lips:
 Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness
 (Rom. 3:13-14).

What is an "asp"? It is another word for a viper--a venomous snake.

— You can see that John the Baptist not only believed that men are sinners, but he believed in original sin. Vipers give birth to vipers, and on and on it goes generation after generation. And humanly speaking there is no hope that a viper can ever be anything else but a viper. He goes through life influencing others in a evil way. Only Christ can make a human viper into a child of God.

What else did John the Baptist believe?

II. HE BELIEVED THAT GOD WAS GOING TO JUDGE SINNERS (Luke 3:7b, 9, 17).

And he seemed to indicate in the question he asked the people who were coming to him, "Who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

Most people probably believe that sometime there is going to be a judgment, but they often have mistaken ideas about how to escape that judgment. And one thing that countless numbers of people take refuge in is a ritual, or rituals, of some kind--like baptism! That is not what John the Baptist was preaching. Or they took refuge in the fact that physically they were the descendants of Abraham. John the Baptist did not preach that either. Look at what he said about being children of Abraham in verse 8.

What did John preach?

III. HE PREACHED REPENTANCE AND FAITH (Luke 3:8).

Luke does not give us a full account here of the preaching of John the Baptist, but the Apostle John did in John 1:29 when he said that this was John the Baptist's message: "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world."

John preached that there had to be a turning away from sin, a repentance concerning sin, and faith in the coming Messiah. And this was the only hope that he held out for sinners, whether they were Jews or Gentiles.

But the main part of this passage is given over to another great, but neglected, truth. And it has never been more neglected than it is today. This is what I have in mind:

IV. HE BELIEVED THAT TRUE SALVATION WOULD RESULT IN A CHANGED LIFE (Luke 3:10-14).

After John rebuked them so severely, they asked him, "What shall we do then?" What are "the fruits worthy of repentance," that is, fruits which show that your repentance is real, and therefore your salvation is real.

In turn John answered:

- A. The people (vv. 10, 11).
- B. The publicans (vv. 12, 13).
- C. The soldiers (v. 14).

These are evidently samples of what he told the people. He was not telling them what they needed to do in order to be saved, but what they would do as evidence that they were saved.

John the Baptist believed that you could not be saved and keep on living like you lived before. You would live righteously. You would want to please God. You would be like Zacchaeus who not only wanted to be different in the future, but he wanted to make amends, as far as possible, for the evil that he had done.

John the Baptist would have heartily agreed with the Apostle Paul when he wrote those words we find in 2 Cor. 5:17. If a person is not changed, he or she is not saved! It is as simple as that. We don't change to be saved, but, when we are saved, we will change. The Lord doesn't save us and let us go on living like we did before. How this needs to be emphasized today.

But let me get to my last point:

V. HE SOUGHT TO GLORIFY ONLY THE LORD JESUS CHRIST (Luke 3: 15-18).

God was using John in a great way. People were coming to him from everywhere in Israel to hear him preach, and to be baptized. And over the time some began to wonder if he might not be the Messiah himself. In fact, it seems from verse 15 that the general feeling among the people was that he was the Messiah. We will get to a passage later where this issue came up very strongly.

But here we see that right from the very beginning of John's ministry he absolutely refused to let people think that. He refused to take any glory to himself for what God was doing in the hearts of the people. Instead, he exalted the Lord! Look at the middle of verse 16. (Read.)

This was one of the main characteristics of John the Baptist's ministry--or perhaps I should say there were two: He humbled himself, and he exalted the Lord. He refused to become a celebrity. He refused to let people think that he was more than he was--just a sinner saved by grace.

Concl: Now, as we examine the Lord's work in our day, are we old fashioned in our ministry? Are we afraid to talk to people about sin, original sin, and how it is sin that is responsible for all of the ills of our day?

Do we tell people as preachers used to tell their hearers

that there is a hell to be avoided, and a heaven to be gained? Are we mainly concerned that people make a decision to receive Christ, but fail to see evidence of repentance and faith in Christ and of changed lives? I wish I had kept a record of how many times I have asked people what a Christian is and have them say nothing about Christ. And people will cling to a decision that their children made when they were young when they can see no evidence at all that they have been changed, made new, regenerated by the power of God.

And what about all of the methods that are being used today to get people to come to church? Do you see one bit of evidence in Scripture that that is what the prophets did, or the apostles did? Do you find any teaching in Scripture that this is how we are to reach people? We are more concerned today about entertaining than we are teaching. We are more concerned that people feel good than that they know that they have passed from death unto life.

And are we concerned about exalting the Lord Jesus Christ?

I conducted a memorial service a couple of weeks ago at Hinson Memorial Baptist Church. As I walked up to the pulpit I notice that right there when pastors would place their Bibles was a brass plate with these words of Scripture inscribed on it: "Sir, we would see Jesus." As I stood there and looked at that, I said to myself, "That is true for a memorial service as well as for a Sunday message. That is just as necessary on Monday as it is on Sunday. It is Jesus that people need to see, not physically, but as He is set forth so perfectly in the Word of God. We need to stay out of the way so people can turn their minds and their hearts to our beloved Savior.

Oh, may it always be true that when people come to Trinity Bible Church, they are going to hear about the Lord, and see Him in the Word, and find their hearts drawn to Him by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I tell you that I want to be an old fashioned preacher, and I want us to be an old fashioned church. Let us follow in the steps of the OT prophets and the NT apostles, and that long line of faithful people of God throughout the years in nations around the world who have had one main object in life: to glorify the Lord. Let's be true to the Word, and true to our wonderful Lord.

THE WITNESS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Part 1

John 1:6-18

Intro: The ministry of John the Baptist was specifically a ministry of witnessing. That is brought out in the following verses: 7 (2x), 8, 15, 19, 32, 34. And in this entire passage (from verse 6 to 37 we have the content of his witness. In this word is the idea of giving out a testimony rather than holding it back. It also sometimes, as in the case of John the Baptist, means to speak as from God, i.e., by divine revelation. And so John the Baptist was "a man sent from God" with a message from God. That message had to do primarily with the Lord Jesus Christ. He was a man sent from God with a message about the Son of God.

One commentator (Leon Morris, p. 90) has pointed out that there is a legal tone to a witness. It was like John the Baptist had been put on a witness stand to tell what he could about the Lord Jesus Christ. A witness seeks to establish the truth, and the Apostle John was firmly convinced that John the Baptist's testimony was true, or he never would have included it in his Gospel.

That same commentator has pointed out that a witness such as John the Baptist gave committed him to the One about Whom he was witnessing. John the Baptist could not be neutral after giving the testimony that he gave according to this first chapter of the Gospel of John. On the question, Was Jesus Christ the Son of God, the Messiah?, John the Baptist was firmly convinced that he was. And the result of that conviction was that he convinced others. A person who entertains any doubt about the character of Jesus of Nazareth will not spread conviction, but doubt and confusion.

So when we take all of this into consideration, we can see that the testimony of John the Baptist was a mighty, God-given witness which got our Lord's ministry off to the right start.

The first testimony that John the Baptist gave concerning our Lord was that He was:

I. THE LIGHT.

See vv. 4-9. And this is a theme which the Apostle John developed later on in his Gospel in chapters 8, 9, and 12. It was a very significant part of the ministry of our Lord to give light. But John the Baptist's testimony was to the effect that the Lord not only gave light, but that He was in Himself "the Light." That could not have been said about any

other prophet, or any other apostle, or any other servant of the Lord from that time to this. The Lord Jesus Christ is the only One Who can lay claim to that title. He is the Light of the world because the light will never be found in anyone else. And yet, because of the uniqueness of John the Baptist's ministry, there were those who were ready to declare that he was the Messiah. This ran contrary to every drop of blood in the John the Baptist's veins, and we see this in verse 8. (Read.) We will see it again later on in this chapter.

What is the purpose of light? Light reveals. Light dispels darkness--either in part or completely. Long before either John the Baptist or the Lord Jesus Christ was born, the prophet Isaiah made this prediction about the coming Messiah:

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined (Isa. 9:2).

There is no question but that when our Lord came to the earth, in spite of the revelations that God had given, there was heavy darkness in the world, spiritual darkness. And this was as true in Israel as it was in any other part of the world. It was practically impossible for people to learn the truth about salvation. Some knew the truth, and believed the truth, but they were the exception rather than the rule. Even the religious leaders of the day only added to the darkness and confusion which was so prevalent. And so into a world which is always dark regarding spiritual truth, but intensely dark at that time, God sent two men: one to bear witness to the other; the Other, Who was more than a man, was the Light. He was "the true Light" (v. 9).

Darkness stands for ignorance as well as for sin. Jesus Christ came into the world to make the truth known to the ignorant and to identify sin as sin. And to do this He was also the Light in another sense. The Apostle Paul was speaking of it when he wrote 2 Cor. 4:6:

For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

So Jesus Christ was the Light, the true Light, because He was the revelation of God.

But let us notice more about what the Apostle John wrote about John the Baptist.

John the Baptist's mission was evangelistic. He came as the first true Gospel preacher that Israel had had in a long

time. And his ministry was not limited to Israel, but was "that all men through him might believe." We know that it was not God's purpose to save everyone through the ministry of John the Baptist, but all kinds of men were to be saved! The Gospel had been intrusted to Israel, but it was never meant to be exclusively for Israel. But in the preaching of John the Baptist, and then in the ministry of the Lord Jesus, the true Gospel of the grace of God was revived. What a tremendously important witness John had.

But notice something which ought to be of special interest to us, and this evidently was a part of John the Baptist's preaching. I am referring to verse 9. What does this mean? Could this mean that because of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ there is some knowledge about Christ which has been communicated to every person so that even the most pagan have some idea concerning Christ? Could this not be a special incite that we have into the hearts of men through the Word that men themselves are not willing to admit? Is this not like the knowledge of God which all men have in their consciences as well as from creation itself? We get all exercised in our hearts because of people who, as we say, "have not heard," but has their been a wider spread of the truth through the coming of Jesus Christ than we would normally realize? Why is it that people who have never read the Bible, never gone to church, and perhaps do not even know a Christian, will use the Lord's Name when they get mad? And they don't have to be mad to use it. We hear it all of the time. It is not even censured from TV.

It was through John the Baptist that the Jews of his generation learned that they were sinners, and needed someone to take away their sins. They learned that it was not enough to be born a Jew; they needed to be "born of God." And all of this was made clear because God was speaking to the world through the One Who carried the name, "the Word."

However, we are also indebted to John the Baptist for showing us not only that the Lord Jesus Christ was "the glory of the only begotten of the Father," but that He was "full of grace and truth." See also verse 17. The revelation of God through His Son would strike terror to the heart of any man if it were not accompanied by "grace and truth"--"full of grace and truth." This would indicate an adequate supply for all sinners who would come to Christ for salvation. Salvation cannot be earned in any way; it is by grace, and grace alone—which opens the door for the worst of sinners. The Lord Jesus is not only Light, but He is the Truth. It is truth which never changes, but truth which was revived in the coming of Christ as announced by John the Baptist.

I take it that from verse 6 through verse 14 the Apostle John was referring to the witness, the basic witness, of John the Baptist. It is no wonder that people flocked to hear him. Most of them had never heard preaching like John the Baptist did, and yet what he preached was the Gospel God prepared before there ever was a world or a single sinner. There is so much here that we will never be able to exhaust it.

But let me go on to the second part of my text as we thing about the testimony of John the Baptist.

II. JOHN AND JESUS COMPARED BY JOHN (John 1:15-18).

I think we would have to understand the very high place John the Baptist had in the hearts of thousands of Jews in order to grasp the meaning of verse 15 properly. And the popularity of John the Baptist would have been a great temptation to himself if God had not had His hand upon him for his special ministry.

Notice that he spoke of the Lord twice as being "before" him. "Is preferred before me" means that although the Lord followed John, yet the Lord had moved into a place much greater than John's, and John was in no way to share the glory of Christ. The honor and dignity which the Father had placed upon His Son was much greater than John the Baptist had ever experienced, and it would always be that way.

But then John the Baptist said, "For He was before me." This is a different "before." This means that in time, place, and importance (according to Strong) the Lord Jesus Christ had always been ahead of John the Baptist. And when we remember that the Lord said that there never had been a prophet born of women who was greater than John the Baptist, as He did in Luke 7:28,

For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist...

we begin to see what it meant that our Lord was even greater!

But not only was our Lord greater than John the Baptist, but John the Baptist declared that we (speaking of the Lord's people) have all received of His fullness, with grace upon grace, but He is greater than Moses, and greater than any man who has ever lived because He has not only seen the Father, but He is the only begotten Son of the Father, the only One qualified to reveal to men the character of God.

This was all coming from John the Baptist. This was his witness. God was using John the Baptist to declare the truth, and we know from the life that John the Baptist lived

afterwards that no one could change him from the witness that he gave at the beginning. He reached a low ebb before he died, but we see his humanity in that. We would have had the same problem that he had. But it is encouraging to know that he never turned against the witness that he gave.

Concl: Now let me apply this to us, those of us who know the Lord. We, too, are witnesses. Cf. Acts 1:8. We are to bear testimony to the truth about Christ. We live in dark days. The message of the Gospel has been distorted in many different ways. It needs to be declared. It needs to be confirmed, and we need to be committed to it. We may never see what John the Baptist saw, but the message today is just as true, and just as powerful, as it was in John the Baptist's day. But one thing we must be very sure of. We must serve the Lord with the same humility which John did, refusing to take any of the glory to ourselves, but always pointing others to our supremely glorious Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

THE WITNESS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

John 1:19-37

Intro: It was inevitable that there would be opposition to the ministry of John the Baptist because of his great popularity and his success. Matthew tells us this:

Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea,
and all the region round about Jordan,
And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing
their sins (Matt. 3:5-6).

Here in our text we are told that "the Jews" in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to find out what claims John might be making for himself. It was both an attack and a temptation--an attack, because we know that those priests and Levites were not sincere in wanting to hear the message of John; a temptation, because John's devotion to his calling would have been tested by the success he had experienced. Many before him and after him have fallen before the pride of their own hearts in such a situation as John found himself here. The purpose of the mission was to get John's answer to the question:

I. "WHO ART THOU?" (John 1:19-24).

Notice that the question was repeated in verse 22, and it was clarified with the question at the end of that verse: "What sayest thou of thyself?" Luke tells us that some were feeling at least that there was a possibility that John might actually be the Messiah. See Luke 3:15:

And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not.

"The Jews," as I have mentioned before, is a term that was used of the leaders of the Jews, probably the Sanhedrin. They were very jealous of their power over the people of Israel, and very sensitive lest their relationship to Rome might be threatened by anyone who would cause a disturbance among the Jewish people. Therefore, John was being tested, and at the same time he was being attacked. Not long after he was put to death by Herod for a matter of lesser proportions than this. He must have realized the danger he was in.

The way the Apostle John stated his answer shows how clear he was in saying, "I am not the Christ." He made no pretense ever of claiming that he was the Messiah.

Could he be Elijah? "I am not." Was he the prophet which Moses spoke about in Deut. 18:15. John's answer was a solid, "No."

The delegation from Jerusalem had run out of suggestions, and so they asked John what he was claiming for himself. He responded with Isa. 40:3. (Read.)

John the Baptist preferred to remain an unnamed "voice" because that was his calling, and that was what he wanted to remain so that in no way would he divert attention from the Lord Jesus Himself. He was not the Messiah, but he had come to prepare the way for the Messiah. And so with this one statement from Scripture he sought to turn the focus of attention from himself to his Lord.

But John was doing something else which should have impressed the priests and Levites to whom he was speaking. He brought the Word of God into the conversation! But his questioners let that pass unnoticed even though there was a great "expectation" among the people, as we read a moment ago in Luke 3:15.

There never have been an abundance of men among the servants of the Lord who were content to be a voice. There is enough pride in our hearts that causes us to be tempted by a desire to be made known. While John was not the Messiah, he was related to the Messiah, but he did not even mention that! The humility of John was truly unique. That should have disarmed the men who had come to him. And then for the Scriptures to be introduced was another way for John to test the sincerity of the men who had come to him. So, while they were testing him, he was testing them.

But, as verse 19 tells us, "this is the record," the testimony, the witness, of John. He wanted to minister in such a way that people would start to look for the Lord.

However, the men who had come to him were not satisfied. They now asked John another question:

II. "WHY BAPTIZEST THOU THEN?" (John 1:26-28).

Again John deferred to the Lord. And we need to go back to the Gospel of Luke to pick up a verse here regarding the baptism of John. It is Luke 3:3:

And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

But John did not press the point of his baptism. We would think that these priests and Levites would have been thankful for anyone who was preaching repentance and causing people to seek the forgiveness of their sins. But that did not provoke any further conversation with the priests and Levites.

However, John pointed out that what he was doing, while extremely important, was important only because he was preparing the way for One Who was among them, Who was greater than He was, and for Whom John did not feel worthy to exercise the duties of a household servant. Some would have counted it a great honor to serve the Lord in that way, but not John! His heart was filled with a sense of his own unworthiness when being considered and compared with his Lord.

We all know that John's ministry was to be very short. He knew this, too. He probably had no idea how it would end, but he knew that his time in the public eye would not last long. But until the end came to his ministry, he was determined to show the surpassing greatness of the One he came to proclaim.

This, too, should have awakened some desire in the hearts of the men who had come to him. But there was no response. But if John were great in the eyes of the people, then what was the greatness of the Person Whom he felt unworthy to serve in the lowest possible way. But his questioners did not say, "Who is He?", or, "Where is He?" They evidently felt that they had the answers they wanted, and so the conversation came to an end.

How tragic it is when men can come so close to the Lord, and yet not be interested in Him! Those particular men could never stand before God and say that they had no opportunity to know the Lord and to be saved. God providentially had put them in the way, but they were oblivious to how critical that hour was for them. As I have said, they were trying John, not knowing that they were being tried in an entirely different way.

As we move on to verse 29 we come to another day. The testimony of John was becoming clearer. John at this point was positively identifying the Lord Jesus Christ.

III. CHRIST, "THE LAMB OF GOD" (John 1:29-37).

We can see here that John the Baptist was not preaching a Gospel of salvation by baptism. Baptism was the way in which people made known their repentance, confessing that they were sinners. But salvation would come through the Messiah, not just as God incarnate, but as "the Lamb of God."

This expression means, according to Leon Morris, the Lamb provided by God, or the Lamb belonging to God (p. 144). This expression is not used anywhere else in the NT although our Lord is called "the Lamb" more times in the book of the

Revelation of Jesus Christ than by any other title. It is clear that the Holy Spirit put this title in John's mouth. It was to become one of the most familiar titles of our Lord. And it was a title which would make the OT come to life with its emphasis upon animal sacrifices, such as, the Passover lamb, the continual burnt offering, and all of the other sacrifices that were offered by the Jews, although they often made their sacrifices without realizing what they were doing. All of those sacrifices were type; the Lord Jesus Christ came as the antitype, the fulfillment of the type. And John made it clear by this simple statement that there was no other way that sins could be removed and forgiven except through Christ, the Messiah.

John was proclaiming prophetically here the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, and he was indicating that His death would not be for His own sins, but for sinners' sins. And he was also preaching that "the Lamb of God" would take away the sins of Gentiles as well as Jews.

But John had also learned something else about the Lord Jesus Christ. He had been told that when in his baptizing One came to him upon Whom the Spirit of God would descend in the form of a dove, He would be the One Who would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

I want to spend an evening talking about the baptism of our Lord, but we anticipate that here in John's account as he briefly covered these events in the life of John the Baptist. And here we come to the crucial point in the testimony of John the Baptist. (Read verse 34.)

Now John the Baptist understood why in all of those OT sacrifices the animals used had to be "without blemish." They pictured the One Who would come, the Messiah, Who was nothing less than the Son of God. Only One as perfect as the Son of God, Who Himself was "without sin," would be an acceptable sacrifice to God. No animal could meet the need. And so God sent His Lamb, the One belonging to Him, the One provided by Him, who would die for the salvation of Jews and Gentiles in every generation wherever throughout the world they would believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. We will see this note in John's preaching as we come to John 3.

These two points, that the Lord Jesus was the Lamb of God Who had come to take away the sins of the world, and that He was the Son of God, were the main points in the testimony of John the Baptist.

The last point in our text is:

IV. THE TEACHING OF JOHN WITH HIS DISCIPLES (John 1:35-37).

One of these was Andrew. See v. 40. It is assumed that the other was the Apostle John. John the Baptist taught them that the Lord was the Lamb of God, and these two disciples left John the Baptist and became followers of the Lord.

This was probably one of the greatest tests of John's ministry. He had enjoyed these men. Perhaps he had seen them saved under his ministry. But when he pointed out the Lord to them, they left him to follow the Lord.

Concl: What more crowning honor could be placed upon a man than to have those who were under him, leave him, to follow the Lord? Doubtless this happened to many others who first heard the Gospel from the mouth of John the Baptist, followed John until the Lord came, and then they followed the Lord.

What an example John the Baptist set for all who would serve the Lord Jesus Christ! May we not miss the lessons. And may it please God to use us even in a small way in this day of spiritual darkness to point out the way of salvation to people as John did in his day. The message has not changed, nor has the Savior. He is still the only way to God and to glory.

BAPTISM AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

Matthew 3:13-17

Intro: In my last message on the life of John the Baptist (which was two weeks ago), we had the Apostle John's account of our Lord's baptism, and the sign that it was to John the Baptist. Let me read those verses again for you as we begin tonight. It seems that the Apostle John's account follows the baptism of our Lord, but in the latter part of this passage he tells how John the Baptist knew that it was the Lord, the Messiah.

The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.

This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me.

And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water.

And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him.

And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Spirit.

And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God (John 1:29-34).

Twice in this passage it is recorded that John the Baptist said, "I knew him not," speaking of our Lord. (See verses 31 and 33.) When we read our text in Matthew, it seems that John the Baptist at least sensed that there was something very superior about our Lord, and therefore at first refused to baptize Him. But the positive identification of the Lord was withheld from John the Baptist until our Lord was baptized, and was coming out of the water. Then it was, that John the Baptist knew that our Lord was the Son of God, the Messiah. The Apostle John did not mention the Father's voice as Matthew did. And perhaps it was mentioned by Matthew because it seems to complete the picture which Matthew was giving, as we will see in a moment.

And so turning to Matthew's account, let us note, first,

I. OUR LORD'S TRIP FROM GALILEE TO THE JORDAN RIVER (Matt. 3:13).

At this time the Lord's public ministry had not started. We might speak of His baptism as His inauguration into His ministry. Only the temptation of the Lord remained after our Lord's baptism before He began to minister publicly.

Matthew, by the wording of verse 13 makes it clear that our Lord's sole purpose in coming from Nazareth down to the Jordan River was to be baptized by John. Thus we can see that this was very important to the Lord.

But look at the next verse where we have:

II. JOHN THE BAPTIST'S REFUSAL TO BAPTIZE OUR LORD (Matt. 3:14).

The language which John the Baptist used here not only suggests a verbal refusal, but that he sought in some physical way to hinder the Lord from going down into the river to be baptized. And the wording here also suggests that it was not just a case where John only said what is recorded here in verse 14, but that he continued to refuse and to express his unwillingness to baptize the Lord.

John the Baptist did not yet have the positive identification that Jesus was the Son of God (because that happened as our Lord was coming out of the water), but there must have been something about the Lord that made John the Baptist know not only that the Lord had no reason to be baptized, but that John himself needed to be baptized by Jesus. According to the Apostle John's account, nothing was said to John about the Holy Spirit descending upon the Lord after baptism; only that at some point John would see this unusual event take place.

So this would mean that when John the Baptist said, "I knew him not," which is recorded twice in John's Gospel, he meant that the Messiah had not been positively identified to him.

Verse 15 gives us:

III. OUR LORD'S RESPONSE TO JOHN THE BAPTIST, AND THE BAPTISM (Matt. 3:15).

The Lord did not disagree with the point that John was making. But He indicated that for "now," temporarily, it had to be done. And the reason? It was not only perfectly fitting, but absolutely necessary if righteousness were to be fulfilled.

The mention of righteousness would have made John the Baptist know that what the Lord wanted to do had something to do with pleasing God, satisfying God, making things right in God's sight. And note the words, "fulfil all righteousness." This would mean that that which the Lord's wanted to do would complete, finish, satisfy, everything that was necessary for

the righteousness of God to be so satisfied that nothing else would be necessary.

And so John the Baptist baptized our Lord.

Now we come to:

IV. THE TWO EVENTS WHICH FOLLOWED OUR LORD'S BAPTISM (Matt. 3:16, 17).

A. The coming of the Holy Spirit (v. 16).

This was the sign that John the Baptist had been looking for. At this moment he was sure that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God.

B. The Father's voice from heaven (v. 17).

It is significant that this was spoken after the baptism, and not before. The Father declared Who Jesus was at that moment (and, of course, what He had been before), and that the Father was "well pleased" with His Son. These words of the Father can be translated to say that God continually finds all of His delight in His Son, i.e., that righteousness was fulfilled by what His Son had done.

Now for:

V. THE APPLICATION.

Let me point out in discussing the baptism of our Lord that we are not to understand from this that salvation is by water baptism. It is stated here that righteousness was fulfilled by what the Lord did, not by what John the Baptist did. John the Baptist never preached salvation by water baptism. The use of water in both the OT and the NT is always symbolic, not efficacious. If salvation were in any way dependent upon baptism, it could not be said to be completely a work of God, and so it could not be said to be by grace through faith. Salvation would have to be in part the result of our works. No, the important statement that is made by our Lord in this passage is,

Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.

The NKJV reads like this:

Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.

What was becoming, or fitting, or absolutely necessary? By John's own refusal he stated that the Lord should have done the baptizing, and he should have been the One Who was doing

the baptizing. He did not feel that the Lord had any sins to confess, any sins which needed to be forgiven. The Lord, as we noted, did not disagree with John about that. Instead, He said, "Let it be this way now." He meant, "Let me take your place now so that you, who needs to be baptized, can have my place."

What is pictured by baptism? We are told in verse 16 that the Lord "went up straightway out of the water." This means that He had gone down into the water, had been immersed, and came out of the water afterwards. Baptism by immersion pictures death, burial, and resurrection. This was the picture. It was necessary for our Lord to take John's place, die John's death, and be raised from the dead, in order for God's righteousness to be satisfied. The death and resurrection of our Lord was all that was required. With our Lord's death and resurrection, the work of salvation was completed.

And so we have here a wonderful illustration of the Gospel. We had this today in our SS lesson. Christ died, was buried, and rose again. And Paul made it very clear in 1 Cor. 15 that if the Lord had not died, been buried, and raised again, we would have no salvation. We would still be in our sins. But He did die. He was buried. He rose again, and all who are trusting in what He did will find that they are clothed in God's righteousness, fully accepted with God the Father.

Now I said a moment ago that it is important to see that the Holy Spirit descended on the Lord, and that the Father spoke from heaven, after the Lord was baptized. Remember that all of this is a picture, the Gospel simply illustrated as the Lord began His public ministry. The Holy Spirit was anointing the Lord for the completion of the work which had just been pictured, and the Father was declaring not only that the Lord was still His Son after the pictured death, but that His work was fully accepted, pleasing to God, for every person who would ever be saved.

This is why I believe so firmly that Biblical baptism can only be by immersion. Sprinkling or pouring does not picture death, burial, and resurrection. When we are baptized, is it to complete our salvation? Absolutely not! I believe every Christian should be baptized, but a person who trusts in Christ is saved whether or not he or she is ever baptized. But by baptism we are confessing our union with Christ in His death, in His burial, and in His resurrection. He died as our substitute. He took our place. He died the death we should have died. When He was buried, in God's sight we were buried with Him. And when He was raised, we were raised, and now in God's sight we are seated with Him in the heavenlies. This is the only salvation that has the approval of the Holy

Spirit. This is what the Spirit convicted us of, convinced us of, before we were saved. And the statement of God, the Father, in verse 17 is the statement we must have in order to be sure that our salvation is the true salvation. If God were not satisfied with the work of His Son, there would be no salvation. But the picture here in Matthew 3 gives us the assurance which is confirmed later on in the epistles. After the Lord was raised, He was still the spotless Son of God, approved by the Spirit, and fully accepted by the Father.

Concl: John the Baptist knew much before the Lord the Lord came to him that day, but afterwards he knew much more! He did not know, I am sure, how much he was saying when he said, "I have need to be baptized of thee," or by thee. John the Baptist was already saved, but it is important for anyone who is going to be saved not to come to the Lord to offer our works to Him. They are abominable to God. We come to receive from Him. We come to receive Him. And He does for us what we could never do for ourselves. By the shedding of His blood He has cleansed us from our sins, and we have become partakers of His life, life eternal.

And there is no other way to be saved. Christ saves sinners, saves us completely, and saves us eternally. And only He can save us because only He has satisfied the righteous demands of a holy God.

Our text tonight is a perfect illustration of 2 Cor. 5:21. Let me read it to you from the NKJV:

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

The important thing for us to make sure of is that our faith is in Christ, and in Him alone. Peter told the Jews in Jerusalem after the ascension of Christ, and it is still true tonight:

Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

Remember none of us is saved because we go to Trinity Bible Church. None of us is saved because our parents are believers. Each one of us must come to the Lord, and believe in Him, assured that His work on the Cross was sufficient for our salvation. The promise is that, if we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, we are saved. If you have never trusted the Lord in this way, come to Him now, and put your trust in Him.

"HE MUST INCREASE"**John 3:22-30**

— **Intro:** At this point in our Lord's ministry His baptism was past, and so was His temptation. He had obviously entered upon His public ministry. But at this point there were two who were baptizing. Looking ahead to John 4:1, 2 we learn that Jesus was baptizing more people than John was, although our Lord did not actually do the baptizing, but His disciples did the baptizing.

During this time a dispute arose over the proper means of purification. This dispute did not involve the Lord and those who were following Him, but it was a conflict between "the Jews" and John's disciples. Matthew Henry suggested in his commentary that these disciples of John were either very recent disciples, or immature in their understanding, or both. And so they entered into conflict with the "the Jews." Perhaps it was something like the situation which Mark described in Mark 7:1-8, 14-23. (Read.)

— It is apparent that spiritual truth was not clearly understood by very many people. John the Baptist certainly understood that his baptism was not a purification of sins, but this became a source of distress to his disciples, especially because more were going to the Lord than were going to him. So they left the controversy that they were involved in, and headed for John the Baptist because "the Jews" had probably questioned the continuation of John's baptism since more people were going to the Lord to be baptized than were going to him. John's disciples, evidently worried about the ministry and reputation of their master, went to John and said what we find recorded in John 3:26. (Read.)

John's disciples were at this point more devoted to their master than they were to the truth, and so John took this opportunity to minister to them.

Expositors seem to be divided as to where John's words end and where the Apostle John's comments begin. But it seems to me that John the Baptist's words continue on to the end of the chapter. The Lord willing, we will consider the remainder of the chapter (from verse 31 to 36) next Sunday night.

— Here we see the spiritual stature of John the Baptist (vv. 27 to 30), and we see also how a knowledge of the truth will keep us in peace when others are in turmoil, and seek to disturb us. From the words we read in John

3:27 we see:

I. JOHN'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD (John 4:27).

It seems that John was in a position similar to the one Paul faced with the Corinthian believers. Cf. 1 Cor. 4:6, 7:

6 And these things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself and to Apollos for your sakes; that ye might learn in us not to think of men above that which is written, that no one of you be puffed up for one against another.

7 For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?

The church at Corinth was divided in four ways: Paul, Apollos, Peter, and Christ. But there was no reason for the division. Paul and Apollos and Peter were not competitors; they were on the same team. And so there was only trouble for the church if the church continued to be divided.

John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus Christ were not in competition with each other, but they were both serving the same God. And this had been settled in John's mind (and had never been a problem to our Lord) by what he said according to John 4:27. (Read.)

John believed that God was in charge of His own work. He did not have an exalted opinion of himself. He knew what his ministry was, to go before the Messiah, and to prepare His way. He knew that he was not the Light, but that he had been sent to bear witness of the Light. And so, while he did not know any more about his future than we do about ours, he knew what his place was. Therefore, he rejoiced in the true ministry of the Lord, and could praise the Lord in his heart if God's blessing were upon the Lord in a greater way than it was for the moment upon himself. John had seen great blessing before the Lord began His ministry, and it certainly was not easy to see his influence wane. But the point is that he accepted it from God in heaven.

Cf. also Paul's words in Phil. 1:12-20.

But the attitude of John was not one of simple resignation; we see from what he said in the next two verses that what was happening was the fulfillment of his joy. This is what John the Baptist had been looking for.

II. THE FULNESS OF JOHN'S JOY (John 3:28, 29).

John applied to himself the full significance of what he had been preaching. He had never said that he was the Messiah. But when he knew Who the Messiah was, he joyfully pointed him out — even though we learned in chapter 1 that, when he did, Andrew and probably the Apostle John, left him, and began to follow the Lord and to bring people to the Lord. Andrew went and got his brother, Peter. But none of that bothered John the Baptist. Instead it brought great joy to him.

In verse 28, the bridegroom is Christ. The bride was a term John used for those who were following Christ. He was "the friend of the bridegroom." This did not mean that he was not to be classed with the followers of the Lord, but it meant that he was speaking of the role that he had. As "the friend of the bridegroom," it was his greatest joy to see what was happening, and to be able to hear "the bridegroom's voice." Instead of making John jealous, this was His greatest joy. He was seeing God's purpose fulfilled, and nothing could make him happier than to see people coming to Christ, believing in Him, and following Him, doing His will.

And then it was that John made one of the greatest, one of the most significant statements of his ministry.

III. THE WILL OF GOD FOR JOHN THE BAPTIST (John 3:30).

On other occasions I have pointed out to you the importance of that little word "must." The Greek just has the word "must" in the first part of this verse; it is added correctly by the translators to show that the first "must" applied not on to our Lord, but also to John.

But cf. John 3:7, 14; 4:4, 24; 9:4; 10:16; 12:34; 20:9.

Listen to the definition that Thayer in his Greek dictionary gives to this word. He says that it speaks of a
necessity established by the counsel and decree of God, esp. by that purpose of his which relates to the salvation of men by the intervention of Christ and which is disclosed in the O. T. prophecies (p. 126).

And then Thayer added in a note to say that this word speaks of a "constraint which arises from divine appointment (Ibid.).

So this word does not indicate something that John had decided, nor even

that circumstances had forced upon him, but it was given by John to indicate what was the sovereign will for himself as well as for the Lord Jesus Christ. It meant that the Lord was to increase, to grow, in His influence, but the ministry of John was to become less in rank and influence.

Many have pointed out that the first must come first, and then the latter will follow. Such a statement as this does not always mean to every servant of the Lord what it meant to John (that his ministry would soon come to an end — and that in a most ignominious way), but it is the way of power and blessing to any true ministry. If we are out to make a great name for ourselves, we are going to keep people from seeing the glory and greatness of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if our purpose is to fit into His plan for ourselves, and to exalt the Lord alone, then there can be blessing as people are drawn to the Savior. This is the Lord's way; this is His appointment for us.

One illustration of this is what we find in the life of the Apostle Peter when he was called by God to go to the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. Cf. Acts 10:25, 26.

We have another in what Philip did with the Ethiopian eunuch. Cf. Acts 8:26-40. The significant part is that Philip began with the prophecy of Isaiah where the eunuch was reading, and "preached unto him Jesus" (v. 35).

Concl: We are not to exalt ourselves, to try to impress people with how much we know and how little they know. We are simply to do what John the Baptist did, make sure that we are stepping out of the way so that people can see the Lord. We need for Him to grow in us, to take a greater place in our lives. Even though the Lord is not physically present on earth as He was in the days of John the Baptist, yet He lives in us, and He lives through us, if we are walking humbling with Him, and are making it our purpose to do nothing that would keep people from seeing the Lord. If our goal in life is to exalt our Lord, then we can be an instrument of blessing in His hand, not only pointing others to Christ, but bringing them to Him.

WHAT DID JOHN THE BAPTIST BELIEVE?

John 3:22-36

Intro: We are not inclined to give John the credit which he deserves for the understanding he had of the truth. If it were not for John 3 we would not know how deeply he understood our Lord and the mission that God had given His Son in the world. John's ministry was Christ-centered from first to last, and few, if any, surpassed John in his desire to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is saying a great deal for John when we compare him with the Apostle Paul, or the Apostle Peter, or the Apostle John — all of whom were likewise deeply devoted to our Lord. The problem is that we have no epistle written by John the Baptist. We have much written, on the other hand by the three Apostles. We do have the record, even though very brief, of what John preached, and what he had to say about the Lord. And this takes us again to the last part of John 3. As I mentioned last week, from verse 27 on to the end of chapter 3 we have John's response to his disciples when they came to him concerned that the disciples of our Lord were baptizing more disciples that John was. The NIV has these verses marked out by quotation marks, and so do the NASB and the NKJV, which is their way of showing that they believed that verses 27 through 36 were the word of John the Baptist, and not comments made by the Apostle John.

Another point of interest about these verses is that they represent John the Baptist's more mature understanding of Christ and the truth related to Christ. And, therefore, they are very helpful in enabling us to learn what John the Baptist believed. We know from John 1 that he believed in the pre-existence of Christ, i.e., that Christ existed before He became a man. And even though some were inclined to think that John was the Messiah, John did not hesitate to declare that there was no way they could be compared with each other. He did not feel worthy to do the tasks of a household servant for the Lord.

John the Baptist also believed that Jesus was "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." John saw in Jesus the fulfillment of the types set forth in the OT sacrifices, that He, and He alone, could remove the barrier which sin had placed between man and God. He knew that man could not remove it regardless of how hard he might try. It was not within the ability of man to do such a thing.

But now let us look at verses 31 through 36 to complete, or at least add to, our understanding of the main points of John the Baptist's theology. The first thing that we note is:

I. HE BELIEVED IN THE SOVEREIGNTY OF OUR LORD (John 1:31).

Twice in this verse he said that the Lord was "above all." He comes from above. He was not "of the earth," or from the earth, but "from above." John may have been "a man sent from God," but he belonged to the earth as far as his origin was concerned. Not so with our Lord; He came "from above." This not only put Him above John the Baptist, but above every other man, or woman, who has ever lived upon the earth.

To the Jews John would say that One has come Who is greater than Abraham, greater than Moses, greater than David, greater than any of the prophets or all of them put together. Outside the ranks of the people of God, no one has ever lived, and no one will ever live, who is above our Lord Jesus Christ! He is greater in His position, greater in His power, and so greater in His authority over all.

We need to think about this statement more than we do. We need to think about it until the Spirit of God writes it upon our hearts. Our Lord is in the chief place of authority, and whoever we might try to compare with our Lord is so far behind him that, if we knew who it was, his name would not be worth mentioning along with our Lord. He alone is "above all."

The second point in John's theology which is mentioned here is that:

II. JOHN THE BAPTIST BELIEVED THAT JESUS SPOKE THE WORDS OF GOD (John 3:32-34a).

During our Lord's time here on earth people were constantly amazed at the nature and content of His teaching. He spoke with special authority. His gracious words attracted people. His enemies ridiculed His claims, but He never made a claim which was not true. He spoke "the words of God" in a greater way than anyone had done before. The writers of the OT and the writers of the NT spoke by revelation from the Father. But they had not come from heaven; they were of the earth. But here was One Who came from the very presence of the Father, and who had the same nature as the Father. And He came speaking with a greater authority than anyone ever had before or since. In fact, you could not accept his words without giving your own confirmation ("seal") that "God is true," and you could not reject His message without charging God with being a liar. Therefore, a man's relationship with God was judged on the basis of his acceptance or rejection of the message our Lord proclaimed.

In spite of this evidence, John the Baptist had to say, "And no man receiveth his testimony" (v. 32b). This leads me to a third point:

III. JOHN THE BAPTIST BELIEVED IN HUMAN DEPRAVITY (John 3:32b).

Cf. our Lord's words to Nicodemus in John 3:11. This can be said about all people wherever they may be. Even though God sent His Son, and His Son gave the words of the Father, still people do not believe they are the Word of God. What our Lord meant, and what John the Baptist also believed, was that no man "on his own" will receive the Word of God. Man is dead in his trespasses and sins and utterly incapable to receiving the Word. It is only as the Lord opens our eyes and our hearts that we will do what the Thessalonians did. They received the Word of God as the Word of God. But Paul did not give credit for that to the Thessalonians; he gave the glory to God by thanking Him for what the Thessalonians did.

All through John's ministry as he called upon people to confess their sins and repent, he knew that only God could bring them to that place — and interestingly, God uses His Word to bring salvation. He uses His Word to bring about repentance and faith.

Notice a fourth point which John mentioned here:

IV. JOHN THE BAPTIST BELIEVED IN A UNIQUE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRIST AND THE HOLY SPIRIT (John 3:34b).

Perhaps someone has pointed out to you sometime that the words "unto him" are not in the original text — and that is true. And so some have raised a question as to whether or not this applies to Christ, or does it apply to everyone including Christ.

My first response to that objection is that John the Baptist was speaking about Christ, and so it is most likely that this applies also to our Lord. I am satisfied that it does.

But let me add this. God has given His Holy Spirit to each one of us, but is it not true that the Spirit is given "by measure" to us? If not, why would we be exhorted to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Is there not a great difference between us as Christians, and can not that difference be attributed to the fact that some have a greater measure of the Spirit than

others, not a greater measure of His Person, but a greater measure of His blessing. Surely the blessing of the Holy Spirit was upon our Lord "without measure," but we cannot claim that same kind of a relationship. The Holy Spirit would not hesitate to confirm everything that our Lord did and said, but He would not give that same confirmation to us. This thirty-fourth verse of John 3 indicates that the perfection of our Lord's spoken ministry was, in His humanity, due to the fact that the Spirit of God was with Him "without measure." It was not in any limited way, in any measured way, that the Spirit of God was working with the Lord. We have the Holy Spirit indwelling us as a Person, but we will never have the blessing of the Spirit as our Lord did.

V. JOHN THE BAPTIST BELIEVED IN A UNIQUE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE FATHER AND THE SON (John 3:35).

When we add this to what John the Baptist said about the Holy Spirit in verse 34, we can see that John believed in the unity of the Trinity. He believed that you would never find any conflict among the Members of the Godhead. The Father's complete love and confidence is in the Son, and, therefore, He has "given all things into his hand."

John would have strongly believed our Lord when He said, "I and my Father are one."

And so you can see that this completed John the Baptist's belief in the Trinity. John never spoke of himself, nor of any other human being, as having the relationship with the Godhead that God has with His Son and with the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist was here giving us a most unusual Statement of Faith.

One more point:

VI. JOHN THE BAPTIST BELIEVED THE GOSPEL (John 3:36).

This is a verse which takes its stand with John 3:16. But he used a different word for believe in the second statement of this verse from the one we ordinarily expect. Listen to the way it reads in the NASB:

He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.

The second word for believe can be translated as it is, but why would John change words if he did not want to bring out another idea in connection with his statement of salvation?

Do we not have the basis here for saying that John the Baptist believed in the perseverance of the saints? I think we do. He did not mean that salvation was by faith plus our obedience, but that the reality of our faith is always shown by our obedience to the Word of God. Cf. 1 John 2:4, 5:

4 He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

5 But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.

John believed that salvation was a present possession, that it was by faith alone, and that if a person truly believed he would demonstrate it by daily obedience to the Word of God.

He also believed that if a person does not believe, he is already under the judgment of God, and if he does not turn to Christ, he will remain under that judgment forever.

Concl: What a marvelous Statement of Faith? Let us never minimize John's understanding of the truth of God. He was far beyond most of the people of God in his day. And he was far beyond many, if not most believers today. Let us follow his teaching, and reaffirm these great truths today. It is only as the Word of God is faithfully proclaimed that we have any right to expect the blessing of the Lord.

A DISCOURAGED PROPHET

Matthew 11:1-11

Intro: I usually am very partial to J. C. Ryle in his writings. Again and again I have been blessed in reading what he has written. But I have to take exception to him in his comments on John the Baptist in Matthew 11. He says that when John the Baptist sent to the Lord, asking Him, "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?", that John was asking that question for his disciples, to strengthen their faith. Others have taken this same position, and Spurgeon was among them. Charles Simeon was another. I think that those who hold to this position are trying to protect John because they do not feel that such a godly man could have such doubts in his heart. However, the Scriptures show that it is not unusual for the people of God to go through such times in their lives.

The Psalms certainly indicate that David had his times of discouragement, times when he did not understand what the Lord was doing with him. Elijah got so discouraged that he wanted the Lord to take his life. Job certainly had times of extreme discouragement, and at one point his wife believed that death was his only out — but that he ought to curse God before he died! Even after Jacob's name was changed to Israel, he is often referred to as Jacob in Scripture. He had his low times, many of them. So we don't need to think that we need to protect John the Baptist. He was a man of like passions with us, and it seems that at this particular time in his life that circumstances were getting the best of him.

He was in prison. He had been arrested and cast into prison because he stood up for the truth of God, rebuking Herod for taking his brother Philip's wife. You will find the story in Matt. 14, Mark 6, and Luke 9. The Lord had not even visited him in prison. When our Lord heard about what had happened to John, He just went on about His work. We don't know how long John had been in prison, "bound" (Matt. 14:3), but it had evidently gone on for some time. It is easy to see why John may have felt neglected by the Lord. So he had many reasons to be discouraged, and I am satisfied that discouragement was his problem. Perhaps he had been like many others, thinking that the Lord was going to liberate his people. Perhaps this was one reason he had been so bold with Herod. But when he heard continued reports of the Lord's kindness and patience and humility, he began to have a big question in His heart.

The Puritans in their writings speak much about God's desertions — those times when prayer is not being answered, when there is little or no

enjoyment of the presence of the Lord, and when there is little in the way of fruit to be seen. It seems to me that John the Baptist was going through such a time as that. And it would have been all the more discouraging for him, having had such a very fruitful ministry, and then having it come to a sudden halt even as he was speaking up for what was right.

Psalm 44 gives us an illustration of a time when the people of God were confused and discouraged, although they did not actually turn away from the Lord. That is always important to see. John did not turn from the Lord; he was seeking confirmation for the strengthening of his faith.

But let us turn to the text and examine what Matthew under the direction of the Spirit of God has recorded for us.

I. JOHN'S QUESTION (Matt. 11:1-3).

I like what Alexander Maclaren had to say about the trial which John the Baptist was going through at this time. Let me read to you a little of what Maclaren wrote:

We do not believe that this message of John's was sent for the sake of strengthening his disciples' faith in Jesus as Messiah, nor that it was merely meant as a hint to Jesus to declare Himself. The question is John's. The answer is sent to him; it is he who is to ponder the things which the messengers saw, and to answer his own question thereby. The note which the evangelist prefixes to his account gives the key to the incident. John was 'in prison,' in that gloomy fortress of Machaerus which Herod had rebuilt at once for 'a sinful pleasure house," and for an impregnable refuge, among the savage cliffs of Moab. The halls of luxurious vice and the walls of defence are gone; but the dungeons are there still, with the holes in the masonry into which the bars were fixed to which the prisoners — John, perhaps, one of them — were chained. No wonder that in the foul atmosphere of a dark dungeon the spirit which had been so undaunted in the free air of the desert began to flag; nor that even he who had seen the fluttering dove descent on Christ's head, and had pointed to Him as the Lamb of God, felt that 'all his mind was clouded with a doubt.' It would have been wiser if commentators, instead of trying to save John's credit at the cost of straining the narrative, had recognised the psychological truth of the plain story of his wavering conviction, and had learned its lessons of self-distrust. There is one on Man with whom it was always high-water; all others have ebbs and flows in their religious life, and variations in the grasp of the truth (Vol. 5, pp. 121, 122).

F. B. Meyer had this to say about John and the question he had:

Some commentators, to save his credit, have supposed that the embassy was sent to the Lord for the sake of his disciples, that their hearts might be opened, their faith confirmed — and that they might have a head and leaders when he was gone. But the narrative has to be greatly strained and dragged out of its obvious course to make it cover the necessities of such an hypothesis. It is more nature to think that John the Baptist was for a brief spell under a cloud, involved in doubt, tempted to let go the confidence that had brought him such ecstatic joy when he first saw the Dove descending and abiding.

The Bible does not scruple to tell us of the failures of its noblest children... And in this the Spirit of God has rendered us untold service, because we learn that the material out of which He made the greatest saints was flesh and blood like ourselves; and that it was by Divine grace, manifested very conspicuously towards them, that they became what they were. If only the ladder rests on the low earth, where we live and move and have our being, there is some hope of our climbing to stand with others who have ascended its successive rungs and reached the starry heights. Yes, let us believe that, for some days at least, John's mind was overcast, his faith lost its foothold, and he seemed to be falling into bottomless depths (John the Baptist, pp. 112, 113).

This seems to me to be the right explanation of what John the Baptist was going through at this time in his life. Whether this trial arose out of the weakness of John's faith at this time, or as an attack from Satan, or both, it is impossible to say, but the important thing for all of us to see is that, if it can come to a man of the spiritual stature of John the Baptist, it can come to any of us.

It should be of special note to us that the trouble that John the Baptist was going through centered upon Christ. This is where we all need to be careful. If we begin to doubt Him, we are in great danger.

From all that has been pointed out we can see that John was probably affected by a number of things, some which I have already mentioned.. John was a man of the desert, of the open air. For him to be confined as he was, and "bound," would certainly have been discouraging to him — almost unbearable! Then He surely could not understand why the Lord had not at least come to see him, and even perhaps deliver him. John believed in our Lord's Deity, and he would have known that there was nothing impossible to the Lord. And then as Meyer pointed out, John was

deficient in his understanding of the Person of Christ. He knew He was to be the Savior, but he also had preached that our Lord had come with an ax to cut down trees which did not bear good fruit, that He had a fan in His hand with which He would purge His floor, and that He would burn up the chaff with an unquenchable fire. This was the picture that John had of the way the Lord was going to deal with evil. That is what would have made the Lord's response to him that much more confusing.

Let us look now at:

II. THE LORD'S RESPONSE (Matt. 11:4-6).

We all have so much to learn about our Lord. Most of us have possibly a one-sided view, or we may know that, on the one hand, He is holy and cannot tolerate evil, and that, on the other hand, He is loving and merciful to even the chief of sinners, but we do not have an understanding of His ways and why He does not work for us the way we think that He should.

John the Baptist may have known about the Lord reading in the synagogue that He had come "to preach deliverance to the captives" (Luke 4:18), and "to set at liberty them that are bruised," and could not understand why he himself was still in jail.

And it is also possible that we get so concerned about our own needs that we forget that there are others who need the Lord's help just as much as we do, and perhaps more.

All in all, John the Baptist, although he was a mighty man of God, needed to remember, and learn in a deeper way (like we all do) what Isaiah wrote in Isa. 55:8, 9:

8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD.

9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

But it is not ever easy to rejoice in the blessings that others are receiving when we are in great need ourselves. And we are inclined to question both the wisdom of God and the love of God — especially in His dealings with us.

The Lord pointed out the way for John the Baptist to be happy in his trials. The Lord gave it as a beatitude. (Read verse 6.) It is so easy to stumble over the Lord's ways with us, but peace and joy come when we

really are trusting Him to do the best thing for us. John went through a more difficult time that we may ever have to endure, but we never know what lies ahead. That is the reason we need to learn now all that we can about our precious Lord and His ways. We want to be able to enjoy that blessedness which He has promised to those who continue to trust Him whatever the circumstances might be.

But now we come to the last point:

III. THE LORD'S DEFENSE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST (Matt. 11:7-11).

It seems apparent that the multitudes heard what John's disciples had asked the Lord, as well as the Lord's answer. And it is interesting to see how the Lord immediately spoke so favorably about John. Here is a good illustration of Psa. 103:13, 14,

13 Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD
pitieth them that fear him.

14 For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are
dust.

And here also we need to remember Isa. 42:3-4:

3 A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax
shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto
truth.

4 He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set
judgment in the earth: and the isles shall wait.

Notice how Matthew used this passage in Matt. 12:14-21. (Read.)

We are always quick to criticize one another. We can so easily pick out weaknesses in others while being oblivious to even greater weaknesses in ourselves. Or we are so inclined to exalt those whom God has blessed in our lives that we are disappointed and overwhelmed ourselves when we see that they are not perfect. And so the Lord spoke out in John's defense lest anyone minimize him or his ministry by the trial which John was going through.

The Lord asked the crowd a series of questions, looking back to what they had anticipated when they had gone out to see John the Baptist, confessing their sins, and to be baptized by him. What did they go out to see? Was it a reed shaken in the wind — showing weakness? No! Was it a man clothed in the garments of a rich man of leisure and fine clothes? No! What did they go out to see? "A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet." He was the greatest of all the prophets because he

came as the forerunner of the Messiah! The people were never to forget this. Our Lord had no criticism of John, and neither should we if we understand anything of our own hearts.

Then it was that the Lord said something which seems contradictory in a way, and it is not a simple verse to explain. (Read v. 11). I don't know that I have the right interpretation, but I will give you what I think that it means.

John was great in the eyes of men, and He was great in the eyes of the Lord because as the Lord had just pointed out He was the One appointed by God to go ahead of the Messiah. That is the greatest honor that has ever been conferred upon the outstanding men of Scripture. John the Baptist had the most exalted place. But the point that the Lord seemed to be making was that we are not to aspire to that in our lives. Instead, the Lord said that we are to seek to be, not "the least," as the KJ renders it, but less as the Greek has it. This is no way was a criticism of John the Baptist, but simply a statement of what true greatness is in the eyes of the Lord. True greatness is true humility. The Lord was meek and lowly; we are not to seek to be greater than He was.

We know from what we have learned about John the Baptist that he was a humble man, not worthy to serve the Lord as a household slave, by his own confession. And this is where his true greatness was. On one occasion this is what the Lord said:

And he sat down, and called the twelve, and saith unto them, If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all (Mark 9:35).

And in the next chapter in Mark's Gospel we have these words:

42 But Jesus called them to him, and saith unto them, Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them.

43 But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister:

44 And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all.

45 For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45).

Conc: These words speak for themselves, but let me close with an illustration.

When Lucille and I were first married, we attended a school briefly. I won't mention the name. But the president of the school hit us day after day with the idea that we could be a Charles Fuller. Some of you who are younger may not know who he was. He was a radio preacher, a man greatly used by the Lord. He was a very humble man, and spoke to millions of people every week by radio. Many people were saved under his ministry. I personally listened to his broadcast every week. He had a choir and a male quartet which sang the old hymns of the church. The Lord had given him a great place of ministry. Most Christians in those days knew who Dr. Fuller was, and were well acquainted with his voice.

But even in those days such an appeal to become another Dr. Fuller did not appeal to me. That is not what the Lord wants us to do — to aspire to be well known, to get in the public eye, to have millions of people listening to us, and able to recognize our faces and our voices. The greatest place in the eyes of the Lord is the lesser place. We need to walk humbly with our God. It makes no difference if anybody knows who we are just as long as we are walking humbly with the Lord and seeking to serve Him for His glory.

That is what the Lord was saying, I believe, to the people about John the Baptist. The people were not to seek to be a prophet, nor to be jealous of John because he was the forerunner of the Lord. The Lord was giving John a humbling experience, and that is what they needed to learn from him. The lower we are, the better it is for us because the more people will be able to see the Lord.

Long ago Micah told the people of Judah what the Lord wanted of them. Here are the words:

He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God? (Micah 6:8).

Let that be our purpose, and there is far less possibility that we will ever be offended with the Lord's ways with us.

THE DEATH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Matthew 14:1-14

Intro: It was six weeks ago tonight that I brought a message on the life of John the Baptist. I almost decided to let that be the conclusion, but realized that it would leave that series unfinished. As all of you know, John the Baptist died a most humiliating death at the hands of Herod's executioner. The account is given to us by Matthew here in our text, and also by Mark in Mark 6:14-29. Both reports were written after, perhaps long after John had been put to death. Luke only devotes three verses to the end of John the Baptist's life, and you will find them in Luke 9:7-9. The Apostle John mentioned that John was going to be cast into prison, but did not mention how or why he died.

We can't establish the time of John's death, but both Matthew (4:12) and Luke (3:20) put it very close to the beginning of the Lord's public ministry. So John's ministry was very short, possibly only about six months, as some have suggested.

Let me read the account, and then we will look into some of the details.
(Read Matt. 14:1-14.)

I. THE BACKGROUND OF JOHN'S IMPRISONMENT.

In John 5:35 the Apostle John recorded that our Lord referred to John the Baptist as "a burning and shining light," or lamp, which would probably be a better translation of the word the Lord used. This means that he was bold in his witness, fearless in his preaching, not hesitant at all to reprove people for their sins, or to point them to Christ, the Lamb of God.

There was a great deal of corruption in the Roman government, and Herod was no small part of that corruption. However, when on one occasion when he was in Herod's presence, he rebuked Herod because Herod had taken his brother Philip's wife, and John told him that it was not right in God's sight for him to do what he had done. Philip's wife, Herodias, probably was the initiator of this relationship, and she had a great hatred for John because of what he had done. Some have supposed that she was fearful that John might have a growing influence on Herod (who was the son of Herod the Great), and so she was determined to see him put to death.

Her opportunity came when a birthday party was given for Herod. It was a large doing, and a party which Herod had planned for himself. He invited, according to Mark's report, "his lords, high captains, and chief

estates of Galilee" (Mark 6:21). These were times of drinking and much sinful behavior, and a time when women were put on display. Herodias' daughter, who was anything but an example of virtue, was brought in, and she danced before the crowd. Herod was pleased, and he offered her whatever she wanted up to half of his kingdom (which was a way of offering a gift). She went out, and asked her mother what she should request, and her mother saw her opportunity to get rid of John the Baptist, and so she asked for John's head. Even in his drunken condition, Herod regretted his offer, but because so many of his officials were present, he agreed to go ahead. And John was put to death. It tells you what kind of women Herodias and her daughter were when they accepted the head of John the Baptist. You would have thought that at that moment there would have been judgment from God similar to the time when Samson pulled down the pillars of the place where the Philistines were having their feast, but there was no such judgment. Instead, he left Herod to suffer from the memory of what he had done to John, and so, when the Lord's ministry began to grow, Herod felt that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead. His conscience troubled him, but there is no indication in Scripture that he ever repented of his sin, and turned to the Lord.

And so John the Baptist died in a very disgraceful way, and especially in the midst of such terrible debauchery. He died as a martyr for the truth, and it seems that it was an hour of great victory for the forces of evil.

But let me point out:

II. SOME OTHER DISTURBING FACTS.

A. The record of John's death.

You would think that the death of John the Baptist would have been an event of major importance not only to the people who had been saved under his ministry, but even to the writers of the Gospel. But we only learn about his death weeks after he was executed from the accounts given by Matthew and Mark. Luke tells us about John's perplexity over the ministry of the Lord, thinking possibly that it was John raised from the dead, but he does not tell us about how John died, and neither did the Apostle John. This, it seems to me, is quite amazing.

B. The lack of a response from the Lord.

Matthew, in 4:12, tells us that "when Jesus had heard that John was cast into prison, he departed into Galilee," but he said nothing about the Lord going to see John. The Lord could have kept John from being

imprisoned. And He certainly could have delivered John from prison so that he would not have been put to death. But He did neither! And to make matters worse, when He had heard that John had been put to death, there was no expression of sympathy (as far as we know) that was sent from the Lord to the disciples of John. The Lord simply went on with His ministry. Is it any wonder that John sent to the Lord saying, "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" I believe we can say with absolute certainty that John never expected that his life and ministry would end this way. Like so many of the Psalms indicate, the wicked were having their way, and it seemed that the Lord was unconcerned about it.

How are we to explain, or to understand, the ways of the Lord in the case of the death of John the Baptist?

III. SOME POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS.

A. God's ways vs. our ways.

Cf. Isa. 55:8, 9,

8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD.

9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

And along with this let us remember Psalms 18:30,
Psalm 18:30

As for God, his way is perfect: the word of the LORD is tried: he is a buckler to all those that trust in him.

We are often perplexed by the ways of the Lord, but we need to remember that His ways are higher than ours, and His ways are always perfect. God never makes a mistake in what He does; He is never guilty of sin.

So we have to confess that we are standing on holy ground when we observe the ways of the Lord, and there are many things that we will not be able to explain, or understand, until we get to heaven. Then it all will be clear to us, and we will unitedly praise God for all of His ways.

Let us notice another event in Scripture which might give us some help:

B. The death of Lazarus.

You remember this event which is recorded in John 11. The Lord was told that His friend, Lazarus, was sick, and He purposely delayed His trip to the home of Mary and Martha until He knew that Lazarus was dead. In that case He raised Lazarus back to life again. But our Lord also gave His disciples at least a partial explanation for His delay. We have it in John 11:15,

And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him.

The disciples needed to learn, and we need to learn, to trust the Lord even when we don't understand why He doesn't do what we want Him to do, and think that He ought to do. The Lord's purpose in the case of Lazarus was to show Mary and Martha and His disciples that He was capable of doing a greater work than that of healing Lazarus; He would raise Him from the dead. And what an important lesson this was to everybody concerned!

But let me point out a third point:

C. John the Baptist's ministry was over.

And this has been true of thousands of people throughout history who have laid down their lives for the sake of the Gospel. God did not intervene. None of us knows when our ministry is over. There is always more to be done, and it seems that it is especially sad when a person like John the Baptist dies, a man so greatly used of God, and a man so fearless in his stand for the truth. There have been those who said that John should not have rebuked Herod, but neither the Lord nor any of the writers of Scripture even suggest that John was at fault. It is always easier to let sin go unmentioned, but both the Lord as well as John, and the prophets and the apostles, were fearless in their stand for the truth. God's people would have avoided much trouble throughout history if they had only been quiet about sin. But that is not God's way.

But let me make another suggestion:

D. God was dealing with Herod.

We have some outstanding incidents in Scripture of God dealing with men high in government. Think of Pharaoh in Moses' day. Think of the kings Daniel ministered to. Think of Pilate, and Agrippa. And I am only mentioning a few. Herod feared John the Baptist, and after he had John killed his conscience continued to bother him, but he never turned to the Lord to seek the forgiveness of his sins. If you want to know a man who will be without excuse when he stands before God, Herod is one of many.

And so will Herodias, and her daughter, and every official who knew about John the Baptist and saw what had happened when the head of John the Baptist was brought in. It makes you wonder, doesn't it, what God is doing in our day with the leaders of our nation, and the leaders of nations around the world. Only in eternity will we learn how the martyrdom of the saints has been used by the Spirit of God to draw sinners to Christ. And those who failed to hear the voice of God will stand in greater judgment.

There are undoubtedly many other things that could be said about the death of John the Baptist, but let me add just one more:

E. What the death of John the Baptist meant to God.

John the Baptist surely knew Psa. 116:15: "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints." The Lord takes us home in different ways. Some have gone through terrible circumstances, as Hebrews 11 tells us. But however we may go, we can't even begin to appreciate how the Lord looks forward to our arrival in heaven.

Do you remember the prayer that the Lord prayed, recorded in John 17? Do you remember His last request? You will find it in John 17:24:

Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.

Conc: The life of John the Baptist, as short as it was, holds many wonderful lessons for us. He was a man deeply devoted to God, and to the Lord Jesus Christ. When the Lord appeared for His ministry, it was time for John to step back. And he could only rejoice that the Messiah had come because it was his place to point to the Savior, but only Jesus Christ could save.