

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Matthew 3:1-17

Intro: The study of John the Baptist should remind us of the important of biographies in the Bible. I have even seen it mentioned many times by godly, dependable people concerning what Christian should read outside of the Bible, are biographies of the Lord's people who lived in the past, whose story can help us to learn to walk in ways that are pleasing to the Lord. We get to learn the truths that were important to them, and how they dealt with trials and testings which come to all of us in our walk with the Lord. Such is certainly true of the man we are going to be considering tonight: John the Baptist.

We can only assume by the way this chapter begins that the Jews, to whom and for whom Matthew wrote his Gospel, were well acquainted with the man called "John the Baptist." But I am sure that most Jews today could give you little or no information at all about this man who is spoken of with such honor and admiration, not only by Matthew, but also by Mark, and Luke, and John. His name and title, "John the Baptist," appear only six times in the Gospel of Matthew (3:1; 11:11, 12; 14:2; 16:14; 17:13), four times in the Gospel of Mark (6:14, 24, 25; 8:28), and three times in the Gospel of Luke (7:28, 33; 9:19). The Apostle John never spoke of him as "John the Baptist," but simply as "John" – and that a total of nineteen times. See John 1:6, 15, 19, 26, 28, 29, 32, 35, 40; 3:23, 24, 26, 27:4:1; 5:33, 36; 10:40, 41 (2x).

Of course it is not necessarily the number of times a person is mentioned in the Bible that determines their importance to us, but it is what is said about them. Of course much space is given to men like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, and that gives them places of special importance for all of us. Of course the most valuable biographical information of all is that which is given to us about our Lord Jesus Christ. The whole Bible speaks of Him. But in reading our Bible we need to get as well acquainted as we can with all of them. What is recorded is for our learning, and so the more we know, the richer we will be in spiritual knowledge and understanding. I doubt if we can ever exhaust all that is written about any of the people we meet in Scripture, men or women, and so we need to keep reading and praying, meditating and remembering. This what the Holy Spirit enables us to do.

The study of the life and ministry of John the Baptist is one of the richest

studies that we can engage in of all the men and women who are mentioned in the Bible. And, saying that, is saying more than we can realize just by saying it. But I cite one of many things that our Lord Jesus Christ said about him to prove the importance of John the Baptist. And it is Matthew himself who has recorded for us these words of our Lord Who said, "Among them born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist" (Matt. 11:11). Our Lord Himself would be the one exception to that statement.

And yet when you weigh the amount of information that is given to us about this man, John the Baptist, it is far less than we have about David in the OT, or the Apostle Paul in the NT. But again, we need to beware of judging what is said about people solely on the basis of how much information is given to us.

Christian biographies tend to be more detailed than biographies we find in Scripture, but that is all to our advantage. A good biography of any servant of the Lord will have us going back and forth from the biography to the Bible. There has never been a time in my lifetime when more good Christian biographies are available than there are today. When I was a young Christian, many biographies that are available now were not available at any price. If you need help on knowing what to read, there are many of us who would be delighted to help you. Reading the right books is a good way for us to redeem the time that the Lord gives us.

But tonight we are going to take just a brief look into the life of John the Baptist who was a subject of OT prophecy regarding the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ into the world, and it was God's dealings with him which broke broke four hundred years of silence between the OT and the NT. So he had a very unique and important place in Scripture. Actually the length of his ministry was very short, even less than the three years of ministry that our Lord had. But what a lot of wonderful truth has been packed into what the Spirit of God has revealed to us and for us in our Bibles.

It is Luke who records for us the birth of John the Baptist. His father was Zacharias, a priest, and his mother's name was Elisabeth. The birth of John the Baptist was miraculous because both Zacharias and Elisabeth were past the ages when normally they could have a child. It was an angel of the Lord who appeared to Zacharias, telling him that his wife would have a son. The angel even told Zacharias that he was to name his

son, John.

And then the angel told Zacharias what the mission of his son would be. This is found in Luke 1:14-17:

14 And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth.

15 For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb.

16 And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God.

17 And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

It was six month later that the angel Gabriel appeared to the virgin Mary to tell her that she would have a child. And this is the conversation in part that the angel and Mary had. This also is found in Luke 1, verses 26-35:

26 And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,

27 To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

28 And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

29 And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

30 And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.

31 And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.

32 He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David.

Now it had been approximately 400 years since Malachi, the last of the OT prophets had predicted the coming of Elijah the prophet, which was a prophecy of John the Baptist who would come in the spirit and power of Elijah, and the ministry of John was described in these words, recorded in the very last words of the prophet Malachi, in chapter 4, verse 6

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6 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.

Now I hope that these verses help us to understand the great things that were to take place under the ministry of John the Baptist, and the even greater works that would follow during the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ.

No one of the Gospels, nor even all four of them put together, gives us a complete history of the ministry of John the Baptist, or of the Lord Jesus Christ. Each of the Gospel writers included those details about John the Baptist, and of our Lord, that were important for the people to whom each man wrote as he did about the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. So we gather from all of them to get as complete a picture of the days of our Lord on earth as the Spirit of God intended for us to have.

Now going back to our text in Matthew 3, we learned from Matthew chapter 2 that our Lord was born in very troublous times in Israel when the Jews were under Roman bondage. When Herod heard about the birth of Israel's king, the wise men were warned not to tell Herod where the baby Jesus was, and so they returned home without seeing Herod again. This infuriated Herod to the point that he ordered te death of all children who were in Bethlehem or the vicinity. Joseph was warned to take Mary and the baby Jesus down into Egypt to escape from Herod. When Herod died, they came back, but to avoid the possibility that Herod's son who took his place might want to kill the Lord Jesus, instead of returning to Bethlehem, they went north to Nazareth where the Lord lived through the rest of his childhood and early manhood. What we learn about the Jews in chapter 3 causes us to realize that there was a lot of corruption among even the Jewish leaders. So spiritually things were not good in the days of John the Baptist, nor in our Lord's days which followed.

Verses 1 and 2 tell us about the mission of John the Baptist and what his message was. Israel was in like America is today, in great need of a revival, of spiritual awakening. And so he called them to repent.

Verse 3 tells us the voice which Isaiah prophesied about 700 years before Christ, was fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist. John was not named by Isaiah; he is simply referred to as *a voice* – “the voice of one

crying in the wilderness.”

This reminds me of an incident in the life of John the Baptist recorded for us by the Apostle John when the Jews sent to John the Baptist in his ministry to find out who he claimed to be. This is record for us in John 1:19-23. Let me read it to you:

19 And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou?

20 And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ.

21 And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No.

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

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

John the Baptist did not tell them his name; he was content just to be *a voice*. This shows the great humility of John the Baptist. Not many of us are content just to be a voice. I think that it was Robert Murray M'Cheyne who said that it is not great gifts which God uses, but great likeness to Jesus. We hear a lot these days about name recognition being a great advantage for political office. God is looking for those who are willing to be just a voice.

The same emphasis is carried on in verses 4, 5, and 6. How simple and unimpressive was the appearance of John the Baptist, and the same thing was true about his eating habits. And notice: he did not go into the cities to get the crowds to come out to him. They just came because of the power of God that was upon John the Baptist.

God is not looking for great buildings with all of the latest electronic equipment. He is looking for prepared hearts, people who come to Him confessing their sins and repenting from their hearts for the wrongs that they have done to Him. John the Baptist did not put himself forward. His message was not, “Behold, me,” but it was “Behold, the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29, 36).

Verse 7 through 12 give us a sample of the preaching of John the Baptist. Whenever the Lord is at work, the Devil goes to work to, not to make the Lord's work more effective, but to undo it!

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John the Baptist was interested in reaching people who believed that had become convinced that there is “wrath to come.” What is this but hell. There are always those who want to take part in a great movement for the glory it will give to them. But John the Baptist was not ignorant of Satan’s devices. Their claim to be descendants of Abraham meant nothing to John the Baptist. He knew that God could raise up children to Abraham from the stones that they were all walking on. God is no respecter of persons. Repentance does not save us; the grace of God does!

John the Baptist did not want them to look to him for salvation. He wanted them to look to the Lord. The Lord is not going to be deceived by the false professions and pretenses of men. Again we see the great humility of John the Baptist. Although he and the Lord were related in the same human family, yet John knew that he was worthy to do the work of a common slave for the Lord.. You can usually tell by the way a person talks whether he comes first, or the Lord does. One of the chief reasons that the Apostle John was so devoted to the Lord was because he knew that hell is a place of unquenchable fire.

To be baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire speaks of the purifying work of the Spirit, purging away as by fire our sins. But it is a difficult statement. It is clear that it has to do with our salvation.

The last five verses of our chapter give us a wonderful picture of salvation. Just after John the Baptist finished denouncing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Sadducees, then the Lord Himself appeared to be baptized by John. John was both startled and confused. Verse 14 shows again the humility of John. But what did the Lord mean by what He said in verse 15? *He meant that it was important for Him to take John’s place so that John could have His place.* And so John baptized the Lord.

Immediately after the Lord was baptized and as he came out of the river, the heavens were opened and John saw the Spirit of God in the form of a dove lighting upon the Lord, and the Father spoke from heaven saying, “The is my beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased.”

This is what the Lord was going to do when He died on the Cross. He took our place that we might have His place. He atoned for our sins that the righteousness of God might cover us. This is a wonderful picture of substitution, and the Father spoke from heaven to express His great

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pleasure in what His Son had come to the earth to do. We are not saved by our work for Him, but by His work for us.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees did not understand simple substitution. They were not looking in faith to Christ; they were trusting in their own works which were corrupt beyond description.

I know that most of you understand this great truth, and why John the Baptist was always careful not to attract attention to himself, but to point sinners to Christ. Make sure that your faith is in Christ and in what He did on the Cross for you, not on your works, nor your money, nor on your character. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and so all need a Savior. And there is only one Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, God's beloved Son.