

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Matthew 3 - Part 2

Intro: Last Sunday night we had our first look at John the Baptist as it is recorded in Matthew 3, but I went beyond Matthew's account to look at Luke's account of the birth of John the Baptist, followed by some of the statements made by him showing his great humility and his desire to be a true forerunner of our Lord, the Messiah.

Tonight I want us to think of John the Baptist as an evangelist and the light that his ministry throws upon the ministry of the Gospel today. Prior to the birth of John the Baptist and his ministry there had been no revelation from God since the days of Malachi. But God's silence over those approximately 400 years was broken with God's revelation to Zacharias that he and his Elisabeth were going to have a son even those both of them were past the age when couples normally could have children. In Malachi 3:1 we read these words which were spoken by the Messiah Himself. This is what He said:

Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts (Mal. 3:1).

But before that, in fact, a total of approximately 700 year before the birth of Christ, the prophet Isaiah had been directed by the Holy Spirit to make this prediction in Isaiah 40:1-3:

- 1 Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.
- 2 Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins.
- 3 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.

This last verse is quoted in Matthew 3:3 as it is in Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4; and John 1:23 leaving no doubt but that the passage in Isaiah was being fulfilled in the birth and ministry of John the Baptist whose ministry was to precede and prepare the way for the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Some Bible teachers have referred to the birth of John the Baptist as evidence that God's prophetic clock was beginning to tick again. It had to be a very exciting time for those whose hearts were being prepared not just for John the Baptist, but especially for the Lord Jesus Christ.

The ministry of John the Baptist was clearly a ministry of the Gospel, a ministry of evangelism. And as such it the ministry of John the Baptist brings before us some very important lessons for us today concerning the preaching of the Gospel.

Now I realize that the ministry of John the Baptist, being predicted in OT prophecy was very unique, and especially because it immediately preceded and introduced the ministry of the Lord Jesus. Spiritually we can tell by the low level of life among the religious leaders of the Jews that those days in which John the Baptist was born, and six month later when the Lord Jesus was born, that conditions in Israel were nothing short of deplorable. They could hardly have been at a lower level. The need for a revival could not have been greater. I do not give the credit to John the Baptist, but I want you to see the kind of a man that God prepared to be His special messenger at this most important time in the history of the world.

Let us focus first of all on:

I. THE KIND OF A MAN JOHN THE BAPTIST WAS.

In John chapter 5 where the Lord was speaking to a group of unbelieving Jewish leaders, He referred to those who witnessed on His behalf. He mentioned His miraculous works. He referred to the Father's testimony of Him. He referred to the Scriptures. But he first referred to the witness of John the Baptist, and the Lord called John "a burning and shining light" (John 5:35).

Earlier in the Gospel of John, the Apostle John had said this about John the Baptist. You will find these words in John 1:6-9:

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

7 The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe.

8 He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.

9 That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

Now John was not *the* Light. The Lord Jesus is the Light of the world. But John the Baptist was *a* light, just like you and I are. This world is in spiritual darkness. They are ignorant about themselves. They are ignorant about God. They are ignorant about the Gospel. But when we were saved we became lights in this world. However, I don't know that

many of us ever become like John the Baptist, “a burning and shining light.” Now I am not sure that I understand all that the Lord meant by that. In fact, I am sure that I don’t know all that He meant when He called John “a burning and shining light.” But I think that a part of what the Lord meant was that wherever John the Baptist went, people recognized that there was something very different about him, very different from what you usually see in men, something good, something uplifting, something that made people want to know what made him so different. The light that came from John the Baptist was “burning.” It was always there, always turned on. It was out where people could see it. It would have been difficult to engage in bad talk when you were with John.

But John would always want you to know, as the Lord said about him, that he was not the ultimate Light, but was sent to bear witness of the Light. If you talked with John, you would see that he wanted you to know, not how good he was, but what a wonderful Savior he had. The light that you would have seen in John was the Light of Christ. We are like the moon. We have no light of our own, but we shine by light reflected from the Son of God Who is the one and only true Light of the world. John the Baptist came to bear witness of the Light.

E. M. Bounds in his very important little book on prayer, *Power Through Prayer*, says, “The church is looking for better methods, but God is looking for better men.” The more we know the Lord, and walk with the Lord, the brighter the light will shine forth from our lives. That is the kind of a servant John the Baptist was.

But let me make a second point:

II. WHAT WAS JOHN THE BAPTIST’S MESSAGE?

I think that last week I read some verses from John, chapter 1, and I want to read some of the same passage tonight. I hope you remember the passage in which a group of Jews were questioning him about who he was, and his response was, “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Isaiah.” John the Baptist was content just to be a voice pointing people to the Lord. But the next day when he saw the Lord coming, he said, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). That was John’s message. He knew why the Lord Jesus had come, it was that by His death as the Lamb of God, He would take away the sin of the world.

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This is the Gospel, isn't it? The Jews should have understood this if it had not been that they were in spiritual darkness. You see, the light is shining, but God has to open our eyes before we can see the truth. Every lamb slain for sin in OT days was a picture of the coming of the Son of God, Who was the Lamb of God, and Who would offer a sacrifice, and the only sacrifice, by which anyone, whether Jew or Gentile, throughout the whole world could be saved.

But there was another part of John's message that he preached freely and I was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2).

In Act 20 when the Apostle Paul was leaving the Ephesian elders after telling them that he did not expect that he would ever be back to see them again, he reminded them of this which we find in Acts 20:20-21:

20 And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publicly, and from house to house,

21 Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

Repentance means sorrow for sin and an intention to turn away from it in the future. True salvation now only delivers us from the penalty of sin, but it brings about a real transformation in our hearts toward all sin.

"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17).

Now it is important for us to realize that what attracted people to John the Baptist was not something spectacular, such as the ability to perform miracles. John 10:14 tells us about John's ministry,

And many resorted unto him (that is, to the Lord) and said, John did no miracle: but all things that John spake of this Man were true.

It is important for us to realize that it was John's message that caused people to come out to the Jordan River to be baptized by him. He did not go to them; they came to him. The message is what is important. In these days when we think we have to put on a show really in order to get a crowd, let us learn from John the Baptist. When the Spirit of God is working among people, they are going to be drawn by the message. *This is a major lesson that we can learn from the ministry of John the Baptist.*

A third point that I want to make from the ministry of John the Baptist is found in a statement that we find in the words of John. Let me express it

as:

III. GROWTH IN THE MINISTRY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST.

One thing that was very unique in the ministry of both our Lord Jesus Christ and John the Baptist, was that the time of their ministries was very short. It is generally thought that our Lord ministered about three years before He was crucified. F. B. Meyer who was very diligent in going into details which other expositors have overlooked, estimated that *the ministry of John the Baptist could have been as short as six months*. We know that it was shorter than our Lord's ministry – quite a bit shorter!

But before we get to that which will be my last point, I want to call your attention to the words of John the Baptist in John 3:25-36, the end of chapter 3. (Read the passage.) The maturity of John the Baptist could not be clearer than it is here.

But the expression that I want you to notice in particular is in verse 30. John the Baptist is the speaker, and he is speaking about the Lord Jesus. I know that both men were living then, and both were ministering, but John here gave expression concerning his ministry that is important for all of us to remember, especially those of us who teach the Word. The statement is, "He must increase, but I must decrease." If your Bible uses italics to show words that have been added by the translators you will notice that the second "must" is in italics. So the verse actually reads in the Greek, "He must increase, but I decrease." I think that the translators were right in adding a second "must" because that is what John the Baptist meant. But I also think that just to make the last part, "but I decrease" makes the statement even stronger.

But I would call your attention to the word "must." I know I have mentioned this word to you before. It is the same word found in verse 7 of this chapter. It is a little word δεῖ. It does not speak like it does in English of something that ought to happen, but it speaks of something that *must* happen, but not because of what *we* do, but because of what *God* does. My Greek dictionary describes it as a "necessity established by the counsel and decree of God" (p. 126).

Now with John the Baptist it was going to mean that his ministry would gradually, and we would say, prematurely, come to an end. Herod was going to behead John the Baptist at the request of a very wicked woman

he had married.

But I think that in most cases this statement means that in our lives as Christians there should always be more of Christ, and less of us. I think that this is what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:5, “For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake.”

The Lord Jesus Christ needs to have a greater and greater place in our lives so that others see more of the Lord Jesus in us than they see of us. And if that is happening to us, then the Spirit of God is going to use that as one major influence by which we see more of the Lord Jesus in our families, and in the children of God with whom we have the most fellowship. You couldn’t make John the Baptist jealous by telling him that the disciples of the Lord were baptizing more people than his disciples were. John the Baptist gloried in anything that would cause people to be more like the Lord.

I have one more point. It is a sad one, and yet perhaps is good in that it keeps us from thinking too much of each other.

IV. THE FRAILTIES OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD.

A moment ago I read to you from the latter part of John 3 beginning with verse 25. I want to go back to John 3 now and read verses 23 and 24. (Read.)

This was something that John the Baptist didn’t know anything about – “For John was not yet cast into prison.” But the day came when that is where he found himself. Now I don’t know how long he was there, but the day arrived when he sent two of His disciples to ask the Lord a question you would never think would come from the lips of John the Baptist. “Art Thou He that should come, or do we look for another?”

Please turn to Matthew 11. For the moment let us concentrate on the first three verses. John the Baptist was thinking, “If you, Lord, are Who You are, and are going to do what I have said you are going to do, then why I am where I am?” At that time John didn’t know that he would never get out of jail alive. John had been preaching that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” But to him in jail it looked less likely than ever. But did you in reading the Gospels ever think that you would hear John the Baptist

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saying what he did in verse 3? He was beginning to feel like he might have been mistaken even about the Lord.

But now look at what follows from verse 4 on to verse 15 of Matthew 11. How could the Lord say what He did about John the Baptist in the light of the question that John the Baptist had raised about Him?

I find the answer in a very important divine principle which was expressed by the Lord when he had sent Samuel to the house of Jesse looking for one of his sons who would be king over Israel. Samuel was ready to choose the first son, Eliab, because he liked his looks. But the Lord said unto Samuel,

7 But the Lord said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7).

After seeing seven of Jesse's sons, and seeing the Lord reject them all, Samuel asked if Jesse had any more sons. Jesse said he had one more who was keeping the sheep. Jesse brought in his son David, and the Lord told Samuel to arise and anoint this most unlikely son as Israel's next king.

But the principle is, and it is confirmed even by the Lord's refusal here in Matthew 11 to drop John the Baptist like we probably would have if the decision had been ours.

But why would the Lord give the commendation to John the Baptist that we read about in verses 4 and following. Think of the thousands of people that John the Baptist had preached to, and the thousands that he had seen come to the Lord. Didn't such a question as John the Baptist raised disqualify him for the ministry that the Lord had called him to do – certainly so far, but no farther.

Why was the Lord's response different? Because God seeth not as man seeth, for man looketh on the outward appearance, but God looketh on the heart. This David committed adultery, and then killed that woman's husband to cover his sin. Both sins were punishable by death under the Law, "but God seeth not as man seeth . . ."

Take another illustration from an earlier period in the OT, from the life of Abraham. In Genesis 12 we are told that Abram went down into Egypt

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when he arrived in Canaan and found the country in a famine. Then he got worried about his own life, and lied about Sarah his wife saying that she was his sister.

The Lord delivered him out of that, but in Genesis 20 we find Abraham going down to Gerar, and He got worried that the men there would kill him, so he told them the same lie about Sarah, and Sarah was taken from him and it was only by the grace of God that her virtue was preserved. But the Lord had judged the family of Abimelech so that none of them could have children. But an interesting conversation took place between God and Abimelech in verses 4 through 7 in Genesis 20:

4 But Abimelech had not come near her: and he said, Lord, wilt thou slay also a righteous nation?

5 Said he not unto me, She is my sister? and she, even she herself said, He is my brother: in the integrity of my heart and innocency of my hands have I done this.

6 And God said unto him in a dream, Yea, I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart; for I also withheld thee from sinning against me: therefore suffered I thee not to touch her.

7 Now therefore restore the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live: and if thou restore her not, know thou that thou shalt surely die, thou, and all that are thine (Gen. 20:4-7).

Why would Abimelech expect God to hear Abraham's prayer when Abraham was the cause of all of the problem? Because God does not look on the outward appearance, but on the heart.

If time permits point to Peter's denial of the Lord – three times with curses and oaths. Would you have trusted Peter after that to lead the work after the ascension of the Lord? How did the Lord deal with Peter? This passage is one of the most amazing in all of the Bible. The passage I am referring to now is in the last chapter of the Gospel of John

The words of the Lord about John the Baptist in the verses that follow are wonderful words. But John was making the mistake as far as he was along the way to glory, that his timing was not synchronized with God.

We could ask the same question today? Is God building His kingdom? It doesn't look like it when we look at our world today, does it? I am sure that John the Baptist asked this question at what probably was the lowest point in his life as a child of God. Job had his faith shaken to the roots,

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didn't he? Even our Lord Jesus Christ said, "My God. My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" The Lord Jesus was touched to the depth with the feeling of our infirmities, and we need to remember this in our down days.

We are so used to be thinking about our relationship with God as being on a merit system. It is true that our obedience to the Lord brings blessing, but often the blessing comes at the lowest point in our lives because while we look on the outward appearance, even of ourselves, but the Lord looketh on the heart. Many times we don't even understand ourselves, but how wonderful it is to know that God's grace is greater than our sins. This is no excuse for sinning, but it is to keep us from being hopeless when we do sin, and often repeat the same sins.

When Jacob was faced with meeting his brother Esau after more than twenty years since he had cheated his brother out of the blessing, and the last he knew about Esau was that Esau wanted to kill him, on the eve of their meeting Jacob had divided his family so that he would be able to escape from Esau with half on them, and then he prayed this prayer:

9 And Jacob said, O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the Lord which saidst unto me, Return unto thy country, and to thy kindred, and I will deal well with thee:

10 I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands.

11 Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau: for I fear him, lest he will come and smite me, and the mother with the children.

12 And thou saidst, I will surely do thee good, and make thy seed as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude (Gen. 32:9-12).

If there is something in your life tonight, and you are fearful that the Lord no longer is going to love you, and care for you, take these illustrations from Scripture and let your heart be comforted by the grace and the faithfulness of our loving God and heavenly Father.