

JOHN THE BAPTIST—THE FORERUNNER OF THE MESSIAH

Presented by

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Sometimes, as we read the historical accounts in the Bible about various people, we see that certain individuals occupy what we might call “main roles,” while others have what we might refer to as “supporting roles.” For example, in 2 Kings 5 we find a story in which two men have main roles. The first man was Naaman, a leper who was the commander of the army of the king of Syria. The second man was Elisha, the prophet of God to whom Naaman came in hopes of being healed. Playing the part of the supporting role was Elisha’s servant Gehazi—who was cursed with Naaman’s leprosy because of his greed and lies.

The New Testament contains another account of man who also played a supporting role—yet who had a much nobler spirit than Elisha’s sinful servant Gehazi. His name was John the Baptist, and his job was to serve as a forerunner among the Jews to announce the future work of Jesus Christ the Messiah. Long before either John or Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah had predicted that someone would come, “crying in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God!’” (Isaiah 40:3). We know from the New Testament that John was the individual of whom Isaiah spoke, because Matthew 3:1-3 informs us, “In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near,’” and that John was indeed the one about whom Isaiah had prophesied.

Like Jesus, we know practically nothing about John’s boyhood years except for the fact that he “grew and became strong in spirit” (Luke 1:80). The silence of those early years, however, was broken by his **thundering call for the Jews to repent**—shortly before Jesus began His own public ministry. Each of the four gospels records that John lived “in the wilderness,” which was where he was reared (Luke 1:80), called by God (Luke 3:2), and preached until his death (Mark 1:4). John beckoned the people to leave the comforts of their cities and homes and come into the wilderness area where they could learn of the great salvation that God had planned for them.

John—dressed in camel’s hair and a leather belt—understood his task to be two-fold in nature. First, he had been called by God to reform a nation full of hard-hearted and sinful Jews by calling them to repentance. Second, he was to “prepare the way of the Lord and make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” As John preached, he told the Jews in no uncertain terms that “One who is more powerful than I is coming after me—One whose sandals I am not worthy to carry” (Matthew 3:11).

John’s commanding presence and powerful message drew **huge** crowds to hear him. In fact, according to Matthew 3:5, “Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him.” What those Jewish citizens encountered from this “voice crying in the wilderness” was, according to Matthew

3:6, a call for them to immediately begin a badly needed spiritual and moral renewal by “confessing their sins.” John also “told the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, Christ Jesus” (Luke 19:4). He then urged them to submit to “baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Luke 3:3).

John’s blunt moral challenge to the Jews of his day was issued with specific purposes in mind. For example, his command in Luke 3:11 for the people to share their food and clothing was intended to be a verbal jab at a society whose main goal had become the collection of material goods. And when, in Luke 3:12-13, John admonished the tax collectors not to take more money than was rightfully due to them, he exposed the rotting underbelly of a society in which personal greed had drawn people to such distasteful positions in the first place.

John obviously took his job very seriously, because he even was willing to oppose Herod Antipas, who was the powerful governor of Judea and the ruler during Jesus’ life and ministry. Herod had married the daughter of a king, but had begun committing adultery with Herodias, the wife of his half-brother, Philip. As Luke 3:19 tells us, John openly condemned this scandalous affair, which caused Herod to order that John be arrested and imprisoned. Later, at a royal birthday party, Herod granted Salome, the daughter of Herodias, a wish. At the prodding of her mother, Salome asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Since Herod had taken an oath to give her whatever she requested, and because he did not want to appear weak in front of his guests, Herod ordered that John be executed, and that his head be brought to the feast on a platter. John had preached God’s Word faithfully—and because of that he was killed by a wicked king who allowed himself to be influenced by an adulterous woman, her scheming daughter, and the evil people around him.

Matthew 14:13 informs us that Jesus, saddened at learning of John’s death, “withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by Himself.” Jesus loved John dearly, and, in fact, once said of him, “Assuredly, I say to you that among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist” (Matthew 11:11). John’s influence continued to live on even after his death. Acts 19:1-7 tells us that when the apostle Paul went to Ephesus nearly thirty years later, he found a group of John’s disciples worshiping there.

John loved the truth of God’s Word **so much** that he preached it without compromise to everyone he met—from Jewish Pharisees to Roman governors. Perhaps if John had been willing to preach something other than God’s Word, Herod might have spared his life. But John was unwilling to do that—and died as a result. As we ponder John’s fate, we cannot help but be reminded of what is said in the book of Revelation about first-century Christians who “conquered Satan by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death” (Revelation 12:11). John the Baptist, like those Christians who died for their faith, “did not cling to life even in the face of death.” Through his sacrifice, he left us a wonderful example to follow as we live out our faith every day of our lives.