

JOURNEY THROUGH THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

#2: "The Message of John the Baptizer"

SCRIPTURE: John 1:19-34

¹⁹ And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." ²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." ²² So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."

²⁴ (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) ²⁵ They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, ²⁷ even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸ These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.' ³¹ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." ³² And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

INTRO:

Who was this man known as John the Baptizer? Some consider him to be the most theologically significant figure in the gospel accounts, apart from Jesus himself. His birth and entrance into the world parallels that of Jesus, as well as that of Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah.

Elizabeth, who gave birth to John, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, were kin, although we can't be sure that they were "cousins" as the NIV indicates. The Greek word used to describe their kinship is "SUNGENIS," which simply means "kinswoman" or "relative." Elizabeth was six months along when Mary became pregnant, so John was six months older than Jesus.

Although the Baptizer's formative years were lived in obscurity in the desert, when he came with his message to the people of Judea, he was the first

prophet of God that they had heard in four hundred years! God had been silent for four hundred years! John was the “voice crying in the wilderness” that Isaiah prophesied about seven hundred years earlier:

A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isaiah 40:3).

Matthew wrote in chapter 3, verses 1 through 3:

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’”

John’s lifestyle was notable in that he chose to live an ascetic life in the wilderness, subsisting on locusts and wild honey. (Have you ever eaten chocolate-covered fried grasshoppers?) His clothing was made from woven camel hair. He was quite the sight, even for his day.

He called on the Jews to repent, and those who did were baptized in the Jordan. Even Jesus asked to be baptized.

The Jews believed that Elijah would return and prepare the way for the Messiah, so when John came along, they thought him to be Elijah. However, when they realized that he was identifying an itinerant teacher and preacher named Jesus as ***“the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,”*** they were more than a little skeptical.

John became a victim of Herod’s wrath for pointing out his infidelity, as he had him beheaded at the request of his evil daughter.

Now let’s look at the biblical text of our study this morning, noting first that...

HE DENIED THAT HE WAS THE EXPECTED MESSIAH.

Before I get into this, I want to point out something that the apostle John does that results in Matthew, Mark, and Luke being called “synoptic” gospels. From verse 18 to verse 19, John jumps from the incarnation of Christ all the way to His teaching ministry, omitting any mention of His boyhood, His baptism, and His temptation in the wilderness.

So, when word got out that this striking figure who was called John was calling people to repentance and baptizing them, the Jewish religious leaders felt that they needed to find out what it was all about, so they sent a committee of priests and Levites to investigate. When they found John, they asked him, ***“Who are you?”***

Knowing that the Jews were concerned about the coming of the Messiah, John said, ***“I am not the Christ.”***

Then the Jewish investigating committee said, ***“Are you Elijah? Are you the prophet?”*** John said, ***“I am not.”***

So, they said, ***“Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”*** And John said, ***“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”***

Now, just what is meant by the words, ***“Make straight the way of the Lord”***? One commentator says, ***“...if we take a clear look at what John is preaching, it is the way of preparation for something expected yet completely new. He’s asking us to ‘wipe our slates clean’ in a sense, because something brand new is coming down the line; it is, in fact, at hand; imminent”*** (Daily Exegesis; Bible Commentary).

Another writes: ***“It was from among the people who obeyed John’s call, who made straight the way of the Lord in their own hearts, that Jesus chose his disciples. Men and women who cleared a path so that the living word from his lips could penetrate to their hearts. They repented, they got rid of the things that blocked the way of God’s Spirit. And because they cleared the way within them, their eyes could recognize Jesus for who he was, their hearts could grasp his word”*** (Mirror.com).

Verse 24 says, ***(“Now, they had been sent from the Pharisees”)***. Who were the “Pharisees”?

They were a religious sect that was a precursor to Rabbinic Judaism, which is the mainstream form of Judaism. The New Testament portrays them as legalists who emphasized oral Jewish tradition.

They were distinct from the Sadducees and Essenes. The Sadducees didn’t believe in life after death (That’s why they were sad, you see.), and the Essenes were Separatists who lived very privately in communes. The Pharisees believed not only in the Torah (the five books of Law, Genesis through Deuteronomy) but also in the oral traditions (in what was known as the Talmud), which they believed were handed down directly from God to Moses. They were very public with their beliefs as they sought to influence everyday life in the Jewish community.

Many of the Pharisees were politically active, motivated by their desire to initiate social change.

They certainly didn't like Jesus and His message. They didn't like John, either. For the most part, they were glad when John was beheaded and when Jesus was crucified.

So, this committee of Pharisees was sent to find out just who this guy was that was preaching repentance and baptizing penitent Jews.

So, when they asked him who he was, and why he was baptizing people,

HE IDENTIFIED JESUS AS THE MESSIAH...

...and said, ***"I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."***

Then the apostle John wrote, in verse 29: ***"The next day he (John the Baptist) saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'"*** At this point, Jesus was a man of thirty years of age.

And note verses 32-34, where the apostle wrote: ***"And John bore witness: 'I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and have borne witness that his is the Son of God.'"***

There's a lot of misunderstanding about what John the Baptist said regarding his baptism with water and Christ's baptism with the Holy Spirit ***"and with fire"*** as the synoptics have it. The baptism with the Holy Spirit was for the apostles on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended, and the church was born with over three thousand members. It is said that the baptism ***"with fire"*** was for those who rejected Him, although you may remember that ***"tongues of fire"*** appeared above the apostles' heads. The baptism of believers with water for the forgiveness of sins was very much like John's baptism, but with saving grace.

There is certainly no misunderstanding about John the Baptizer's declaration in verse 34: ***"...this is the Son of God."***

IN CLOSING...

...think on this:

God didn't send John the Baptizer just to identify Jesus as the Messiah that He had promised. Just believing Him to be the Messiah didn't bring forgiveness and eternal life to anyone. God sent John to let the whole world know that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God!

I saved an issue of “Smithsonian” magazine from January of 2016 because it contained an article titled “The Search for Jesus.” It seems that the Israeli government has found the buried ruins of a synagogue from the time of Jesus at Magdala. Archaeologists have also excavated near Jerusalem an “ossuary” or bone box that has been identified as the burial box of James, the brother of Jesus, a heel bone with a spike through it, a building inscription verifying Pilate’s position of prefect, not procurator, in Caesarea, an eight by twenty-six fishing boat from the first century, such as Jesus and the disciples used when they crossed the Sea of Galilee, and several other first century finds.

While archaeology confirms, to some extent, the historicity of the New Testament, it doesn’t tell us that Jesus is the Son of God. As believers, we don’t need archaeologists to tell us that. We can take John’s word for it.