

Teen Lesson 8: John the Baptist

Covering Matthew 3:1-12; Luke 1:5-25; Luke 3:1-18; John 1:19-34

As you study this lesson, be sure to read any highlighted scriptures - especially at the beginning of paragraphs. These are part of the story flow and the lesson won't make sense unless you read them first! To increase your understanding and "prove all things", please read the other referenced scriptures too.

Before we continue our study of the life of Christ, we will pause to consider John the Baptist,¹ who, as we learned in our last lesson, was the man who baptised Jesus Christ. But who was he? Let's begin by reviewing some of the things we learned about him in Lessons 5 and 6.

Luke 1:5-15 — So, the first thing we learned about John the Baptist is that his birth to Zechariah² and Elizabeth, a righteous couple who obeyed all of God's commandments, was a miracle. Elizabeth was barren - unable to have children - and both Elizabeth and Zechariah were well past childbearing age when John was born. We learned that his mother was a relative³ of Jesus' mother (verse 36), so he and Jesus were related in some way - possibly cousins.

We also learned that John was to be a great man, filled with the Holy Spirit from birth, and that he would not drink any wine or strong drink (verse 15). We learned that similar things were said of Samson in the Old Testament (Judges 13:2-6, 24-25), who was a Nazirite. That's someone who, if you remember, was dedicated to God in a special way (Numbers 6:1-21). So it's *possible* that John the Baptist was also a Nazirite. The Bible doesn't tell us whether he had long hair (as Nazarites did) but it does make it very clear that John had been set-aside even BEFORE his conception and birth to do something special for God.

Luke 1:16-17 explains what this was. John was to make peace between parents and children, and to bring those who were not obeying God back to a right way of thinking and acting - and in this way make ready a group of people for the coming of the Lord.

The job of bringing people to repentance (back to the right way of thinking and acting) is the same job that was given to the Old Testament prophets. They too, were to encourage people to turn away from sin and turn back to God (see for example: Isaiah 1:16-17; Isaiah 58; Jeremiah 3:11-17; Jeremiah 4:1-2; Hosea 4:1-3, 6; Hosea 6:1; Joel 2:12-13). If you've looked up these examples, you might have noticed that some of these

¹ Information for this lesson was gathered from a number of sources, including *The Life Application Bible*, the *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* & the *Youth Bible, New Century Version*.

² Or "Zacharias" (see King James Version).

³ The KJV translates this as "cousin", but the Greek word *sungenis* is not quite so specific and means a relative by blood, or kinsman. So Elizabeth could also have been Mary's aunt.

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messages were also prophecies for the future. Jeremiah 3:17, for example, is referring to the time after Jesus Christ returns and sets up God's government on this earth.

The prophet Malachi wrote this about what will happen just before Christ's return:

Behold, I [God] will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse (Malachi 4:5-6).

As we read in Luke 1:16-17, John the Baptist was told to do exactly the same thing in the SPIRIT and POWER of Elijah. He prepared the way - and prepared a people - for the first coming of Christ. Malachi's prophecy is about a messenger who will do the same thing before Jesus returns to set up God's government on this earth (see Malachi 3:1-2). This is part of the job that the Church has to do today. As we preach the message about the gospel (or good news) of God's coming Kingdom and teach people God's way, then we are doing our part to make ready a group of people for Christ's return. And it is because of this group of people - who the Bible calls the "elect" - that Jesus Christ will return and intervene in world events to save mankind from complete destruction (compare Matthew 24:3, 21-22 with what God says about striking the earth with a curse in Malachi 4:6).

Little is known about John's early life, but it seems that he was still quite young when his parents died, and that after their death he went to live in the wilderness of Judea. He may have lived there alone, or stayed with one of the religious communities who lived in the desert. We might think this was a strange thing for him to do, but it makes more sense when we understand a little about what was happening in Judea at the time.

The land of Palestine had been under Roman rule since the middle of the previous century. Most Jews resented their Roman rulers and the fact that they had brought their pagan culture into the land. Small groups of Jews had plotted rebellion and tried (unsuccessfully) to fight against their Roman oppressors. Some Jewish religious groups, familiar with the Old Testament prophecies about a coming Messiah who would deliver them from their pagan rulers and establish God's Kingdom on the earth, "withdrew into the wilderness, gathering disciples around them to await the coming age. The Israelites had always thought of the desert as a fitting place for religious thinkers, and in Jesus' time many men believed the Messiah would appear there first".⁴ So, as John

⁴ *Reader's Digest, Great People of the Bible and How They Lived*, 1974, pages 308-309.

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undoubtedly knew that he had been chosen by God to prepare a people for the Lord, it wasn't strange at all that he would go and live in the desert to prepare for His coming.

It was at this time, and with this as the background, that the word of God came to John and he began "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:1-3, NIV). We don't know how the word of God came to John or exactly what it said; but clearly John now understood that he was to begin his ministry, which was not only to include a message about repenting and turning back to God, but of being baptised for the FORGIVENESS OF SINS.⁵ This was something new! This wasn't something that the Old Testament prophets had preached, but it WAS something that John's father had hinted at when he described the work that his son would do (see Luke 1:76-77).

Matthew 3:1-2 — John's message was that people should REPENT because the "kingdom of heaven is at hand". There was a sense of URGENCY about what he was preaching because the Kingdom of God (which he referred to as the kingdom of heaven because the Jews did not say God's name) was near. We know from our perspective today that the Kingdom of God was not as near as the people at that time thought it was! But it was "at hand" in the sense that the King of that Kingdom, the Messiah, was just about to come on the scene.

So John urged people to repent, which means to change their minds and to have a complete change of heart. The underlying Hebrew concept is that of "turning from one's sins and returning to God." Most people today don't know what sin is, but 1 John 3:4 makes it very clear. Sin is the transgression of God's Law - the Law that God gave to mankind to help us live happy and fulfilling lives that are pleasing to Him. We tend to think of God's Law as the Ten Commandments listed in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 - and that's true of course! But the principles of God's Law, which enlarge on the Ten Commandments, are found THROUGHOUT the Bible. That's one of the reasons why I keep encouraging you to read it! The Bible is filled with information about HOW to live godly lives and how to avoid sin - and how we can be forgiven when we do sin. So, if you want to obey God, and live His way of life, then nothing is more important than filling your mind with the words from His Book!!

Matthew 3:3 — This verse explains that the preaching of John the Baptist was a fulfilment of this prophesy in Isaiah 40:3. John's was LITERALLY the voice crying out in the wilderness (or desert), "Prepare the way of the Lord".

⁵ For information about how our sins are forgiven see the first two lessons in the Holy Day series.

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Matthew 3:4 — John wasn't the only person who wore this kind of clothing or ate this kind of food. Poor people at that time, who couldn't afford to buy wool clothing or the ornate waistbands of the rich, wove camel's hair into coarse cloth and wore leather belts instead. They also ate locusts and honey from wild bees. (The thought of eating locusts sounds yucky to us, but Leviticus 11:21-22 explains that there are four types of locusts that can be eaten, and apparently the Bedouins - people who live in the desert - still cook and eat them today!) The point of all this is that John lived a simple life and identified with the poor, just like many of the prophets in the Old Testament. And the fact that he wore a leather belt links him to the prophet Elijah, who also wore one (see 2 Kings 1:8).

Matthew 3:5-6 — By all accounts, John was a fiery preacher who caused no small stir among the people! His message was forthright and controversial, and his reputation grew. Multitudes went into the desert to hear him speak, and many confessed their sins and were baptised as a result.

The Greek word for "confess" in this verse means to acknowledge or agree fully. These people were admitting that they HAD sinned and were publicly willing to express their sorrow, guilt, and willingness to change, by being baptised. Their baptism was an outward symbol of an inward change, just as it is for us today.

Baptism was common among the Greeks and Romans at that time and was also practiced by some Jewish sects. It was used as an initiation rite, to show that a person had become a member of something. But it wasn't something that the Jews, in general, practiced. They were familiar with ritual cleansings of course, because the priests had to make themselves ritually pure before they served in the Temple or Tabernacle (see Exodus 30:18-21). They were also familiar with ritual purification baths, which involved being immersed in water, but the idea of having their sins washed away by the waters of baptism was "new",⁶ although it had deep theological roots in the Old Testament (see 1 Peter 3:18-22; 1 Corinthians 10:1-4; Colossians 2:11-13). No wonder people flocked to listen to John the Baptist! They were curious to discover more about what he was teaching and doing.

Matthew 3:7-10 — John certainly had some harsh things to say to the Pharisees and Sadducees - the religious leaders of his time! He didn't pull any punches! He called them a brood of vipers because he knew they were hypocrites, and he exhorted them to change and bring forth fruits worthy of repentance. But his habit of "telling it like it is"

⁶ John made baptism the distinctive rite to signify repentance. Christ submitted Himself to this practice and it became the entrance rite for those becoming part of the Church.

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would eventually get him into trouble with the authorities - as we'll discover in a future lesson.

The "wrath to come" in verse 7 refers to the time of trouble that mankind will bring upon this world because of their sins and unwillingness to repent, and the punishment that God will send before Jesus Christ returns to establish God's Kingdom on this earth. Many of the prophets in the Old Testament talked about this time (see **Malachi 3:1-3**; **Malachi 4:1-3** for example) and the book of Revelation outlines how it will all come to pass.

It may seem hard to understand why God will punish the world in this way, but God does it so that unrepentant, sinful humankind will finally understand that the consequences of continuing in sin is death (eternal spiritual destruction) - and that the result of living **GOD'S WAY** is everlasting life (see Romans 6:23). So God's punishment on this wicked and unrepentant world is actually a **LOVING** act (**Revelation 3:19**, see also Deuteronomy 8:5; 1 John 4:8b) because His desire is to bring **EVERYONE** to repentance (2 Peter 3:9) so that they can live forever as part of His Family in His Kingdom.

In **John 1:19-27**, we discover that the Jews (meaning the religious leaders) sent priests and Levites to discover who John was and why he was baptising. They were beginning to wonder whether John was, in fact, the prophesied Messiah. But John soon set them straight about that - and it wasn't long after this that Jesus came to him to be baptised. **John 1:29-34** explains that, as a result of what occurred during that baptism, John realised that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, who had come to take away the sins of the world. John's reference to Jesus being the Lamb of God, and the fact that he preached repentance for the forgiveness of sins, indicates that John may have had some understanding of the sacrifice that Jesus would make on our behalf.

We'll pick up the story of Christ's life next time, but I'd like to conclude this lesson with a few things for you to think about:

1) John the Baptist was to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers in preparation for the Messiah's arrival (Luke 1:7; Malachi 4:6). We are now much nearer to the return of Christ than they were then! So what is your relationship like with your parents? How is your heart? You might like to read Ezekiel 11:19-20 and Ezekiel 36:25-29 in this context, which talks about the new heart that God will give people in the future. This is the kind of heart that Gods' people can have **NOW** through God's Holy Spirit, which is given to us upon repentance and baptism.

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2) John urged people to repent and told them to produce fruit worthy of repentance - in other words, not just to feel sorry for doing what was wrong and want to change, but to *actually* change their behaviour (Matthew 3:8). We can say that we want to be obedient to God and live God's way of life, but do we? We all need to ask ourselves whether our actions match our words!

3) God expects us to produce good fruit - even you young people! When the people (including some tax collectors and soldiers) heard John the Baptist expressing that thought, they asked him what they should do. In what way could they bear good fruit? In reply, John gave each of them specific things to do (Luke 3:8-14), because he knew the kind of people they were and what they needed to change. If you're not sure where you could change and what kind of fruit you need to produce, then ask your parents. They know you better than anyone else!

4) In Matthew 3:11 John talks about Jesus Christ's first coming and refers to the Holy Spirit, which will be given to those who are baptised (his comments about being baptised with the Holy Spirit and fire are a reference to what would happen on the Day of Pentecost - see Acts 2:1-4). But John's words in Matthew 3:12 are describing what will happen after Christ's second coming. We've already read about the "wrath to come" BEFORE Christ returns; this verse is describing what will happen AFTER God's Kingdom has been established on this earth and everyone has had the opportunity to learn about God's way of life. Those who still refuse to repent and turn to God and live His way of life will be thrown into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:15).⁷

The point John is making in verses 8-12 is that people WILL be judged for how they live their lives. This is exactly the same conclusion that King Solomon came to (**Ecclesiastes 12:13-14**). Our whole duty (or responsibility in life) is to fear God and keep His commandments. Why? BECAUSE God is going to judge us (along with everyone else) on HOW we have lived. Will we live our lives God's way or not?

You teens growing up in the Church have a tremendous advantage because you have been taught how to live God's way from the time you were children! Have you ever considered what a privilege that is? You have the opportunity now to live the way of life that will ultimately lead to Eternal Life. I hope and I pray that it is something you will take seriously!

⁷ More information about this can be found in "The Holy Days and God's Plan" lesson in the Holy Day series.