

## The Ministry of John the Baptist

Call to Worship: Psalm 135:1-6

1st Scripture: Luke 3:1-20

2nd Scripture: Matthew 3:4-12

Hymn Insert- *Come, People of the Risen King*

Hymn Insert- *By Faith*

Hymn Insert- *O Church Arise*

### Introduction

When traveling a long distance to get to a desired location, such a long and tedious trip can wear on you (especially when you are with young children). The repeated questions, “Are we almost there?” “How much longer?” “Why is this taking so long?”...etc, can really test the patience, especially of the driver. But then, when you reach that one sign that reveals that your desired destination is just off the next exit, what happens? You make the announcement (you tell the kids), and everyone begins to perk up. Whoever was sleeping is awakened. Coloring books and other activities are laid aside. Arguing children are hugging. Socks and sneakers (and any other formerly removed articles of clothing) are quickly put back on, and the sense of anticipation in the car seems so strong that it is virtually visible to the eyes, if not felt in the soul! And of course, you arrive, and all excitement breaks loose!

But, that sign, just before the main exit, played a significant role in preparing everyone for arriving at the designated location, didn't it? It got everyone up and motivated, providing everyone, perhaps, with a handful of minutes to mentally and physically prepare for the coming excitement that was about to be experienced, once the reality had arrived. That sign served a good purpose. Well, John the Baptist was, in many ways, like that sign, pointing to the arrival of Jesus the Messiah. And here, this morning, in our main text, we will consider the primary way in which he functioned; his ministry, as it were, unto preparing the people for the arrival of the Christ.

### I. John the Baptist: The Man (vs. 4)

In verse 4, we are first given a general description of his physical appearance, which was very telling of the humility and sobriety of his calling:

“Now, John himself was clothed in camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his diet was locusts and wild honey.” Needless to say, John would not have made it on the cover of the first century version of “GQ” magazine. He was a wilderness prophet in every sense of the word. Considering that he was eventually arrested by King Herod (for calling Herod to repent of his adulterous affair with his brother’s wife, Herodias), jailed and ultimately beheaded by Herod (in his early thirties), at the request of Herodia’s daughter (on behalf of her mother), from the standpoint of the world, John enjoyed nothing even remotely equivalent to the “good life.” And yet, this “Elijah-like” prophet was labeled by Jesus, as the “greatest of all prophets,” primarily because of the honorable task he had been given, by God, in preparing the way for Christ. I only note this, brethren, to highlight the fact that what God considers to be the “good life” and what man considers to be the “good life,” are often two very different things. If you are a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ here this morning, you may lack every material blessing, and you may be despised by the world, and unpopular in all circles, but note, that true life is not bound up in man’s estimations of success, but rather, in God’s purpose for you. John was a desert wandering caveman, as it were, who was not given the privilege of enjoying life’s delicacies and delights, and yet, having faithfully fulfilled his ministry, he was beyond blessed in the sight of his God. Take note of that!

That said, let us then move on, considering the primary ministry of John the Baptist, as the forerunner.

## **II. John the Baptist: His Ministry**

John’s primary ministry, as the forerunner of the Christ, was to prepare the people to receive the Christ, by calling them to repentance, and baptizing those who had expressed a sincere desire to repent, in preparation for receiving the Christ. To this end, John’s baptism was called a “baptism of repentance,” symbolizing outwardly, the moral cleansing of all who were baptized, having determined to now embrace the Messiah, upon His public reveal/manifestation, which we will address when we come to verses 13 and following, next time, Lord willing. And as I said last time, many, many people, went out to John, to receive his baptism unto this end (Read verses 5-6).

Now, while *we* look at things from a post-revealed, crucified, risen and ascended Christ, one of the great benefits that we receive from considering the unique ministry of John, is a very detailed understanding of what “repentance” truly looks like, which is required of all who would truly be saved by Christ. While John’s emphasis on repentance is highly magnified by the fact that his focused ministry precedes the revealing of the Christ, the nature of repentance remains unchanged, for those who come to Christ in the present, even long after the completion of our Lord’s earthly ministry. And so, for this reason, we must spend some time reflecting upon, examining and applying this critical doctrine of “repentance,” which was at the very center of John’s ministry, and which, sadly, has fallen on hard times, in many churches in our day.

We already saw a summary of John’s ministry, last time, when we considered verses 1&2, “In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” And now, moving on in our text, we find a controversy that develops, as a group of Pharisees and Sadducees approach him, seeking to interrogate him on behalf of the Sanhedrin. And this leads to John emphasizing the critical need for genuine repentance, in all those who would be baptized by him (Read verses 7-10).

And so, this investigative group of Pharisees and Sadducees (from among the priests and Levites), being sent as representatives of the Sanhedrin (see John 1:24 as well), appear among the crowds, who are coming to be baptized by John. And John recognized them, probably by the clothing that they were wearing, which would have indicated their place among the religious leaders and elite. And John doesn’t hide his thoughts or sugar coat things, but rather, right from the outset, he publicly declares their hypocrisy, stating, “Brood of vipers (‘family of poisonous snakes’)! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” John knows that they are not there to deal with their own sinful, self-righteous hearts, and that, in many ways, they are the root cause of the religious hypocrisy and collapse in Jerusalem.

And so, he gets right to the root of the issue, uncovering their ungodly motives for being there. They were a crafty family of poisonous snakes, who were conspiring to uncover John’s alleged real motives for what he was doing, so that, they could report back to those who sent them out. And what makes them particularly cunning here, was that they meshed themselves in with the rest of the crowd, pretending to take a general interest in what John was doing. It is like

what later happens with Jesus, when the religious leaders seek to cause Him to slip in some way, so that they can accuse Him before the people, while they were pretending to have a sincere interest in communicating with and learning from Him. And so, John calls them out. And this then leads to a dialog between John and this group (some of which is recorded in the other Gospel accounts). But, Matthew's account especially brings us to focus on the necessity of "repentance," which is an important contribution to the purpose of his Book, which seeks to expose the utter hypocrisy of contemporary Judaism, and the need to turn to Christ, who alone can bring about the heart transformation that meets God's true standard of righteousness.

And so, John then adds, "Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (vs. 8-10). Here, John splits the reality open wide, brethren! And this is where he does some of his best work in preparing the way for Christ, because John knows that he must, "break down," in preparation for Christ to rebuild, from the inside out. And addressing the religious leaders like this (who were viewed as the epitome of perfection by all) in the presence of the multitudes, would have sent a profound message to all the people, concerning the nature of Christ's upcoming work, and how to access the righteous benefit that would come out of it.

Put yourself in the sandals of the multitudes for a moment, brethren, as they witnessed this confrontation on John's part. These men, who everyone thinks has it all together; these who were surely a "shoe in" in the kingdom of heaven, are here told by John that they are on the verge of being cut down by the axe of God's judgment, unless they exhibit true repentance; unless they acknowledge and confess their own sinful condition, with the commitment to turn away from their sinful ways, in pursuit of God's righteousness. Your jaw would have utterly dropped, upon witnessing this! Everything you were taught about how to become righteous in God's sight, by keeping the Mosaic Laws, the prophet John has just cut down at the root, declaring that a new foundation is needed.

And then, when you would run to that other key Jewish support, John cuts that down as well. "Well, wait a minute, John. You do realize that we are children of Abraham, right? Will

God turn His back on Abraham's physical seed, as you here seem to imply by this statement of condemnation?" And John responds, "Do you actually think for a moment that you are justified in God's sight, simply because you have passed through a Jewish birth canal that takes you back to Abraham? God could make children to Abraham out of these stones! Physical descent means absolutely nothing (a big fat zero), if you are not right with God on the inside, at the level of the heart! You need to repent of your sins and of your self-righteousness, and then you will find the power, in God, to bring about what God calls for, in all who would partake in His heavenly kingdom. Bear fruits (bring forth the genuine evidence) that would affirm that your repentance is authentic, and God will work there. The axe of God's judgement is already laid at the root. You are already under God's judgment. And you will soon be cut down, unless you repent and start bearing good fruit, all of you!"

Let's just say that no one would have expected to hear these kinds of things coming from the prophet John, especially directed at the religious leaders. But, in Luke's Gospel, we see then, how this leads to others, within the multitude, beginning to seek John's counsel, concerning *how* they themselves could exhibit such fruits of genuine repentance (Read Luke 3:7-14). Note for now, brethren, that clearly, repentance is not just a confession of sorrow, but it also involves a change of heart, leading to concrete change in actions, leading to positive fruit bearing. What once was heading in one direction, is now heading in another direction, manifested by a life that has actively changed direction, in accordance with the profession. One who has extra, now gives to those who have not. One who once took extra, now takes only what is fair and proper. One who intimidated and accused falsely, is now content with what he has, and exercises authority with dignity and respect.

And so, we find that John's ministry of preparing the way for the Christ, was centered upon calling the people to repent, to be baptized (as a symbol of cleansing and change), and to bear fruits worthy of repentance, all in anticipation of entering the kingdom of heaven, through faith in the soon to be revealed Messiah (and King of that kingdom).

### **III. John the Baptist: His Baptism**

Before we conclude our time for this morning, brethren, I want to leave you with a few comments about the baptism of John, especially as it relates to the baptism of Christ, as this also comes out of his interaction with the religious leaders, who interrogate him. [Read John 1:19-28 & then Matthew 3:11-12]

As the religious leaders then question John's authority to baptize, since he was neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet (like unto Moses), John then explains the nature of his baptism, and then the far greater importance attached to the baptism that was to be administered by the Christ Himself. Now, it is important to understand what John is stating here, and what he is not stating here, by his response to the religious leaders.

1) John is not devaluing the importance of the water baptism that he was providing. That water baptism was necessary, and it was an outward means of affirming one's genuine repentance and desire to embrace the soon to be revealed Messiah. However, there was no power in the baptism itself. John was not, in any way, administering grace or regeneration, nor was he invoking the Holy Spirit in any sense, by baptizing those who came to him. That said, it did provide an opportunity for the people to receive an outward sign, of their professing inward commitment to repent of their sins. And so, John is in no way saying that his baptism was empty, useless or unnecessary.

2) That said, John, as the road sign, was definitely highlighting the far greater importance of the baptism that the Christ (the main attraction) would administer upon His arrival. In other words, John's baptism, though necessary, paled in comparison to the powerful baptism of Christ, even as John himself, paled in comparison to Christ (Read Matthew 3:11; note, John is less than a servant in comparison). Indeed, one could experience John's baptism and never experience the true life to which it points, but Christ's baptism involved real and certain change. And so, John is not negating the purpose of his baptism, but rather, he is minimizing its value compared to the much greater and all powerful baptism of the Christ. John baptized with water unto a profession of repentance, but the Christ would baptize with fire and with the Holy Spirit.

Now, all of that said, what exactly is this Messianic baptism, which the Lord would perform upon *all* people. Well, there are two sides to it. On the one hand, this baptism gifts,

purifies and greatly benefits those who come to faith in Him; all believers. And on the other hand, this baptism brings eternal condemnation and judgment upon the wicked. The same baptism that purifies the godly, utterly condemns and eternally ruins the ungodly. Verses ten and twelve clearly confirm this two-fold aspect to Christ's baptism (Read Matthew 3:10&12). And so, we understand this fire and Holy Spirit baptism in two ways:

1) The fire here spoken about is the means, whereby, Christ gifts, purifies and sanctifies His people through the work of the Holy Spirit, beginning with regeneration and concluding at the glorification of His redeemed people. This baptism is given to all who will ever truly believe into Christ.

2) The fire here spoken about also relates to the authority and power given to Christ, whereby, He will cast into eternal hell all who reject and deny Him. The tree that does not bare fruit (evidencing the fact that regeneration has never taken place) will be cut down and thrown into the fire, by Christ Himself, who will trample it underfoot in the winepress of His wrath. Or, said another way, when He comes to reap His harvest, His wheat (His true people) will be gathered into the barn, but the chaff (the non-living unbelievers, as it were) will be burned up in unquenchable fire. And so, this is the distinction that John is seeking to make, when highlighting the far greater importance of Christ's powerful baptism, over His symbolic baptism with water.

Having considered John's person, ministry and baptism, let us then conclude, brethren, by considering a few, relevant, concluding applications.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

1) While we look at things from the other side of the fence, where the Christ has already come, and furthermore, accomplished all of His earthly ministry, with the clarity of His divine nature being revealed like the noonday sun, and while Christ still works powerfully within all of His people by means of the Holy Spirit, recognize the importance of water baptism as a sign of the covenant between God and us, representing our union with Christ in His death and resurrection. Baptism is still a necessary sign of one's profession of faith, received in obedience to Christ, and ought to be received by all who are truly in Christ. While John had a unique position and calling, as the forerunner of Christ, proclaiming a baptism of repentance in light of

the soon to be revealed Christ, we point to the Christ from the standpoint of His ministry having been fulfilled, calling people to repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, followed by a baptism that is in keeping with, and represents, union with Christ.

No, it does not save. No, it does not regenerate in any sense, whatsoever, even as it hadn't, during the time of John. But, it is an important declaration of union with, and obedience to Christ, in which all believers, ought to partake. We see this in the Great Commission given to the Apostles. We see this carried over into the life of the early church in Acts. And we see it all throughout church history. And so, I ask you this morning, are you a believer? If so, have you been baptized? If not, why not? Why would you neglect to obey one of the very first directives of your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who underwent the baptism of judgment at the cross, for you?

2) While baptism is important, and while being part of a local church by means of baptism is essential to growing in Christ, we ought never to put stock in either of these outward realities, when it comes to assuring us of the authenticity of our salvation. In other words, friends, being baptized doesn't save anyone. Joining a church doesn't save anyone. Indeed, young people, being born in a Christian home doesn't save anyone. No *outward* reality saves anyone, anymore than simply being Jewish saved anyone in John's day. God can make baptized, church going, Christian raised people, out of stones.

You must be born again. You must have a genuine and sincere faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, accompanied by a genuine repentance (turning away from your sins and toward God). There must be a change of heart that leads to a change of desire and action. The commitment and determination to follow Christ must immediately follow the desire to wholly embrace Christ by faith. To be sure, there are many, many people who have received the outward signs of the covenant (there are many who have been baptized with water, joined the church and received communion), who have never received the inward change which is represented by the outward signs. John's baptism doesn't save. It never did. You must be regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit. You must have the life of God within your soul. If this doesn't describe you, I would exhort you to seek the Lord with all of your heart, praying to this end, until you are certain that you are truly in union with Christ! [The Gospel!] Amen!!! Benediction: Jude 1:24-25