



JOHN THE BAPTIST

- *a dedicated servant*
- *a prophet who prepared the way for the Messiah*
- *a man who perfectly fulfilled his role*

KEY VERSE

Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist. —Matthew 11:11

PROLOGUE

According to Jesus Christ, John the Baptist stands as the greatest prophet in the Bible ([Matthew 11:11](#); [Luke 7:28](#)). John's responsibility was to prepare people for the coming of the Messiah.

John was a preacher, a priest and a prophet. In this lesson we will discover what he accomplished, how he prepared the way for the Messiah, and what we can learn from his example.

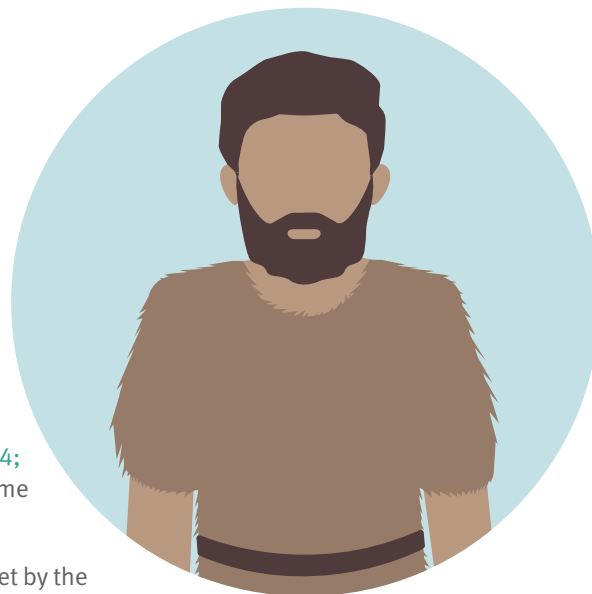
STORY AND STUDY

(You can read the story of John's birth in [Luke 1](#).)

To announce and prepare for this monumental event, God sent a prophet by the name of John.

One of the most important events in the history of humanity was the coming of the Messiah in the flesh to live a perfect life and die as our Savior. Also called "the Word," Jesus Christ emptied Himself of His privileges as a spirit being and came "in the likeness of men" ([John 1:14](#); [Philippians 2:8](#)). He offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sins and became our Savior.

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Pause for thought: *When a new product is released, an announcement is made to help people be aware of it. If television or the internet could have been used to announce the coming of the Messiah, what might the announcement say? How would you get this message out to people?*



John's father, Zacharias, was a descendant of Aaron and therefore served as a priest on a rotating schedule at the temple. John's mother, Elizabeth, was also a Levite of the family of Aaron. As a result, according to God's law, any sons this couple would have would be born to become priests and, when of age, would be able to serve in the temple.

Zacharias and Elizabeth were very careful to be obedient to God and followed His law carefully. Unfortunately they were unable to have children, and it appeared that this would always be the case. All through their married lives, they had prayed fervently to God asking for children.

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John's birth announcement

When Zacharias's turn to serve at the temple came up (probably during early June that year), he was selected by lot to be the one to burn incense in the holy place. While he carried out this duty, a shocking surprise confronted him!

An angel suddenly appeared to the right of the incense altar! This frightened Zacharias and greatly troubled him. But the angel tried to calm him by telling him not to be afraid.

The angel, later identified as Gabriel, explained that Zacharias's and Elizabeth's prayers had been heard by God, and He was going to act on them. Gabriel announced that Elizabeth would become pregnant and have a son, and they were to name this son John.

The name *John* in Hebrew means "God is gracious" or "God is a gracious giver." God would graciously give Zacharias and Elizabeth—and the world—a wonderful gift in sending John.

Zacharias was stunned by this encounter, which included prophecies about what John would do and how he would help turn many of his fellow countrymen back to the true God. The meeting concluded with Gabriel telling Zacharias that the main focus of John's responsibility would be "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17).

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Speechless

While Zacharias *hoped* what the angel stated would come to pass, he apparently doubted. He felt he needed more assurance that it was true. Zacharias explained that he and his wife were quite old—past childbearing age—so how could he be assured that it would happen as the angel said?





Zacharias would become mute—unable to speak a word out loud until after the birth of the baby.

Gabriel proclaimed that he was an angel who served at the very throne of God and was bringing this good news directly from God Himself. It appears that Zacharias lacked faith. His doubt and request for a sign *could* be interpreted as limiting the great God.

But understanding human frailty, God patiently dealt with Zacharias in a way that would correct him for his lack of belief, as well as draw attention to the miraculous birth of John: Zacharias would become mute—unable to speak a word out loud until after the birth of the baby.

Pause for thought: *How would you communicate with others if you suddenly lost the ability to speak? Write a phrase on paper and ask your child to try to communicate it without using words.*

Zacharias was in the temple far longer than would normally have been needed to light the incense. People began to worry that something was wrong. When he finally appeared, he had a look that seemed to combine fear, concern and elation! He wildly waved his arms in a futile attempt to communicate without words what he had just experienced. Finally they were able to make some sense of his wordless story and determined he must have been given a vision. He must have spent hours—maybe even days—trying to communicate what had happened.

It occurred just as the angel had said it would. Nine months later, Elizabeth birthed a beautiful baby boy.

Once his rotation of service in the temple was complete, he departed for home. Shortly thereafter a great miracle occurred. In spite of them both being of advanced years and, in Elizabeth's case, barren, Elizabeth became pregnant!

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John receives his name

On his eighth day of life, a Jewish baby boy would have been circumcised and officially named. Everyone at the baby's ceremony expected that the boy would be named after his father, Zacharias. But Elizabeth protested and said his name would be John. When others reminded her that there were no relatives named John, they appealed to his father assuming he would want his son named after himself. Zacharias asked for a writing tablet to clearly communicate his wishes. What he wrote surprised them all: "His name is John" (Luke 1:63).

At that very moment another miracle occurred. The penalty of being unable to speak was lifted! Zacharias spoke and sang and began to praise God for this son and all these miracles. God used Zacharias to



prophecy—out loud—that “you child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways” (Luke 1:76).

The events surrounding John’s birth were clearly miraculous. From the very beginning of his life, God focused attention upon John so that people would take notice of him and listen to him. Word spread quickly of these miraculous happenings. Many throughout the region and beyond were in awe and wondered what God might be going to do through this child. They watched and waited.

Factoid: At the time of John the Baptist, all religious life in Judea centered around the temple. To the Jews of that day, the presence of the temple was “proof” that God was with them.

John baptized them by immersing them in water. It represented a cleansing, a washing away of their sins.

John’s job

As John grew to adulthood, it was obvious to all that God was with him. While his manner of living seemed quite unusual for a priest (Matthew 3:4), his words were filled with conviction and truth. John’s message was simple yet to the point: repent of your sins to get right with God so you can be ready for the coming of the Messiah.

As crowds gathered to listen, they too were convinced that they needed to do as God commanded. By the thousands, they rededicated their lives to obedience to God and His law.

As an outward display of their change, John baptized them by immersing them in water. It represented a cleansing, a washing away of their sins. As a result of this action, John the priest and prophet became commonly known as “John the baptizer”—hence, “John the Baptist.”



Factoid: The Greek word translated “to baptize” in the New Testament literally means “to immerse or submerge.”

The priesthood as a whole had become self-serving, arrogant and corrupt. They did not fear God properly.

The wilderness, not the temple

Even though John was a priest by birth, he did not function out of the temple. To prepare the way for the Messiah, John would take the Jews’ focus away from the temple so they might better recognize and respond to the Messiah.



The temple and its services had become very corrupt. The high priest had become a political appointment rather than the hereditary role God had decreed. The priesthood was fleecing (defrauding or overcharging) those who came to sacrifice by requiring them to buy sacrificial animals from the priests themselves. They were charging exorbitant exchange rates when they required worshippers to exchange common coins for coins supposedly more fit for the temple services—which, of course, were available only from the priests. (These were the exchange tables Jesus would later overturn in righteous anger.)

The priesthood as a whole had become self-serving, arrogant and corrupt. They did not fear God properly. Because the Messiah—who was pictured by these sacrifices—would soon fulfill them and make them unnecessary, God was about to put an end to the temple and its services.

God would use John to begin to turn His people away from the temple and toward Him. With the root of the religious system of the day so corrupt, only repentance could change the outcome. Because of John, the people would not look to the temple or priesthood for the coming Messiah.

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Unusual location and habits

John did not fit the mold of the priesthood. Rather than the elegantly decorated clothing of the priests, he wore simple camel's hair clothing. Instead of the sumptuous meals eaten by the priesthood, he ate locusts and wild honey. Rather than serving in the temple with its corruption and misdirection, he taught in the wilderness. Not unlike prophets who went before him, he encouraged Judah to repent and return to God.

With the message he taught, the way he taught it, and where he taught, the Jews' eyes were being turned away from the temple and its priesthood. Their eyes and hearts were being turned as in Elijah's day when God used Elijah to turn the people back to God.

John, in the office and power of Elijah, was helping them to be prepared and made ready for the Messiah. And John expected evidence—"fruit"—that showed repentance had taken place.

Key message

With all the miracles that had surrounded his birth and with the thousands who now listened to him and responded to the call to repent, it might have been easy to allow such notoriety to make him proud and boastful. But not John. He would never allow the focus to be on himself.

Rather, he stayed consistently true to his assignment to prepare the way for the Messiah, the Son of God—Jesus Christ. He proclaimed, "One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Luke 3:16).





By real repentance—walking the narrow or straight path—their hearts would be made ready for the Christ.

It was revealed to John early on that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, the Lamb of God who would be sacrificed to pay the penalty for our sins. John made it clear that he was simply a messenger, “a voice of one crying in the wilderness” (Luke 3:4), encouraging people to get their lives in order and repent of their sins. By real repentance—walking the narrow or straight path—their hearts would be made ready for the Christ.



Baptism as an example

When Jesus came to John to be baptized, John was confused at first. Baptism was meant to wash away sins, and he knew the Son of God had no sins to wash away. John felt he should be baptized by Jesus, not the other way around! When Jesus explained that he was doing this as an example for others, John baptized Jesus.

At that moment, God gave an obvious, public display to confirm that Jesus was in fact the one John had been predicting. The Holy Spirit, in the visible form of a dove, descended from heaven and rested on Jesus. Then they heard the words from heaven, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17).

John realized that he had faithfully done his job and that going forward all attention must be turned from him to Jesus Christ. John gladly passed the baton to his Savior saying, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

So ended the life of a great prophet of God—the messenger who prepared the way for the Messiah.

John the Baptist martyred

Because he faithfully taught the truth, John was imprisoned by the ruler Herod Antipas. John had publically corrected Herod because of the ruler’s illegal and immoral marriage.

In a bout of drunken partying, Herod’s attention, and likely lust, was captured by a dancer. He was so impressed with her that he offered her any gift she would ask for, even up to half of his kingdom. The dancer (who had actually become his step-daughter through his illegal marriage) asked her mother what she should ask for. Her response was shocking: the head of John the Baptist on a platter (Matthew 14:8; Mark 6:25).

Since his pride was so great, Herod could not be embarrassed in front of the crowd by not fulfilling his promise, so he directed that John be murdered (Matthew 14:10; Mark 6:27-27).

So ended the life of a great prophet of God—the messenger who prepared the way for the Messiah.



In the same manner, when our time of service is completed, we must willingly hand the baton to others.

Conclusion

The life of John the Baptist teaches us some very important lessons. We learn from his life to always remain faithful to the responsibility to which God calls us. Repentance is the key to a godly life. Humbly doing our work of service without drawing attention to ourselves is a great virtue. As John did, we likewise must be sure to put the spotlight on the Messiah—making sure He is the focus, not ourselves.

When the time came to pass the baton to Jesus, John willingly did so with no fanfare or remorse. In the same manner, when our time of service is completed, we must willingly hand the baton to others.

It is little wonder why Jesus said of this great man, “Among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist” (Luke 7:28).



?? QUESTIONS

1. Knowledge

What was John the Baptist’s responsibility?

2. Comprehension

Why did John turn people’s attention away from the temple and priesthood?

3. Connections

How did John the Baptist prepare the people’s hearts for the coming of the Messiah?

DISCUSSIONS

1. John proclaimed that Herod Antipas’s marriage was a sin. Why is it hard to sometimes tell people the truth? Is it any of our business when a leader is sinning? What responsibility do we have to teach the truth?

2. Before he would baptize them, John asked the Pharisees to show fruits proving their repentance. What “fruit” do you think he was looking for?

3. Sometimes God allows bad things to happen to good people, such as John the Baptist. Why might God have allowed John to be killed?



ACTIVITIES

1. *Baptism*

Find something that might be immersed in water but not come clean without soap (like a dirty bath toy or dirty dish). Baptism by immersion represents a burial in which we are cleaned up. The water is to wash us clean. Repentance is like the soap that cleans us up.

Baptism by immersion represents a burial in which we are cleaned up.

Now use soap and immersion to get rid of the dirt on the item. Explain how baptism without repentance just gets us wet. But baptism preceded by repentance makes us spiritually clean.



2. *Where Is the Jordan River?*

Find a map of the ancient land of Judah and search for the Jordan River. Where might John the Baptist actually have done these baptisms?

3. *You Are an Artist!*

If you like to draw, color and paint, take your favorite art materials and create a picture of a person being baptized.