

A MAN SENT FROM GOD - JOHN THE BAPTIST

Study 1

HIS NAME - JOHN

Read

Luke 1: 5-25 & 57-66

In beginning this study of the life of John the Baptist, there are several facts which we must take into consideration.

1. He was the son of Zacharias, a priest, and Elizabeth, who was of the priestly family of Aaron. They were elderly parents, beyond the age of naturally having children and they were childless when the story begins.
2. Luke, in **chapter 1: 36** tells us that Elizabeth was the cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus. So John was a relative in a natural way of the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.
3. John was about six months older than the Lord Jesus and as a young man came to the fore to announce His public ministry. We shall notice the true meaning of this in a later study.
4. The name, John, means 'gift of God' or 'favour of God'. It was the name given to him by God's special direction, but against the wishes of relatives and neighbours. Notice these points in reading the passages in Luke's Gospel, which describe the birth of John. This is the only gospel which gives us these details.

The times in which John the Baptist was born and lived were very important. They were difficult days. The Jewish people were under the power of Rome and were constantly reminded of this by the burden of taxes and demands that were imposed upon them. They were under the rule of Herod, a thoroughly wicked man. Although the builder of a very fine Temple, he was a man who had no interest in the true religion of Israel. As John grew up he soon realised that the life of the nation was lacking in the values of the pure faith he was taught at home. These were days of hypocrisy and shameful, godless actions, particularly among the rulers and religious leaders of the people. Yet these were days in which Jesus was to be born, and John's early life was surrounded by an atmosphere of expectancy. The people were awaiting their Messiah and John was to be the herald of His coming. It is therefore sad to see the misguided attitude of the nation when He did come. They could not have really listened to John's message.

Although conditions were dark around him, John was born into a home where God was honoured. Notice the good things said about Zacharias and Elizabeth. "**RIGHTEOUS BEFORE GOD**" first of all. Secondly, "**WALKING IN ALL THE COMMANDMENTS**", and thirdly, "**BLAMELESS**". (1: 6) Their lives before God and their fellow-men were

upright. Although they were elderly, they were still going on with God. This was a Godly home into which John was born. If you have such a home, it is something for which to praise the Lord. Make sure that you fully appreciate it and, if possible, share it with others.

John's birth was a MIRACLE. His parents were beyond the age of bearing children. Like Isaac and Samson, he was a special gift to his parents from the Lord. This gave special significance to his life, right from the beginning. Also his birth was ANNOUNCED by the angel Gabriel to Zacharias, as he was serving in the Temple. Notice what Luke says about angels in his first two chapters, it is most interesting. Angels are obviously God's servants and, according to **verse 19**, Gabriel was sent from the presence of God to announce this important birth that was to take place. Angels are always ready to OBEY God's commands as they serve Him. Are you ready to do the same?

Zacharias was afraid when the angel appeared **verse 12**, and we can sympathise with him in this. But he refused to BELIEVE the words of the angel. This introduces a sad note into the story and because of his UNBELIEF this aged priest was struck dumb. His unbelief brought enforced silence and the angel made it quite clear that this was a judgment upon him until John would be born **verse 20**. This illustrates for us the fact that those who are without faith have no real testimony to give.

Throughout the following months of waiting, Zacharias' disability would be a constant reminder to him of his unbelief. He would also be unable to function as a priest - his service for God. So that we see here a further picture-lesson for us as Christians. Faithlessness, or unbelief, affects our service for God as well as our testimony to the world, for "**without faith it is impossible to please Him**". (Hebrews 11: 6)

Zacharias would, like Peter after his denial of the Lord, have plenty of time to think and to come to a point of repentance. For remember, that even though sin or unbelief in a person's life has severed the means of communication with God, there is always a way back. Peter was given the opportunity and took it and here we see Zacharias is given his opportunity, too.

At the birth of John, all was rejoicing. The neighbours came together to rejoice and share in the joy of the family. And Zacharias, as he wrote the name "**John**" - God's name for the child - testified to his faith and obedience to God. With his BELIEVING, his speech returned and his 'line of communication' with God and his fellow-men was restored. Then God was able to use him to speak the wonderful prophecy recorded in **chapter 1: 67-80**. Yes, those who BELIEVE in God will have plenty to TELL OTHERS. There is nothing like faith to loosen the tongue of Christians to speak of the Lord.

We close this lesson by noticing two important things said concerning John, both of which tell us of the purpose of his birth. (**See 1: 17 & 76**)

1. John was to be a PROPHET - that is, he was a man with a message from God to the people. We will notice what this message was in our further study.
2. John was also to be a FORERUNNER of the great Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. In this he prepared the way for the people to receive the Saviour, whom God sent into the world.

Study 2

A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

Read John 1: 6-37; 3: 22-36

“There was a man, sent from God, whose name was John” - this is how our Bible reading begins to describe John the Baptist. In this lesson we shall be looking at the character of John. In the final lesson we can consider his contact with the people and his message. From John, the gospel writer, we learn much about the kind of person John the Baptist really was. Had we only the accounts given of him in the other three gospels, we could be forgiven for thinking that he was just a rugged, rough man of the desert. But when you read the passages we are studying, it is evident that he was a humble, sensitive person with a great heart and a gracious spirit.

When John came as a herald to announce the coming of the Lord Jesus, he was fulfilling Old Testament prophecy. (**See Isaiah 40: 3-5**) Have you ever wondered what happened in between the record of Malachi in the Old Testament and Matthew in the New? The time that elapsed is very often called the four hundred silent years. Much happened in the history of Israel that we cannot look at here. But gradually the way was opening up for the coming of the promised Messiah, the Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ. In the gospel records we find that the silence was broken, and when John's voice was heard, Mark states that this was that which was written in Isaiah the prophet, **Mark 1: 1-3**. Here is another reminder that God was working to a timetable. The Lord Jesus began His public ministry just as the voice of the forerunner was silenced.

There are two distinct things to note about John's message from the passage we have read.

1. What he says about himself.
2. What he says about Christ.

1. John the Baptist was, above everything else, a WITNESS sent from God. The subject of his testimony was the person of Christ. (**John 1: 6-8**) It seems from **verses 33-34** that he did not know the Lord Jesus, or at least did not at first recognise Him for who He truly was. **“I did not know Him”**, he said. Yet he was very clear in the message that he gave and it is most interesting to read what he said about himself. When the Pharisees asked him who he was, he quotes from **Isaiah 40: 3**, **“I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness.”** (**verse 23**)

John was the ‘voice’ and Israel was the ‘wilderness’. Because of their sin and departure from God, the people had become spiritually dry and barren, like a desert. John

spoke of himself simply as a voice. He did not pose as a great man to be praised or admired, but as a voice - not to be seen, but only to be heard. John was the voice, but Christ was the Word. (**John 1: 1**) The Word needs a voice to make it known, and the voice is of no value without the Word. The Word is infinitely greater than the voice, but it can be our privilege too, to be a voice for Him.

To John then, it was vital that all eyes should be turned towards the One he announced. Notice how he was willing to give PRIOR PLACE to the Lord Jesus. He had a great sense of his own unworthiness and felt that even to unloose the thong on the Lord's sandal was too honoured a task for him. It is at this point that we see the willingness of John to retire into the background, so that the Saviour might be seen. **Chapter 3** makes this even more clear. As the Lord Jesus began His active ministry and the people were turning to Him, John is glad to testify to the worth of the One he had heralded. **“He must increase, but I must decrease”**. (**3: 30**) These words could be written as an epitaph for John the Baptist. It is as though he is saying, **“You must lose sight of me, but you must look at HIM”**. Not only did he say this in WORDS, but his whole LIFE gave expression to this declaration. To Christians who witness to the Lord Jesus this is an essential lesson. The whole aim of your testimony must be to make sure that people are pointed to Christ. They must see beyond you to the Saviour. Your witness is wasted if you are the only one seen.

2. Look now at those things John said about Christ. **“He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.”** (**1: 15**) Naturally speaking, as a man, John was older than Jesus, for he was born before Him. But John knew that Jesus was more than just a man. He existed before even time began. (**See John 17: 5 & 24**) So he says, **“I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.”** (**1: 34**) It is important to understand that John, the forerunner and herald, testified to the fact that although Jesus was a man, He was also God and it made all the difference to John's approach to Christ. What place was there for John when Jesus was there? Read **3: 31-36**.

We end our lesson today by looking at **John 1: 29**. John saw Jesus coming and walking before men. He gave one of the most wonderful testimonies to Him, **“Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”**. To understand what he meant we must remember that the lamb was a sacrificial animal among the Jews. God had taught His chosen people to kill a lamb and sprinkle its blood, as a sacrifice. He was trying to teach them that the lamb was killed as a substitute and also that blood must be shed if sins are to be forgiven. But the blood of the lambs slain during the Old Testament period did not put away sin. Those lambs were only pictures, or types, pointing forward to the fact that God would one day provide a Lamb who would actually bear away sin.

When John said that Jesus takes (or bears) away the sin of the world, he did not mean that everyone's sins are automatically forgiven. Although the death of the Lord Jesus was great enough in value to pay for the sins of the whole world, yet only those people who receive Jesus as Lord and Saviour, are actually forgiven.

Through this witness, John lost, and Jesus gained, at least two disciples. (**verse 37**) What he said in effect was that what he could never do for them the Lord Jesus could do. He could tell them of their sins and call them to

repentance, but the Lord Jesus, as the Lamb of God, was the only one who could take away sin forever. Make sure in your studies that you understand the meaning of John the Baptist's vital witness to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Study 3

A PUZZLED PRISONER

Read

Matthew 11

You will notice that the ministry of Jesus began after John the Baptist was thrown into prison. **Luke 3: 19-20** makes it clear that Herod, the evil ruler in Jerusalem, was reproved by John for his wickedness. See also **Matthew 14: 3-4**. Rather than listen to the message, he got rid of the messenger - he cast John into prison. This seems a sad and wasteful end to such a fine witness to the Lord. We shall look later at the courageous witness of John. There was neither fear, favour nor failure in his testimony. Then Christ came and it was as John's preaching ended that the preaching of Jesus commenced. Compare **Matthew 3: 2** with **4: 17** and you will see that the Lord Jesus began to preach using almost the same words as John, **"repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand"**. There is no further need of the herald when the King has come. Thus John fades into the background.

In **Matthew 11** John was in prison. He had plenty of time for reflection and to consider all the circumstances which surrounded his work as the messenger of the Lord. Had he failed? Should he have adopted a different approach in his preaching? Most of all, had God forgotten him and left him alone? Would you have asked such questions? Then news came to him of the works of Christ. He had no doubt heard of the large crowds that followed Him and of the impact His preaching and teaching was making. The miraculous healing would be reported to him - **"about the works of Christ."** (**Matthew 11: 2**) John could look back upon the active life he had lived and remember the crowds that came to him. He had testified to the Lord Jesus as the Messiah and it is possible that he expected to be part of the triumphant movements that He would bring in. Now he is shut away in prison and desperately needs reassurance. Was the Lord Jesus really the One who should come, the true Messiah? Or has he been mistaken?

So John sends his disciples to the Lord Jesus asking, **"Are You the Coming One or do we look for another?"** (**11: 3**) If we look at this properly, we can sense how depressed and uncertain John felt. We notice that Jesus answered his plea in two ways:

1. He gave John the details of His work in such a way that the answer was there. Compare **Isaiah 35: 4-6**. Notice how considerate the Lord Jesus was. He did not rebuke John and add to his troubles. Remember that when we are perplexed and troubled, we need never be afraid to bring our worries to the Lord Jesus. He cares and understands and even if it seems that God has forgotten us, He is able to reassure us. The message to John was that Jesus was working and the effects of His work were for men's healing and blessing. In other words, the evidences of Messiahship were there. Who else, but the One who was sent from God, could do these things?

Then the Lord Jesus added a very telling sentence, **"Blessed is he who is not offended because of Me"**. (**11: 6**) What does this mean? Jesus is saying to John that whatever his circumstances were and however much he was baffled by his sufferings, the way of happiness was confidence in the Saviour. We noticed the wonderful testimony that John gave to Christ. Now the reality of his witness was being tested. God sometimes allows this to happen to us. Very often the worth of our witness is tested by the things we have to suffer. Our words are challenged by circumstances, and we have to show our confidence in the Lord.

2. The Lord Jesus gave a wonderful testimony to His confidence in John. Read **verses 7-19** carefully. We see the PROPHET - **"more than a prophet"** (**verse 9**) - says the Lord. Here was one sent from God to prepare the way for the Messiah. The Lord Jesus paid tribute to his PREACHING, which was designed to express to men the message of God. He also made very clear the PLACE John held in history, **"Among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist"**. (**verse 11**) John had been humbly conscious of his own unworthiness, but how great to see how highly the Lord Jesus regarded him, compare **1 Peter 5: 6**. This is true of all who serve the Lord faithfully. We can be sure that the Lord Jesus values His servants and commends their service for Him. This is why it is so important to make it our aim to please the Lord in all that we do.

A puzzled prisoner! Yet John did the right thing, he presented his problem to the Lord Jesus. Because he did this he received two blessings. ASSURANCE as the Lord sent the answer back and APPRECIATION as the Lord Jesus expressed how much He valued His servant.

Study 4

A COURAGEOUS PROPHET

Read

Matthew 3: 1-12; 14: 1-12

In our final lesson we are going to look at the message of John the Baptist, that is the way in which he spoke to the people. We notice that the burden of his message was repentance. The people flocked to him and heard his words readily. There was nothing particularly attractive about his personal appearance and he did not look for the popularity of the crowds. In this sense, as we have seen, he was quite content to be a **'voice of one crying in the wilderness'**, attracting attention, not to himself, but to the Lord of whom he was the forerunner. His appearance could even have been wild and rather forbidding, living as he did in the wilderness. But he had a message to give which the people needed. Perhaps they were tired of the hypocrisy and double-speaking of the Scribes and Pharisees. John the Baptist gave them sincerity and truth. People who want to put their lives right with God, are never afraid to face the truth. This is an important fact which John's ministry can teach us.

Look first of all at the CHARACTER of his message. It was bound up in the one word, REPENTANCE. We look carefully at this word and find that it means a complete turn around, so as to face the other way. **Verses 7-12 of chapter 3** are sufficient to show the kind of approach

that John chose as he dealt with the Pharisees and the Scribes. They were proud of their connections with Abraham and of their religious standing, but had no intention of repenting and giving visible evidence of a change of life. The baptism of repentance demanded an end to their old way of life and a new standard altogether. Those who were baptised in Jordan, were confessing their sinfulness and giving testimony to the fact that they had repented and were going to live a different life. How important for us to know the true meaning of repentance.

Now notice the CHALLENGE of John's preaching. Look again at **Luke 3: 7-18** and you will see how John gave a very individual note to his message. People, tax collectors, soldiers, all came to him with their individual problems, for each had a different sense of need. The powerful preaching of John went deep into their hearts and their own particular need was laid bare. **"What shall we do?"**, they asked. John did not hesitate to give a clear answer to the questions that the challenge of his message brought. Look carefully at his answers, they deal with the ordinary things of everyday life. Nevertheless, they were real sins that needed to be put right. We can learn the lesson here, that repentance is concerned with being put right in the everyday matters of life. The Lord Jesus deals with these things when we know Him as Saviour, and He gives us the power to put them right.

We think now of the COURAGE of John the Baptist. In studying his preaching we find that he was absolutely fearless. It was not easy to break into the lives of the rulers and the people and tell them they were wrong. His courage stands out most clearly in the way he dealt with Herod. We read of the courageous way in which he exposed the sin and immorality of this wicked ruler of the people. Herod could not face the truth and so John was imprisoned. Because Herod was determined to continue in his evil practices, he silenced the voice that accused him. John paid the price for his faithfulness to his convictions. We know that to stand for God and His Word when there is evil around us, takes courage. To be a Christian involves upholding the highest standards of life in the Lord Jesus. Are you doing this? In the world in which we live today, some Christians are imprisoned and even put to death for witnessing to the truth!

Finally, notice what the COST of faithfulness meant for John. Although Herod was sorry (**Matthew 14: 9**), yet because of a promise sworn to the girl who danced before him, he was forced to allow John to be beheaded. John paid the price for his faithfulness with his own life. It seems a sad end to such a wonderful life, yet the Bible is clear that to be true to God and to His Word is a costly business.

John was **"Faithful until death"** and would receive **"the crown of life"**, as promised in **Revelation 2: 10**.

Questions

Lesson 1 HIS NAME - JOHN

1. Give two facts from the passage that you have learnt, about Zacharias and Elizabeth.
2. What was the condition of the Jewish nation at the time of John's birth?
3. In what ways were the births of Isaac and Samson similar to that of John the Baptist?
(See **Genesis 17 & 18; Judges 13**).
4. What have you learnt from the experience of Zacharias about faith or belief in God?
5. What was the purpose of John's birth and life?

Lesson 2 A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

1. What kind of person was John the Baptist?
2. How did John see his mission in life?
3. What marks of a true witness do we see in John the Baptist?
4. Give two things John said of the Lord Jesus that describe the character of Jesus.
5. What was the essential difference between the sacrifices of the Old Testament period and the **"Lamb of God"**?

Lesson 3 A PUZZLED PRISONER

1. Why was John the Baptist cast into prison?
2. Why did John send messengers to Jesus?
3. How would John know from the answer he received that Jesus was the Messiah?
4. What tribute did the Lord Jesus pay to John?
5. What do you consider was John's greatest characteristic? Give reasons for your choice.

Lesson 4 A COURAGEOUS PROPHET

1. What word characterised the message of John the Baptist and what did it mean?
2. What did John demand of the people as they asked: **"What shall we do?"**
3. Why does witnessing for the Lord demand courage?
4. a) What promise can we write over the life of John the Baptist?
b) To whom was it originally given?
5. As Christians, living in today's world, how can we be modern "John the Baptists"?