

John the Baptist

by Harris Franklin Rall

John the Baptist was a prophet of repentance who called people to turn away from their sins and prepare for the coming kingdom of God, and his greatest work was to make ready the way for Jesus.

Scripture: Matthew 3:1, Mark 1:1, Mark 6:14, Luke 1:5, Luke 3:1, Luke 7:24, Acts 18:25

Topics: "Repentance", "Kingdom Of God"

Description

Harris Franklin Rall delves into the profound impact of John the Baptist, a figure in the Bible overshadowed by Jesus but who left a lasting impression on his own age. John's message of repentance and the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God stirred the hearts of many, drawing people from all walks of life to his preaching. His baptism symbolized cleansing, repentance, and consecration to God's rule, preparing the way for Jesus. While John's work was powerful in highlighting sin and judgment, it also revealed the need for a message of deliverance, a void that Jesus would later fulfill.

Transcript

There is no more striking figure in the Bible than that of John the Baptist. Only a few words are given to him in the Gospels, and yet how clear the picture stands before us: the rude figure from the desert, the stern message of judgment, the thronging multitudes, the tragic end. For Christian thought he has been overshadowed by Jesus; on his own age he made a profound impression. He had no pleasant doctrine, and yet from Jerusalem and all Judæa there flocked to his preaching the people of every class--common folks and proud Pharisees, Sadducean aristocrats and plain soldiers. His name was upon every lip when Jesus was still unknown. Men asked one another whether he could be the Messiah. His stern words reached the palace and led at last to imprisonment and death. Yet even after his execution men could not think him dead, and the first reports of Jesus' work made them ask whether John was not risen from the dead (Mark 6:14; 8:28). Paul found disciples of his as remote as Ephesus, one of whom became a notable leader in the church (Acts 18:25; 19:1-7). The tragedy of the end helped to deepen the impression. Apparently at the height of his power, Herod laid hold upon him. The Gospels say it was because John had denounced Herod's sin. Josephus declares that Herod feared lest John, with his great influence over the people, might lead them to some rebellion. Perhaps both reasons entered in. In any case, the prison walls never opened for John again, and his murder must have followed soon.

We cannot class John with any circle or party of his day. He was, as Jesus said, a prophet. In him there came to life again that great line of men who were Israel's conscience and Israel's faith, and whose like no

other nation of antiquity can show. Like them, he came with no pomp or heralding. His message constituted his credentials. He might have said with Amos, "The Lord Jehovah hath spoken; who can but prophesy?" John was a preacher, "the voice of one crying in the wilderness."

The message of John is essentially that of the great prophets. The great foundation for him, as for them, is the truth that religion means righteousness. But there is an urgency in John's message that comes from a special cause: the kingdom of God is at hand. To the Jews that was a welcome word. It meant that Jehovah was coming to judge the nations and deliver his people. The rule of the hated Romans was to be overthrown and Israel's glory established. Into this easy-going hope John cuts with the sharp sword of his word: "Repent ye. The judgment is coming, but it will not be upon the Gentiles. Rather it will be a sifting of Israel, and the test will be righteousness. The Jews will not be saved because they have kept the form of the law. The Messiah is at hand with his judgment. He will lay his ax at the root of every evil tree. He will winnow the wheat from the chaff with his fan. My baptism is with water. His will be with fire that shall burn up all the dross. The rule of God is at hand; repent and make ready."

It is in the light of this message that we are to understand the meaning of the baptism to which John invited the people. This was something different from the practice of the prophets. Was John, after preaching righteousness, falling back into the idea that a mere ceremony could have value in itself? There is no reason for thinking this. The form itself was familiar to the Jews as a symbol of cleansing in case of ceremonial defilement (Lev 15 and elsewhere). It was also used when a Gentile convert, or proselyte, was enrolled. Both these meanings appear with John, though not as mere ceremony. It was first a sign of cleansing, of repentance and turning from evil; and second an enrollment, a consecration to the new rule of God that was at hand. It was the outward expression of the acceptance of his message: Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.

The remarkable response of the people to John's message was due first to its declaration that the kingdom of God was at their doors. Chafing under the hated Roman rule, no wonder that they flocked to him when the rumor of this message spread. But the deeper and more lasting response was awakened by his call to repentance. With all her formalism Israel had a conscience, and a conscience like that of no other nation of her day. True, her religion had become largely legalism and her prophets had lost their first place, but their work had not been in vain. She did not want such preaching, any more than Florence wanted Savonarola, but, like Florence, she answered to it, at least for a time. John's message was fearless and searching. He pointed out definite sins. And his appeal gained tremendous power because he pictured the Messiah and his judgment at the door.

The limitations of John's work are closely joined to its strength. He represents the old at its highest. The mountain peaks of the Old Testament are the prophets, and in John we hear their message again. But John did not get beyond the old. Men needed the message of sin and judgment; but they needed something more--a message of deliverance. John had gotten no farther than Paul before his conversion. Paul too knew of law and righteousness and judgment. But if these were not enough for Paul, the man of moral earnestness and mighty will, how could they save the throngs of common folks who came to John's preaching? That was what Jesus meant when he said that they that were but little in the kingdom of God were greater than John. They knew the God of mercy and had learned to say, "Our Father."

John himself knew that his work was not final, but a mere preparation: "He that cometh after me is mightier than I." How much farther John went we cannot know surely. He did not cease his work after Jesus' appearance. He had disciples who continued faithful, and that, too, long after his death (Acts 19:1-7).

From his prison he sends a message to Jesus by his disciples asking whether he be the expected Messiah or no. Jesus' own estimate of John is significant (Luke 7:24-28). He sees his courage, earnestness, and independence, and pays the remarkable tribute: "Among them that are born of women there is none greater than John." But the meaning of his work is preparation:

"This is he of whom it is written,

Behold I send my messenger before thy face,

Who shall prepare thy way before thee."

John's greatest work was to make ready the way for Jesus and to call attention to him.

Directions for Reading and Study

Birth: Luke 1:5-25, 57-66, 80. Ministry: Luke 3:1-20; Mark 1:1-8; Matt 3:1-12. Imprisonment: Mark 6:14-29. Jesus and John: Luke 7:18-25.

Read carefully the reports of John's preaching and make a list of the things he condemned and of the things he demanded.

Read Amos 3 and 4. What points of resemblance are there between John's preaching and that of Amos?

Write out a simple statement of the facts of John's life as learned from the Gospels.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/harris-franklin-rall/john-the-baptist/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net