

Meet John the Baptist

by Victor Maxwell

John the Baptist's life and ministry serve as a powerful example of radical obedience to God, humility, and the importance of preparing the way for Jesus.

Scripture: Isaiah 40:3, Malachi 3:1, Matthew 3:8, Luke 3:1, Luke 3:16, John 1:23, John 3:30, Revelation 5:5

Topics: "Repentance", "Spiritual Renewal"

Description

Victor Maxwell preaches about the lives of Girolamo Savonarola and John the Baptist, both men sent from God to speak out against corruption and immorality in their respective times. Despite facing persecution and martyrdom, they remained steadfast in their mission, paving the way for spiritual renewal and pointing people towards God. John the Baptist, a voice in the wilderness, preached with authority and humility, preparing the hearts of many for the coming Messiah. His radical, practical, and eschatological message challenged people to repent and bear fruits of righteousness.

Transcript

Luke 3:1-20 Meet John the Baptist More than five hundred years ago, in the little hamlet of Ferrara, Italy, a baby boy was born into a physician's home. His parents named him Girolamo Savonarola. Little did they realize that their baby would grow up to be a man sent from God. From his earliest years, this keen, intelligent boy possessed an invincible love for God. By his own testimony, he was prepared to abandon life itself for the glory of Christ. His saintly life was a mixture of loneliness and ruggedness.

He deprived himself of every indulgence, content with only the hardest couch, the roughest clothing, and the plainest food. Savonarola lived in a time characterized by corruption and wickedness among the papacy, the priesthood, and the entire clergy; The offices of bishop and cardinal were put up for auction and sold to the highest bidder. Immorality in its grossest forms was prevalent in monasteries and convents; even in local congregations it was displayed without shame. The church had become a den of vice and iniquity This so burdened the young priest that he spoke with fiery eloquence against these practices.

For eight years he preached at the cathedral in Florence, pleading for purity of life and simplicity of worship. Refusing to mix and mingle with officials of the church, he was resented and publicly assaulted by the clergy; Martyrdom appeared inevitable. Interrupting his devotions, church leaders broke into his monastery; dragged him into the streets, and locked him away in a loathsome dungeon. There he was tortured for weeks. Finally, the day of his trial came. The church leaders were so determined to destroy

him that one of the pope's commissioners wrote: "Put Savonarola to death, even if he were another John the Baptist".

In a fit of unjust rage, they hanged him, set fire to his remains, and threw his ashes into the river Arno. Savonarola had an incredible experience when he went from Genoa to Florence. Believing that God had sent him to minister to the corrupt San Marco monastery Savonarola journeyed there, only to collapse with fatigue at the base of the mountain range that led to the monastery. Despairing of life, Savonarola was visited by a stranger. The visitor fed the discouraged traveler and gave him rest and encouraged him.

The stranger helped Savonarola reach the gate of the monastery. Once there, the stranger friend is reported to have said, 'And now, Savonarola, remember to do that for which God has sent thee;" then he left. In Savonarola we find a perfect parallel to John the Baptist. Savonarola was a man sent from God to Italy; John the Baptist was a man sent from God to Israel. Both lived modestly and preached mightily. And both were forerunners, paving a highway for their Lord in a moral wilderness: Savonarola for the Reformation; John the Baptist for the Redeemer Being a voice in a moral wilderness can be a lonely and discouraging experience.

It's easy for fatigue and despair to set in. But many of you have felt the call to be that voice-in your family, at your school, where you work. If that's the case, and you're feeling faint and discouraged... I want you to consider with me John the Baptiser, He was a man who lived and died for that which God had sent him to do. John the Baptizer burst unto the New Testament page with dynamic freshness. He stood alone and aloof from all other men. Our Saviour said of him that of those born of women there was none greater than John the Baptist.

He was the last of the Old Testament prophets and the first of the New Testament evangelists. Away from the ritual of the Temple or the opulence of the Royal Palace, this rugged and rustic servant of God emerged in the wilderness of Judea. It seemed to be the worst of times. The austerity of John's life seemed to set him against the materialistic and ritualistic spirit of the age. His clothing, his diet, his location and his powerful preaching shook the whole of Judea and beyond.

Outside of our Lord Himself, John was probably the greatest preacher that ever lived. When he preached people listened. He had no committee to back him. We read of no colleagues who stood with him and no offerings to finance him. He was a man sent from God and filled with God. Our Sovereign Lord reserved His best servant for the worst of times. He always does. As a brave pioneer John prepared the way for the coming of the King. With the authority of a fiery prophet he predicted the emergence of the Messiah.

With the zeal of an evangelist he pointed sinners to the Lamb of God. With the humility of a servant whose work was accomplished he was content to be eclipsed by His Master. John the Baptist was like an Old Testament Elijah who stepped unto the pages of the New Testament. He was born into a priestly family but forsook the privileges of being a priest to take up the role of a prophet and become the voice and mouth piece of God.. John the Baptist was human but not ordinary. He was not an angel sent from God "There was a man sent from God whose name was John.

He did not identify with either Pharisee or Sadducee. He stood alone (a) He was not ordinary in His diet - locusts and wild honey. (b) He was not ordinary in his dress - a cloak of camel's hair and a girdle. (c) He was not ordinary in his declarations - His language was strong in denouncing sin, declaring judgement and directing repentant sinners to the Saviour. Not many preachers would survive today if they used the language of John the Baptist who called hypocrites vipers and the King a fox. (d) He was not ordinary in

the desert - Most people went to the city to fulfill their mission.

The windswept wastes of the dry and desolate desert became his classroom and he was shot up alone with God who was His Master. His presence there was John's rejection of the dead and hypocritical system in Jerusalem. Effectively he forsook the office of priest at the temple to be a voice in the wilderness. John the Baptist was a voice and not the Word. Often times the orator reads another's words or a singer uses another's lyrics. John the Baptist was not the Word. He was just the spokesman.

He quoted Isaiah 40:3 to authorize his mission as one who was sent to prepare the way of the Lord. It was the role of a messenger sent as a forerunner on the route the King was to travel. His role was to make the crooked places straight and smooth out the highway for the royal chariot. John as a forerunner was paving the way for Christ. That is still the role of the preacher of God's Word. The highway to heaven is paved over prepared hearts. Hearts that are broken by repentance and softened through the Word of God.

God's Word was given for reproof, for correction and for instruction in righteousness. God's makes us right with God. John the Baptist was a lamp but not the light.. John had one mission in life and that was to prepare the way of the Lord and point people to the Lord. He was a burning and shining light. Important to note that we must burn before we shine. In your house and mine there are all different sorts of lamps - desk lamp, bed lamp, reading lamp, table lamp, etc. The most important thing about a lamp is the light.

It is not the brass on the lamp that shines. It is the flame, - the bulb, the light. The lamp is only the instrument that holds forth the light. This is a challenge for all of us. We are lights in this dark world. do you show off your ornamentation, the brass of an empty life and cold crystal of pride or does your life hold forth the glow of Christ to the needy world. John the Baptist was essential but not indispensable. His birth had been miraculous, his life unusual and his powerful ministry had been prophesied by both Isaiah and Malachi.

However, besides his utility in leading many to righteousness, there was a humility about this man's life. He was not grabbed by the compromises of popularity or the illusions of infallibility. John lived by a timeless principle that he was sent to exalt the one who sent him and not the one who is sent. He said, "He must increase and I must decrease." John's humility is seen when he declared the coming Saviour by saying, "The latched of whose shoes I am not worthy to loose".

There was a Rabbinical saying that went, "Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher except the loosing of his shoe". John was prepared to stoop to the lowest that Christ might be lifted to the highest. See vs. 20,21 - John is in prison and Jesus strides on to the scene. John the Baptist was a witness but not the object of worship. John's role was to clear the way for Christ, prepare the way for the Lord and then get out of the way of the Lord.

John called him a witness. The Greek noun for witness is *marturia*; It means "to testify, to affirm the truth about someone or something". It is from this Greek root, we get our word martyr which means "a person who chooses to suffer or die rather than give up his faith or principles". Such turned out to be the case for John the Baptist who gave his life for the Saviour. The Mission John the Baptist Pursued Luke focuses in on the date and degradation of the age. Upon the death of Emperor Augustus in A.D. 14, Tiberius, a brutish and debauched individual, climbed the steps to the throne of the Roman Empire.

The fifteenth year of his reign would place the beginning of John's ministry about A.D. 28 or 29. From the broad panorama of the Empire, Luke telescopes to the land of Palestine, which had been apportioned to

Pontius Pilate, Herod, and Philip. The political hornet's nest of Judea belonged to Pilate, the cruelly anti-Semitic Roman governor. Herod-also called Antipas-and his half brother Philip, were tetrarchs, local rulers supported by Rome. Both governed parts of northern Palestine inherited from their father, Herod the Great.

Along with territory, however, their father also passed down to his sons a villainous legacy that included his scandalous marriages to ten women and his jealous murder of three other sons. Also mentioned in Luke's list of rulers is Lysanias, about whom we know nothing except that he ruled Abilene, a territory north of Palestine near Damascus. From heads of state, Luke narrows his focus to religious rulers, introducing the high priests-Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas. Both of them were pompous and power-hungry, with Caiaphas wearing the official vestments but the former high priest Annas pulling the strings of influence in the country.

It is into this morass of moral corruption came John, an individual honed in the wild, unsullied by fame or power, and consecrated by God to shatter His four-hundred-year prophetic silence with an earthshaking message from heaven. (b) His testimony The Message John the Baptist preached. (a) His message was Radical He preached repentance (b) His message was Practical He required the fruits of repentance (c) His message was Eschatological He not only had a grasp of the redemptive role of our Saviour as the Redeeming Lamb but he peered into the future and say Him as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah with the Sceptre of righteousness in his hand.

The Master John the Baptist presented.

To make and impact we must dare to be different from the age around us. Different in our priorities and values. Different in our vocabulary.

To fulfill our ministry we must set definite goals. John knew what his role was and set about fulfilling it.

If you dare to be different and take your stand for God be aware of the consequences. For John it cost his freedom and then his life. He was a martyr in life and in death.

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