

# John the Baptizer

The Gospel record through Luke describes how the priest Zacharias entered the Temple to go about his various duties, including the offering up of Incense. During the time when he was in the Temple, we read that the people stood outside, waiting for him to return. “and the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense” (Lu. 1:10). Like Abraham and Sarah before him, Zacharias and his wife were unable to have children, and he prayed as he offered the incense that his wife might conceive, and bear a child. Whilst he prayed in the temple, an Angel appeared to him, and said: “fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John” (Lu. 1:13). The priest, however, disbelieved, and was made dumb until the birth and naming of his son: “and when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned to him, and remained speechless” (Lu. 1:22).

Such were the circumstances of the conception and birth of John. His name itself means *Yah is Gracious*, and refers not only to the Grace of Yahweh extended to Zacharias and Elizabeth in allowing them to bear a son, but also to the child’s mission to testify of the Grace to come through the Lord Jesus Christ. So it was that when John was born, circumcised, and named, his father regained the power of speech, and praised Yahweh: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people” (Lu. 1:68).

This aspect of the graciousness of Yahweh being extended to man features from the very beginning of the Gospel of Christ. John himself testified of Christ: “of his fullness have all we received, and *grace for grace*. For the Law was given by Moses, *but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ*: (Jno. 1:16-17). Again, Titus proclaims that: “the *grace of God* that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men ...” (Tit. 2:11). All of these thoughts are encapsulated in the name of John the Baptizer.

## *THE GREATNESS OF JOHN*

Returning back to the words of the Angel to Zacharias, we read:

“... thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. *For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord*” (Lu. 1:15).

To the eyes of the natural man, John was anything but great. He wore no sumptuous clothes, he did not live in a palace. As Jesus spoke to the people:

“what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously appareled, and life delicately are in kings’ courts. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet ... for I say unto you, Among those that are born of women *there is not a greater prophet* that John the Baptist ...” (Lu. 7:24-28).

His greatness was not being a sumptuously appareled dignitary, for he was a rough man, clothed in camel’s hair, girded with animal skins about his loins, eating a diet of locusts and wild honey. His greatness was not external, but in his conviction of the words that he spoke. John provides us with an example of what the Apostle Paul wrote later:

“God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty: And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: that no flesh should glory in his presence ...” (1 Cor. 1:27-30).

The teaching of John confounded the wise of this world, in that he testified of the coming Messiah, and the Gospel that he would preach – something beyond the ability of the natural man to comprehend. Here was his real greatness: his faith and testimony concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us never feel a sense of inadequacy before the great men of this world, for God has rejected them, and has instead chosen those who approach him in the spirit of true humility.

In the example and preaching of John, we find as a consistent principle that man is to be brought low, and Yahweh exalted. We see this in the way in which Luke 3 introduces us to John:

“Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip being tetrarch of Iturea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the word of God came unto John the son of Zecharias *in the wilderness*” (Lu. 3:1-2).

Here we see the greatest men (by human standards) both of the world and of Israel, in all their pomp and array of glory. Yet the Word of God came to none of these. None were accounted worthy to receive divine revelation, that is, none who were “gorgeously appareled”, dwelling in kings’ courts. Rather, the Word came to John, a wearer of camel’s hair and a leather girdle, whose diet was locusts and wild honey – far from the delicacies usually favored by mighty men.

Returning to the words of the Angel, Gabriel summarized the life-long mission of John: “many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And *he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias*, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedience to the wisdom of the Just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Lu. 1:16-17).

John then, came “in the spirit and power of Elias”. He was not actually Elias, or Elijah, as some supposed. John himself, when directly asked: “art thou Elias?” replied unambiguously: “*I am not*” (Jno. 1:21). And Jesus himself, after the death of John, told his disciples: “Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things.” Jesus’ words that follow are sometimes misunderstood:

“But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them. Then his disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist.” (Mat. 17:12-13).

There is a sense that John fulfilled a role of Elijah, but which does not negate Elijah’s future work. John came to prepare the hearts of the people for the coming of Messiah, and before his second coming, Elijah himself will perform the future work of bringing the nations to repentance, and to “restore all things”. This was Elijah’s original mission in the days of his mortality, to “turn their heart back again”. But Elijah was also dramatically shown how such a change of heart could take place: not through a dramatic strong wind that blew boulders about (1 Ki. 19:11), or an earthquake (verse 11), or a mighty fire (verse 12). True, these things could declare much concerning the power of Israel’s God – but the knowledge of salvation could not come from any of them. Rather, after the fire, there came “a still small voice,” and it is that small voice that holds the power to save. How interesting therefore, that John’s real strength is seen in his mission to be the “voice”: “As it is written in the book of the words of Esaias the prophet, saying, *The voice* of One crying in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (Lu. 3:4). What a contrast to Zecharias, who was stricken dumb for his lack of belief: his son was to be pre-eminently “the Voice” crying out in the wilderness; and it is this work that constituted him to be the greatest among the prophets.

Again, by a dramatic contrast, when Elizabeth, John’s mother “heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And *she spake out with a loud voice*, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb ...” (Lu. 1:41-42). This was foreshadowing the “voice” of her son, declaring the coming and identity of the coming Messiah.

It is interesting to go back to Isaiah 40, as cited above. After speaking of John as being “the voice of him that crieth in the wilderness”, we have the exhortation to Israel: “... O Jerusalem, that bringeth good tidings, *lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up*, be not afraid ...” (Isa. 40:9). This is the voice of praise and thanksgiving which will come about as a consequence of Messiah’s ministry.

### **BEING SENT BY GOD**

John was evidently ordained and sent by either an angel or prophet, as he refers to “*he that sent me* to baptize with water” (Jno. 1:33), and a certain thing that this person told him. Verse 6 describes him as being: “a man *sent* by God”, which defines and confirms the importance of his mission. This description echoes the spirit of

ancient worthies of old. In Isaiah 6, we have the prophet's eagerness to perform the will of the Lord: "**here am I; send me**" (Isa. 6:8). Notice the instant willingness to do whatever was required. Again, very interesting in the context of the "voice" is the young boy Samuel.

1 Samuel 3 records how that Yahweh called Samuel 3 times, and on each occasion he thought that it was Eli, the High Priest that was calling him. Eli, however, understood that it was Yahweh who was calling His servant, and told Samuel that if the voice came again, he was to reply: "speak; for **thy servant heareth**" (1 Sam. 3:10). Notice again, the readiness to hear, and perform that which was required. Samuel was ready to hear the still small voice which came to him. But what a contrast we have with Eli: he knew that the Almighty was speaking to the lad; yet his response was to go back to bed, and wait until the morning before asking what the message was! Samuel, however, showed the example of a ready servant, eager to hear, and do what his Lord required of him. The example to us is plain: we must be always ready to hear, and ready to do the Word of God. Giving urgent attendance to spiritual matters, we do not sleep in indolence as do others, but remain alert, and attentive to the things of God.

Again, contrast this with the example of Israel: the prophet in alluding back to these things exhorts the people to look back at the consequences of their previous refusal to hear:

"But go ye now unto my place which was **in Shiloh**, where I set my name at the first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel. And now, because ye have done all these works, saith Yahweh, and **I spake unto you, rising up early and speaking, but ye heard not; and I called you, but ye answered not ...**" (Jer. 7:12-13).

And finally in this respect, we have the example of Messiah himself:

"... I have given them **the words** which thou gavest me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came out from thee, and they have believed that **thou didst send me ...**" (Jno. 17:8)

Notice that again, we have the voice – spoken words that testified of Christ being sent by his Father.

### **JOHN'S DISCIPLES**

Luke chapter 7 recounts how John sent his disciples to the Master with the query: "John Baptist hath sent us unto thee, saying, Art thou **he that should come?** Or look we for another?" (Lu. 7:20). To which the Master invited them to behold the miracles he performed, which testified of him. As the Master, in his response, described John as being the greatest of all the prophets, who was not "a reed shaken in the wind", it is evident that the question was not for John's benefit, but his disciples. Though they had John's witness to the Master, they needed to behold the evidence for themselves, and be convinced by personal examination of these things.

It would seem that there is a specific reference in the question, to the prophecy of Isaiah. He asked "art thou **he that should come?**", and Ezekiel similarly spoke:

"thus saith the Lord Yahweh, remove the diadem, and take off the crown: this shall not be the same: exalt him that is low, and abase him that is high. I will overturn, overturn, overturn it: and it shall be no more, **until he come** whose right it is, and I will give it him" (Ezek. 21:25-27).

There was more to the question than is first evident; was Christ "he that should come" to be king – to take up his rightful throne?

As we saw earlier, a central theme of John's message was also to do with man's glory being brought low. Isaiah chapter 40 continues this theme, and introduces us to "the Voice":

"The Voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of Yahweh, make straight in the desert a highway for our God ... and the glory of Yahweh shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of Yahweh hath spoken it. The Voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? **All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: the**

***grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever***” (Isa. 40: 4-5, 6).

Here is the message of John, crying out that all flesh is grass etc. The latter part of this citation is taken up by the Spirit through Peter, who expounds it for us:

“for all flesh is as grass, and all ***the glory of man*** as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the Word of the Lord endureth for ever” (1 Pet. 1:24-25).

Notice here, that “*the goodliness thereof*” is expounded to be “*the glory*”. The Prophet is describing how that rich men are brought low, and as the flower of grass they shall pass away (cp. Jas. 1:10). Despite the greatness of their position before men, and the transient beauty that they displayed; like all men they descended into their long home (Eccl. 12:5): the grave, which has truly been described as the greatest leveller of mankind.

The prophet declared that though men will fail and pass away, “the word of our God shall stand ***for ever***”. So it was, that the emphasis of John’s preaching was concerning this very thing: we are told that he “did no miracle” (Jno. 10:41). Rather, as the Voice, what came through him were words only – divine words nevertheless, but words and not mighty deeds.

### ***THE SLAYING OF JOHN***

Speaking of the separation of believers from the works of darkness, it is written:

“... have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.” (Eph. 5:11).

John, being a shining light which the Jews were willing for a season to rejoice in (Jno. 5:35), was separate from the works of darkness. Dwelling in the wilderness, he lived away from the masses of the ungodly, and away from all the distractions of the cares of this life. But he also reproveth the works of darkness that he was confronted by. So “John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother’s wife” (Mark 6:18). This reproof stirred up a spirit of hatred on the part of Herodias. On Herod’s birthday, his daughter danced before him so well that he invited her to ask for anything, to the half of his kingdom. She consulted her mother, Herodias, who took the opportunity to have her husband slay John, and advised her accordingly. So she gave her request:

“I will that thou give me by and by in a charger the head of John the Baptist ... and immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought: and he went and beheaded him in the prison” (Mark. 6:25, 27).

So, the work of John was over. He fulfilled his course, and became a force for good, in preparing the people for the coming of Messiah. He recognized that concerning the master, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (Jno. 3:30), and as Christ came and taught the glad tidings of the kingdom of God, his work was over. Though the mode of his death sounds awful to us, to him it was instant. He would not be aware of the grisly scene of his head being brought in a dish: it would be a swift affair, and his disciples collected his remains, and buried them in respect. But the story of John the Baptizer is not over: he now rests in the sleep of the grave in the certain hope of the resurrection. He will rise to be granted immortality by the One Whose Way he prepared. And he leaves us with an example: not to be discouraged by the great men of this world, but to proclaim the still small voice in the wilderness of the nations. Just as his mission was to prepare a people for the coming of the Lord, even so we seek to preach the word to those around us, that when Messiah comes again he might find a people ready and waiting for him. Not that we have any special commission, or calling, like John did, but we nevertheless have this duty to preach. As a Voice in the wilderness, we seek to aid the gospel-light to shine to those who may yet receive it, seeking to give the word of reprove where necessary. Being ready to lay down our lives in the service of the One who has overcome both sin and death, we look past the present dispensation of evil, seeking first the coming kingdom above all else. And in that day, we might meet John face to face, and be part of the glories of the Age to Come.

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