

## John the Baptist Prepared the People for the Coming of Jesus

In our last topic, we saw that we want to help our physical and spiritual children learn how the Lord worked to protect Jesus when Herod tried to destroy Him. Matthew does not tell us about any of the other events of the life of Jesus until it was time for Him to begin His public ministry. In this topic, we are going to see that John the Baptist was sent to tell the Jews to prepare their hearts for the coming of the Messiah.

Matthew 3:1-3 says, “In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!’ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the LORD; make His paths straight.”’” Luke 1 tells us that John the Baptist was the son of Zacharias and Elizabeth, a relative of Mary. He was six months older than Jesus. When John the Baptist was about thirty years old, these verses tell us that he began to preach in the wilderness of Judea. This was the area on the west side of the Jordan River close to where that river runs into the Dead Sea.

The message of John was, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” The word “repent” means *to have a change of mind for the better* and causes a person to turn from sin and to turn to God. 1 Thessalonians 1:9 says, “For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.” Here, we see that this change of mind causes a person to turn from sin and idols to God. This change of mind for the better also causes a person to begin to serve the living and true God.

The kingdom of heaven (kingdom of God in all books other than Matthew) means that, in the present, Christ is ruling in our hearts and someday, in the future, Christ will rule on the earth for a thousand years. Luke 17:20-21 says, “Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, ‘The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, “See here!” or “See there!” For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.’” Then, Revelation 20:4-6 says, “And I *saw* thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received *his* mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This *is* the first resurrection. Blessed and holy *is* he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.”

We also see that Isaiah had described the ministry of John the Baptist when he wrote, in Isaiah 40:3, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” In the time of Isaiah, it was common when a king was going to visit another area to send a messenger several weeks in advance so that the people of each town could prepare the road by smoothing out the bumps and filling the holes in the road. Instead of preparing the roads, John the Baptist was sent to tell the people to prepare their hearts for the coming of Jesus.

Matthew 3:4-6 goes on to say, “Now John himself was clothed in camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.” Here, we see that John wore

some rather unusual clothing and ate some rather unusual food. His clothing was made from the hair of camels. Camel's hair makes clothing that lasts a long time but also does not feel comfortable and can really make a person itch.

The leather belt around his waist was like the one worn by Elijah. 2 Kings 1:7-8 says, "Then he said to them, 'What kind of man *was it* who came up to meet you and told you these words?' So they answered him, 'A hairy man wearing a leather belt around his waist.' And he said, 'It *is* Elijah the Tishbite.'" The people of Israel were looking for Elijah to come because the last two verses in the Old Testament found in Malachi 4:5-6 say, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse." Malachi was the last of the Old Testament prophets; there had been no Word from God to the people of Israel for four hundred years, so they were looking for Elijah to come.

Since John the Baptist was preaching in a desert area, he ate the food that he could find in the desert. We see that his food was mostly locusts and wild honey. Locusts are large grasshoppers and the Jews were allowed to eat them as food. Israel was not allowed to eat most insects. However, Leviticus 11:22 says, "These you may eat: the locust after its kind, the destroying locust after its kind, the cricket after its kind, and the grasshopper after its kind." Wild honey was also easy to find in the desert. Judges 14:8 says, "After some time, when he returned to get her, he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion. And behold, a swarm of bees and honey *were* in the carcass of the lion." Wild bees will find anything they can to use as a place to swarm and make their honey. As a result, John the Baptist just had to look for a swarm of bees and he was able to find honey.

People came to hear John the Baptist from Jerusalem, Judea and the entire surrounding region. Luke 3:3 says, "And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins." For many years, Gentiles who became a part of Judaism had been baptized to show that they were repenting from their false religions and turning to the worship of the true and living God. However, John was preaching his message to the Jews. This meant that the Jews who were being baptized by John recognized that they were religious but had never repented of their sin. This same thing is true of many people today. Here, we see that the people were confessing their sins. This meant that the baptism of John was different from the Old Testament baptism of the Jews. It was also different than the baptism of followers of Jesus after the Day of Pentecost, as Acts 19:3-5 says, "And he said to them, 'Into what then were you baptized?' So they said, 'Into John's baptism.' Then Paul said, 'John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.'" When they heard *this*, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus." The baptism of John was a baptism of repentance.

Matthew 3:7-10 says, "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, 'Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as *our* father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'" John recognized that some of those coming to hear what he was preaching were Pharisees or Sadducees. Both of these groups were small. However, they had a powerful influence in Israel because the high priests were Sadducees and controlled the temple. Most of the men on the Sanhedrin were either Pharisees or Sadducees. The Pharisees added their own traditions to the Law. In contrast, the Sadducees only accepted the books of Moses and denied the resurrection and other miracles.

John was not afraid to confront these religious leaders and show that their teachings were false and that these

men were hypocrites. He called both groups “vipers”, which are very poisonous snakes. John asked them who had warned them to flee from the wrath to come? Then he said if their faith was genuine, they would show that genuine faith by changed actions which showed there was true repentance in their hearts. James later wrote a similar thing in James 2:17-20, where we read, “Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith, and I have works.’ Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?” Both John the Baptist and James made it clear that true repentance will cause a person to have changed actions.

The Pharisees and Sadducees both thought that God favored them because they were descendents of Abraham and looked to him as the father of the Jews. John made it clear that God has no grandchildren. Any person is either a true child of God because he or she has come to the Father through Christ, or, that person will not have eternal life. John 1:12 says, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.” Then, John 14:6 adds, “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.’” Then, John the Baptist gave two additional warnings. First, John said that God could raise up children for Abraham from the stones that were lying around them on the ground. Second, John said that the ax was already being used to cut the root of the trees. Just a little over forty years later, the city of Jerusalem was destroyed and only those who escaped before the Romans attacked the city survived. The Pharisees and Sadducees did not bear good fruit because their works were evil and so they faced eternal judgment. We want to help our physical and spiritual children understand the warning that Jesus gave to these religious leaders because there are many like them today. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children learn to explain this warning about judgment.