



“Thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways” (Luke 1:76).

The Prophet of the Highest

Central Truth: The prophet prepared the people to know the Lord’s forgiveness.

L443. Date: February 1986. **Text:** Luke 1:68-80.

Topic: John the Baptist; prophecy.

God chooses, calls, qualifies, and uses His messengers. We call those messengers of God in ancient times the “prophets” of God. A prophet is God's spokesman. He may predict or proclaim, but either way he is God's prophet so long as he speaks God's message by direct unction of the Spirit.

Jesus was introduced by a prophet of God. He was so important that a special prophet was needed to present the Messiah. God raised up John the Baptist for that very ministry.

We should honor the spokesmen for God. We should honor the memory and ministry of those who are gone to glory. We should honor the person and ministry of those who are living today. Respect for God's messenger indicates respect for God himself.

The lesson text deals with the life and ministry of John the Baptist. John was “a man sent from God” (John 1:6). What a man of God he was! The world will be always influenced by the ministry of this great man of God.

I. HIS PARENTAGE (Luke 1:5-7)

John was born in a priestly family. His father was named Zacharias (Zechariah in the Old Testament) and his mother was named Elisabeth. His father and mother were “both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless” (Luke 1:6).

Zacharias and Elisabeth were childless. They had been married for years, but no child had been born to them. They had prayed to God to give them a child, but He seemed to refuse to answer as the years passed. By the time of the event recorded in Luke 1, Elisabeth was “barren, and they both were now well stricken in years” (Luke 1:7).

II. HIS BIRTH (Luke 1:8-26)

The birth of John the Baptist was foretold before it happened. An angel of the Lord appeared to Zacharias in the temple to inform him that God had answered the prayers he had offered years before and would give them a child. Zacharias could hardly believe it, so he was stricken mute until after the baby was born.

The birth of John was an occasion for joy. The angel announced, “*Thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth*” (Luke 1:14).

The child was to be devoted to the life of a Nazarite, a people particularly devoted to God as indicated in their lifestyle: they never drank the fruit of the vine, never touched a dead body, and never cut their hair.

This was a special child as indicated by the prophesy, “*He shall be great in the sight of the Lord, . . . and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb*” (Luke 1:15). The “*spirit and power of Elias*” would rest upon him. He would turn the hearts of the people to the Lord their God (verses 16, 17).

The coming birth of John the Baptist was attended by signs. Zacharias, the father, was mute from the time of announcement until the birth of the child. Elisabeth was able to conceive for the first time, even in her old age. God was evidently at work here.

John the Baptist's birth was about six months before the birth of Jesus, as it was in the sixth month of Elisabeth's pregnancy that the angel announced to Mary that she would bear the Christ child.

III. HIS EARLY LIFE

Little is known of the early life of John the Baptist. He was born in the hill country of Judea (Luke 1:39) in the home of his parents.

He grew as a normal child. His growth was physical and spiritual as he “*waxed strong in spirit*” (Luke 1:80).

Perhaps the advanced age of his parents brought about their deaths

before John became an adult. He is said to have been “*in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel*” (Luke 1:80). That indicates that he may have lived with the Essenes in the vicinity of the Dead Sea.

IV. HIS MINISTRY

A. Three primary areas are mentioned as the center of John's ministry. (1) He baptized in Bethabara. The location is not known; probably it was on the Jordan near the entrance to the Valley of Jezreel. (2) He baptized in Enon near Salim, “*because there was much water there*” (John 3:23). (3) He ministered in the wilderness of Perea (Luke 3:2).

John's ministry began in A.D. 26, 27, in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar (Luke 2:1). His appearance was somewhat like that of the ancient prophet Elijah, with his raiment of camel's hair and a leather belt about his waist. He ate off the land — locusts and wild honey.

B. John's message was threefold. (1) He preached a baptism of repentance in view of the soon appearing of the kingdom of God (Luke 3:1-18; Matthew 3:5-12). He related his baptism to repentance and refused to baptize any who did not indicate that their repentance was real.

(2) He preached the coming of the kingdom. To the Jews that meant the political elevation of Israel. To John, that meant turning from sin and being ready to welcome the Messiah.

(3) His preaching identified the Messiah as one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matthew 3:13-17; John 1:19-36). He recognized that the Messiah would be one far above himself, but did not know that Jesus was that Messiah until the Father revealed it.

The authority of John the Baptist is quite evident from his preaching. Where did he get such authority? The Bible explains, “*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe*” (John 1:6, 7). With such a commission he, of necessity, spoke with authority.

John was quite severe in his preaching. Certain religious leaders came to be baptized of him. It appears that they were wanting to identify with a popular movement for their own advantage. John rebuked them sharply, calling them a “*generation of vipers*” and requiring them to give proof that they had repented (Matthew 3:7-12). He spoke of a coming judgment by fire and urged people to repent and believe.

C. John immersed in water any person who repented of his sin and confessed his readiness to welcome the Messiah whom God would send.

The baptism that John performed probably represented three truths. (1) It pictured the renunciation of the past life. (2) It was a symbol of cleansing from sin. (3) It was a promise of loyalty to the coming kingdom of God. Many people responded to John's message and received the baptism of repentance in preparation for the coming of Christ.

D. The highlight of John's ministry was his identification of the Messiah. Matthew 3:13-17 recounts the event, while John 1:32-34 is John's explanation of it afterwards. Jesus came to be baptized of John. John hesitated because he recognized Jesus as a better man than himself. (They were cousins and probably knew each other in advance). Jesus insisted, so John baptized (immersed) Him. When Jesus came up out of the water, the Spirit of God descended like a dove and abode upon Him while the voice of the Father spoke from heaven, saying, *"This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased"* (Matthew 3:17).

Afterward John explained that he did not know which man the Messiah would be. He who sent him to baptize had only told him He would be the one on whom the Spirit of God descended and remained. John testified, *"I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God"* (John 1:34).

E. The twilight of John's career came soon after his identification of Jesus. Four things happened. (1) His disciples began to desert him to follow Jesus instead. He encouraged that, pointing Jesus out to them and saying, *"Behold the Lamb of God"* (John 1:36). His response to that was, *"He must increase, but I must decrease"* (John 3:30).

(2) Jesus was more successful in making converts than was John. Some of John's disciples were a little jealous over that, but John assured them it was as it should be (John 3:26-36; 4:1). He recognized that Jesus was far above him and was content to see Jesus' ministry expanded. Jesus made and baptized (through His followers) more disciples than did John.

(3) John was arrested and put in prison. He spoke out against Herod's taking his brother's wife from him to become his own wife (Mark 6:18-20). Herod had John put in prison for his criticism. John was right in his position, of course, but the king did not want to know what was right. He wanted only to do as he pleased.

(4) Time passed slowly for John as he was confined in prison. He began to doubt. He sent disciples to Jesus to ask, *"Art thou he that should come? or look we for another?"* (Luke 7:19). Jesus sent word back to John to look at what was happening in his ministry. That was sufficient proof that He is the Christ.

F. The death of John the Baptist came when Herodias danced before Herod (her stepfather) at a banquet. Herod offered to give her anything she asked. Her mother told her to ask for the head of John the Baptist. So the prophet of God was executed (Mark 6:21-29).

V. EVALUATION BY JESUS

What did Jesus think of John the Baptist? He made four statements which give a surprisingly high evaluation of the forerunner of our Lord.

A. Jesus said John the Baptist was the Elijah whose coming was expected by the Jews. He said, *“Elias is come already, and they knew him not . . . Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist”* (Matthew 17:12, 13).

B. Jesus said John was a light in which people walked for a time. *“He was a burning and a shining light: and ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light”* (John 5:35).

C. Jesus said John was a prophet and more than a prophet because he was the fulfillment of the prophecy in Malachi 3:1 (Luke 7:24-27). He was an extra-ordinary prophet of God for a special mission on earth.

D. Jesus said John was the greatest prophet who had ever lived. *“I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist”* (Luke 7:28). What a compliment to come from our Lord himself!

Let us draw some practical conclusions to this review of the life and work of John the Baptist. (1) God provides able workers to do His will. (2) We can trust God to give the right message through the right person at the right time. (3) All Christian messages must point to Jesus as *“the Lamb of God.”* (4) Success is not the same in human eyes as it is in God's eyes. John the Baptist was a great success! (5) Thank God for sending and identifying Jesus as our Savior.

As God spoke through prophets in times past (the last of which was John the Baptist), let us trust Him to speak through His messengers today.

Questions

1. What does John 1:6 mean to you?
2. What do you know of John's parents?

3. What does John 1:15 mean?
4. What do you know of the early life of John the Baptist?
5. What was the threefold message of John?
6. What did John's baptism represent?
7. Why was Jesus baptized in water?
8. How did John's ministry decrease?
9. How did Jesus evaluate John?
10. Through whom does God speak to you and me today?