

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 8 January 2012

No. T0710

Speaker: Mr. Ernie Brown

Forgotten Lives of the New Testament: John the Baptist

I should like to arrange what I have to say about John the Baptist under nine headings, each beginning with the letter "P".

1. **Prophecies** that marked him out in advance of his birth into the world.
2. His **Parentage**.
3. His **Preparation** for the service of God.
4. His **Preaching**
5. The spell he spent in **Prison**.
6. The reason why he **Preceded** his Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, into a premature death.
7. His vocation as a **Pointer** to the Son of God, heralding the coming of the long-promised Messiah of Israel, and Saviour of the world.
8. The **Product** or results and assessment of his life and service.
9. A **Précis** or summary of his life and service.

1. **Prophecies given in advance of John's birth into the world.**

About 800 years before John was born, the prophet Isaiah said in his prophecy, "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" Isaiah 40:3. Likewise, in Malachi 4:5-6, written about perhaps 400 years before John was born, we read: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD; And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse."

The ministry of John the Baptist is seen in Matthew 11:14, Mark 9:13 and Luke 1:17 to be the clear fulfillment of these prophecies.

2. **John's Parentage**

Both Zacharias, his father, and Elisabeth, his mother, were from recognised priestly families (Luke 1:4-6). Two things were vital in such families. Firstly, they must be able to declare their genealogical pedigree, so as to qualify for priestly service. Secondly, they must have children, particularly sons, so as to be able to preserve their lineage, so that future generations could continue the line of the priesthood.

As to the first point, they both had a distinguished pedigree. Zacharias was able to claim his descent from a distinguished priestly order. Elisabeth had a clearly defined descent from Aaron himself, brother of Moses, and the first High Priest. We are told that, personally, they were righteous and blameless in their lifestyle, so there was no impediment on that score. However, they had not yet had any children and they were both beyond the normal child-bearing age. This was a great sorrow to them and they prayed much about this matter.

Nevertheless, they were greatly surprised when the angel Gabriel appeared to them and brought them very good news indeed, recorded in Luke 1:11-17: "There appeared unto Zacharias an angel of the Lord. When Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. And 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 Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

3. **John's Preparation for service**

What sort of person was John the Baptist?

a. *He was prepared to follow a good example*

As we have considered, John's father and mother were both devout people. John didn't turn his back on his family background. He didn't rebel against it. He continued in the line of those devout parents. He followed their good example. If we ourselves have had a similarly privileged background as the children of Christian parents, let us follow their example, and that of John the Baptist.

b. *John made steady, unobtrusive progress*

After the record of his miraculous birth, only one verse covers his first thirty years, but how important and significant it is. Luke 1:80 tells us: "the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel." Are we likewise? Are we prepared to make steady progress in an unobtrusive way? If so, when the right time comes we, like John the Baptist, shall be called by God to do whatever important job He gives us to do, the job He has fitted us for.

c. *John had great moral power*

Living a righteous, godly life Himself, he fearlessly denounced sin whenever and wherever he saw it, and by whomsoever it was committed. This gave moral weight to his witness with complete disregard for his own self-interest.

d. *He lived what he was. He was real*

John's witness sprang from personal devotion. "He was a burning and a shining light." That is a very telling statement from the Lord in John 5:35 which sums this up perfectly. Balance is a very necessary component in many walks of life. None more so than in Christianity! Many religious people are very passionate about what they believe, even if they have little understanding of the basis and foundation for what they say they believe. It could be said that such people are "burning" in their zeal. On the other hand, there are those who have a very clear mind and can quickly learn things in an academic way. Such might be said to have "light" on a subject without their heart, conscience and life being affected. The one type could be said to have "burning", having "heat", but without the "light" of understanding. The other could be said to "shine", but to have no warmth or heat. One with "heat" and no "light". The other with "light" and no "heat". It is so easy to be an extremist in one direction or the other. John the Baptist had things in proper balance. He was both a "burning and a shining light", with both heat and light. We should all strive to achieve that kind of balance.

e. *John had true humility*

His humility is seen in the statement recorded in John 1:20-21: "And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elijah? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No." This was putting into practice what he himself said: He must increase, I must decrease (John 3:30). He was prepared to be nothing in order that Christ be glorified. It is written in John 1:23: "He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Isaiah." He seems to be saying, "In myself, I am a nobody, of no consequence at all; none whatsoever. A mere voice, but deeply privileged to be selected to make an important announcement". "This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me." (John 1:30).

f. *He was prepared to be in the minority*

Those who want to do the right thing have always been in the minority. This becomes more and more true as time goes by. Are we prepared to stand for what is right, as John did in his day? Are we prepared to swim against the tide?

4. **John's Preaching**

In keeping with the Mosaic Law, John took up his ministry in due course. Matthew 3:1-6 states: "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey."

5. **John's spell in Prison, leading to a measure of disappointment**

It would be folly to assume that a righteous person who serves God in an evil world will have an easy life. This is particularly true of any like John the Baptist who was absolutely straightforward and forthright in his preaching. Furthermore, a useful life of service to the Lord does not guarantee that the Devil will cease to tempt us, nor that we will be able to refrain from yielding to temptation. On the contrary, we need to be aware that the more we seek to be faithful to the Lord Who saved us, the more we are exposing ourselves to the wiles of the devil, who will try his utmost to deflect us from our commitment to the Lord.

We are not really surprised to learn from Mark 6:17-19: "Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife: for he had married her. For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife. Therefore Herodias had a quarrel against him, and would have killed him; but she could not".

While in prison, John heard of the ministry of the Lord Jesus, and was apparently disappointed and at least to some extent disillusioned. Matthew 11:2-3 relate: "And it came to pass, when Jesus had made an end of commanding his twelve disciples, he departed thence to teach and to preach in their cities. Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, And said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" John was consistent all his life, but seemed to have a few doubts right at the end, although this may have been for the sake of his followers rather than for himself. The warning comes to us. Is there any danger that my Christian profession may just be a flash in the pan?

As far as John himself was concerned, the Lord had this encouraging and reassuring message for him: "Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see. The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me." (Matthew 11:4-6).

Let us take this study not as a criticism of John in any way, but as a challenge to ourselves.

6. **John Preceded his Master into a prematurely early death.**

Why did he have to die in disgrace and have to suffer a violent death?

We have already considered that the forthright witness of John in denouncing the immoral conduct of King Herod had led to his imprisonment. Things got even worse when the daughter of Herodias persuaded Herod, against his own real wishes and better judgment, to have John put to death to appease her mother. The sordid details are given in Mark 6:17-29. The question arises, "Why did God allow His devout, righteous and faithful servant John to be removed apparently prematurely from his active service in this way?" The answer is clear, and salutary. His work on earth was finished. His job was done. He had preached repentance to the nation of Israel, and exhorted all who would to separate themselves from the ungodly mass of the nation by being baptized. He had clearly pointed out Jesus as the long promised Messiah of Israel, and the Saviour of the world. His responsible life and service were over.

7. **John was a Pointer**

What was John's major role? He "bore witness", he "bare record", to Christ. Again and again, we read of John, that "he saw and bare record..." In particular, in John 1:29 it is said, "John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." Then, in John 1:36, "looking upon Jesus as he walked, he saith, Behold the Lamb of God!" He continually pointed to Christ, in his preaching and in his actions. Is this the object of our lives and our service, I wonder?

8. **The Product or results and assessment of his life and service.**

The natural birth of John Baptist was a miracle (recorded by Luke, an experienced medical doctor). John was the greatest of the old dispensation, which ended when the Christian church was inaugurated on the day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2.

What were the Product, the results and effects?

a. *He earned a marvellous commendation from those who knew him.*

Many came to him and said, "John did no miracle: **but** all things that John spake of this man are true - and many believed on Him" (John 10:41-42). I wonder, do we give such a faithful witness to Christ?

b. *He earned the Lord's approval and commendation*

Who can give a better or more faithful assessment and commendation than the Lord Himself? See Luke 7:28: "For I say unto you, among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist". There can be no doubt that the Lord's final assessment of John will be, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant" (see Matthew 25:21).

9. **Précis or summary of his life and service.**

- a. John the Baptist was a man sent from God (John 1:6).
- b. His fundamental job was to prepare the way of the Lord, by heralding Him in advance of His coming into the world (Isaiah 40:3).
- c. In his ministry, John preached repentance and baptism (Matthew 3:1-3). Morally, he was a Burning and Shining light (John 5:35).
- d. In his service he did no miracle but all things he said about Jesus were true (John 10:41).
- e. He bore constant witness to the Son of God, as the long promised Messiah of Israel, and Saviour of the world (John 1:29 and 36).
- f. When his work on earth was completed, wicked men were allowed to have him put to death, and he preceded his Master in leaving this world (Mark 6:14-29).

Little wonder that the Lord Himself could say, "Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist" (Luke 7:28). Even so, what is remarkable is that the Lord went on to say that he that is least in the kingdom of God is in a greater, more dignified position before God than even the best of the previous dispensation (Matthew 11:11, Luke 7:28). What a marvellous tribute to the mercy and grace of God. God has put the simplest, weakest Christian at such a level of blessing, not for what he is in himself, morally, or personally, but because of how God views him in Christ, as a result of the value to God of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Such is the mercy and grace of God. May God be praised.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.