

**John the Baptist: The Greatest Man that Ever Lived...**

Matthew 3:1-12

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I was able to go and see the movie Exodus a few weeks ago with some youth. I went with low expectations because it's the Word of God in the hands of Hollywood. The movie was exceptionally well done, and the director did an amazing job with parts of it. However it was probably only 40-60% accurate biblically. There were many historical and theological errors, so it won't be the next Sunday School curriculum tool. But before I saw it, I read through Exodus again and then seeing the movie, I was amazed again at the incredible journey that Moses went on. Following God through those events would have been incredibly difficult, and yet the payoff was incredible. God accomplished so much through Moses; As he did in the lives of others as well.

Abraham left all that he knew to follow God. Elijah called fire from heaven, John the Baptist got to baptize Jesus, King David was the kingly bloodline of Jesus Christ, Solomon was the wisest man who had ever lived because of God's blessing. In fact out of that list, who would you say was the greatest? Think about it: Abraham, Moses, John the Baptist, Elijah, King David, or Solomon? Today we are continuing through the Gospel of Matthew and we are talking about John the Baptist this morning. And as I was reading about him, I came across Matthew 11:11 where Jesus says that before himself, that John the Baptist was there greatest person who was ever born. The greatest. Not King David. Not the wisest Solomon. Not Elijah – who God didn't even let die. Or Abraham who was the patriarch of our faith. John the Baptist was greater than the humble Moses who was used in a most mighty way many many times, and was declared the most humble man who had ever lived. John the Baptist was greater.

We have stories written about these other guys. Even Jonah gets his own book. All we have about John is a few chapters and references throughout the gospels. So it begged the question from me – Why is John the Baptist the greatest man who ever lived up until Christ? I mean, I know he was a Baptist and all, and Baptists are awesome. (No I'm kidding) But who was he and why was he so great?

Well, let's talk about who he was. We know from Luke's account that his father was a priest named Zecharias, and his wife Elizabeth was from the line of Aaron. They were advanced in age. We know that Elizabeth was a relative to Mary. We don't know exactly what relation she was to Mary because God didn't tell us. Some translations mis-translate the Greek word *sin-genis* (sin-gen-ees) which means relative or kinsman, to be cousin. But the word they would have used for cousin is *exalefos* (ex saddle – fos), which isn't found in any manuscript. But what we do know is that they were relatives and were obviously close enough that Mary felt comfortable to go stay with her. So she may have been a cousin, a distant cousin, or an aunt, but they were close enough to spend extended time together. John's father prophesies over him that we will prepare the way for the Lord, and he grows up and heads out to the desert. Some scholars said that John was part of a sect in the dessert call the Qumran, because they practices a ceremonial washing. But most scholars agree that is not a very likely scenario because John's Baptism was unique in history as it was the first time someone else was baptizing other people, and the reason John was baptizing was different than any ceremonial washing practices before Him. As well,

what John was preaching about the kingdom does not line up with what we know that the Qumran taught. So there was not a likely deep association with them.

We also know that as John was living in the desert, he was dressed in camel hair garments, and ate locusts and honey as food. Which on a side note got me wondering if you could actually live on a diet of Locusts and honey, and it turns out that you can. There is enough nutriance in both. Some will claim that he actually ate honey dates and locust beans, but that is purely assumption. Many people across the world eat bugs as a source of protein, and I learned that Locusts are often dried out and then ground into flour. In fact, you can actually buy locust flour online and then you can use it in your baking. Which means that if John was doing that, he could have had a lot of different food options, he could have used the flour to make some locust pancakes with honey syrup, or some locust waffles, or perhaps some locust bread and could have had some honey sandwiches on locust bread. There is a whole bunch of options if John really wanted to get creative. But I digress.

So he ate this lowly food and dressed the opposite of rich clothing. People thought he was Elijah who had come back because of his clothing, because it is what Elijah wore as described in 2 kings 1:8. He was dressed and lived like a prophet. And he was a prophet. And he was baptizing people. He had disciples and followers, and his popularity grew so that people from all over were coming to be baptized. He was so popular that he eventually was thrown into prison for causing such a ripple among the people. Even Josephus wrote about John the Baptist.

With all of this information on who he was, let's read the passage in Matthew chapter three and ask ourselves: Why is this man so great in God's purposes? Turn to Matthew Chapter 3 verses 1-12.

### Matthew 3

3 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,<sup>2</sup> "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." 3 For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

'Prepare[a] the way of the Lord;

make his paths straight.'"

4 Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, 6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. 10 Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

11 “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

So John, this guy from the desert comes out and starts baptising people and warning them of the one that is coming after him who is greater than he. And Matthew makes it clear that he is the fulfillment of Isaiah and Malachi. He is the messenger, come to prepare the way. But what does that really mean, and why does that make him so great in God’s purposes? Well, the answer lies in the Old Testament, and we can’t truly appreciate this unless we have a better understanding of what was written before. I have to say as I was reading it was like the Holy Spirit was turning on lights in my head helping me understand the immensity of the importance of John’s role. Sometimes studying God’s word is so exciting when you see how things fit together in ways we never understood before.

So in the passage, there is a quote from Isaiah. Now Matthew actually misquotes it –on purpose. The quote reads “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’”. But in Isaiah 40:3 the last part doesn’t say make his paths straight. It says “prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” This prophecy was a well-known prophecy to the Jewish people. It is predicting the one who would come before God himself. This is huge! In the last book of the Old Testament, the book of Malachi also contains this prophecy. By changing the wording Matthew drew attention to it and this fulfillment to it. Malachi’s prophecy is also brought to mind as it says “Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.” And Matthew is the only gospel writer who makes it explicit (in chapter 11) that John the Baptist is Elijah who they have been waiting for. But he doesn’t mean Elijah reincarnate, but he is referring to this understanding of Elijah like in Malachi, pointing out that he is who they have been waiting for hundreds of years.

Matthew is also emphasizing not only who John is, but also who Jesus is! He is pointing out the prophecy that a messenger will come and prepare the way for God (the prophecy says “make straight in the desert a highway for our God”). He is saying John is the messenger, and look who comes after him – God. Matthew is trying to convince the Jewish people who Jesus is. He is not an angel, he is not a prophet, a good teacher, he is not the brother of Satan as some claim – Jesus is God. Matthew’s statement would have been clear to Jews of that day.

And John is the messenger. The way John dressed and what he did screamed out the resemblance to Elijah, and the message John was preaching fit with the prophecy in Malachi 4(5-6) which says “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers” John was calling people to repentance and to turn to the Kingdom of heaven. People were flocking to see John because he looked like Elijah and was preaching the message of the one who was coming.

And again to really appreciate John's role, we must go back to the Old Testament. I read through the book of Malachi again and was floored when I saw that it is all about John the Baptist. If you haven't read it before, it is all about how mad God is. Like he is really ticked with his people and their hypocrisy. You see they offer sacrifices to God, but they are using their worst animals. The sick, blind, lame – the animals they don't want or need or that aren't good to them anymore. And God is ticked. He says 'Would you give these animals to your governor?' What would he think? Imagine Stephen Harper coming to your home, and you were like 'Oh wow! Thanks for visiting my home are you hungry? I have some stale bread, little bit of mold, for you, and half a bottle of pop, it's flat, so we're not going to drink it any more. But thank you for coming!' What does that tell them about how you feel towards them? You would never give your leader the worst of your offerings. So why are you giving your crap to God? You say that you love him and fear him, but you don't show it. God says 'where is My honor? Where is My reverence? Your terrible offerings are evil. I will not bless them.' God is so mad that he says he will smear crap on their faces. He will take the poo from their solemn feasts and smear it on their faces. That's what it says! He's so mad! Then he says what he is going to do about it:

I'm going to send someone to prepare the way for me –turning hearts in repentance. Then I'm going to come like a refiner's fire- burning away the impurities. And who among you will be able to stand and endure when I come. God is mad at the hypocrisy. And there is a very obvious lesson to us in that we also need to be giving God our first-fruits of our money and our time, and the other offerings that we give to him. Then the end of Malachi says ["Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers"](#) This book climaxes with this reference to the messenger who is to come. Malachi was written 400 years before Christ and was the last prophet the Jews had heard from before John. They knew this message and were waiting. Then this man comes out of the wilderness dressed like Elijah, eating lowly food, and preaching the message of repentance, and prophesying of the one coming after – for all they knew, this was Elijah! And Matthew makes it clear, that this is who we have been waiting for! This is the one! This is the messenger!

And the one coming after...! They knew what was coming after! And who comes? Jesus; As a little baby. Humble. Vulnerable. If you were to drop him, he could have died. And Jesus grows up, and he loves people. He heals the sick, and the lame, and the blind and broken hearted. Then he goes on to fulfil everything prophesied about him by giving his life and dying on the cross, and like a refiners fire, paying for the sins of the world. It all happened so differently than what they expected. With so much love. And when I read in Malachi now, I don't just read an angry God. But you can see the deep love through the book like an upset parent who deeply loves their child.

This is why John the Baptist was so great. He was the messenger that they had waited 400 years for. He was the one who would make way for the greatest event in all of history. He was the last Old Testament Prophet and had the most important role of any before him. Moses – he set people free and walked them to a new place to live. That's pretty cool. King David? He got to be leader for God, that's neat. Solomon was pretty smart and wrote down some important things. But JOHN – he got to be the messenger for the single greatest thing that would ever happen –God becoming flesh and walking on the Earth. No one was greater before Jesus. John as messenger was to prepare the way for God to come

– to turn hearts to repentance. And so if he was so great in God’s purposes, we should probably consider his message. What did he say that we should listen to?

It was really simple. John’s baptism was different than what we do today. Today we baptize people, symbolizing their faith in Christ’s death burial and resurrection. But John baptized people as an outward sign of their repentance. His message was clear in Matthew 3:2 [“Repent for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand”](#). That’s it! Repent! Turn back to God!

When the Pharisees and Sadducees came to see what was going on – because remember, even though they didn’t see eye to eye on everything theologically or philosophically, they all came out to see this man who looked like Elijah, who looked like he was the fulfillment of the prophecies. And John speaks to them. You see they didn’t all come to be baptized. And then John goes all Malachi on them. He says, you can’t say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father, - you must bear fruit! John says in verses 9 and 10: [“And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. 10 Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”](#) In other words, you can’t rest your laurels on just saying that you love God or that you are his people if you bear no fruit. **If you do not bear fruit, you will be cut down and thrown into the fire.** A lack of fruit shows that your heart is not with God. Verse 12 says [“he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”](#) If you are not familiar, wheat when harvested needs to be separated from the chaff, which is the thin papery coating over the grain. So they would hit the gran and toss it so the seeds would fall free from the useless chaff. So John is saying God will separate the wheat from the chaff and burn the chaff with an unstoppable fire.

We need to hear this! Look at your life? Does it bear fruit of your decision to repent? Is there evidence in your life? It doesn’t matter how you feel, it doesn’t matter what you say, it doesn’t matter how much you can say “Oh I love the Lord, I love God!” It doesn’t matter if you only come to church or even if you were baptized at some point. Is there fruit in your life? Does your repentance show in your actions? Is the Holy Spirit working in you, changing you, and producing fruit in the way you love Him and love others? Are you obedient? Perhaps that is one of the best ways to look at your life – are you obedient to the things God commands? Do you Love the lord God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength? And do you strive to love others like he loves you? If you do, that’s a good sign! This is not about works or doing enough good things, it’s about seeing God at work in your life and seeing the outpouring of a genuine faith like James talks about.

This is John’s message –repent. Now God has come. We are blessed to be able to see the future of that great event. We get to see the gospel at work and how it’s changed the world. People continue to repent and come to faith in their God through the work of Jesus Christ. And of course we see many people who profess faith, but have no fruit. They don’t love God, they don’t trust Him, and they certainly don’t strive to obey His word, and most likely can’t spare the time to even read it.

God doesn’t want people to confess, be baptized and just fill a pew. He wants people to be transformed by His power – people who love Him and are being transformed by the Word of God, and who are

sharing the Gospel with other who desperately need it. The fruit in your life becomes one of the greatest testimonies to others.

I like the way Author Murray Downy says it in his book 'The Art of Soul-Winning' "Some people may get converted to a church, a creed, a denomination, an evangelist or to a preacher, but unless one is converted to Jesus Christ, it will avail nothing. One of the greatest hindrances [to those who don't believe] is the inconsistent living on the part of those professing to know Him. On the other hand, there is no argument more convincing to an unsaved soul than the experience of meeting a truly transformed life, made radiant and beautiful by the mighty miracle of salvation. The best apologetic for the gospel is a transformed life."

Isn't that great? Brothers and sisters isn't it wonderful that God has transformed us and continues to sanctify us? His grace abounding in our lives. For those who experience it, it is hard to articulate. And to be true disciples of Christ, and to be used by him, we need to share the message of the Gospel with others and let our lives shine before men so they can see our good deeds and bring glory to God.

And for those who are here and it feels like Johns message and warning is right to you this morning – please listen and respond. Admit your need for Him in your life. Admit your sin and shortcomings and repent –turn away from the sin in your life. Trust in the great provision He made for you by coming to the earth to die in your place. And call on His name. Submit your life to God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. Commit your past, your possessions, and all you are to him. And give your first-fruits to God and His kingdom.