

## Jesus Bible Study

### 4 - John the Baptist

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Matt 3:1-6 - In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea 2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 3 This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" 4 John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. 5 People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6 Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

You can't talk about Jesus without including a talk about John the Baptist. Jesus and John the Baptist were connected from early childhood. Not sure if they hung out at all, but when Mary was pregnant, she visited her relative, Elizabeth, who was also pregnant with John. She was 6 months further along than Mary.

Luke 1:39-43 - At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

Elizabeth knew by the Holy Spirit that Mary's child was the none other than the Lord. So from a young age, I'm sure that John heard from his mom that the child of Mary was someone special. And he ended up devoting his life to proclaim the arrival of the Messiah. He was known as one who baptized people, hence the name. When he was baptizing in the Jordan River, he brought a message that was different than what others taught. Baptism was typically for Gentiles who were converting to Judaism.

John preached repentance of sin and baptism to JEWS. If you remember from a couple weeks ago, there were religious leaders who came to the river to see what all the fuss over John was about. Now, the Jewish leaders had a legitimate job of being guardians of the faith. This wasn't something unreasonable or defiant for them to do. Especially since John was rather unorthodox.

The subsequent interrogation we read about in John 1 is also not an unreasonable act. But we will see that, although they had every right to question John, their hearts were already not in a good state. They didn't turn obstinate and defiant only after hearing and observing Jesus. They were already operating in a selfish, ungodly manner.

Let's read John 1:19-28 - 19 And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." 21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." 22 So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" 23 He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight[h] the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." 24 (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) 25 They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" 26 John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, 27 even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." 28 These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Are you Elijah? I am not. This doesn't mesh with Jesus words in Matthew 17:11-13 - "Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. 12 But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." 13 Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist."

So why did John say no to this question? Elijah was a prominent Old Testament prophet. He didn't die, but was taken up into heaven by what the Bible calls a chariot of fire. (2 Kings 2) The last 2 verses of the Old Testament talk about Elijah preparing the way for the Messiah

Not Elijah reincarnated. Not Elijah rising from the dead. Not his ghost floating around. But someone who comes in the spirit of Elijah. Someone who has a spirit like Elijah. That certainly was John the Baptist

So why did he answer this question with a no? I think there are a couple of reasons...

1. I'm sure he was fully aware of the prophecy concerning Elijah and the Messiah. But perhaps, even though he knew that was his purpose, he just didn't see himself in that light. He said of himself that he was not worthy to remove Jesus' sandals. This would put him lower than a servant who would be responsible for removing a guest's sandals and washing their feet. So he had a very humble view of himself. John the Baptist is one of the great men of the Bible. But it should be said that the greatest men are the most humble men.

2. Jesus' words in Matthew 11 shed some light on why he said no. He's talking to his disciples about John in Matt 11:14 - ...if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. I'd suggest that these religious leaders were simply not willing to accept it

It's hard to imagine that these religious leaders, guardians of the faith, living in a time when the thoughts of all Israel were whirling around the promise of a Messiah who would deliver them from Rome and restore the Davidic kingship, were unwilling to accept the imminence of the Messiah's arrival.

Are you Elijah? I am not. Are you the Prophet? No. This prophet refers to Deuteronomy 18:15 when Moses talks about a prophet whom God would raise up from Israel and they were to listen to him. Well then who are you? If you're not any of these prophetic figures, who are you? By what authority are you baptizing people? One could not just do these kinds of things on their own. These activities had to be sanctioned by the religious leaders.

The only legitimate reason for John to be a rogue baptizer was that he was some kind of significant prophetic figure. Who are you? We know your name and your family. That's not what they meant. Who do you represent? Whose function do you fulfill? What do you say about yourself?

As followers of Jesus, we have to answer the same question John the Baptist was faced with. Who are you? Not, what's your name; who's your daddy, but who do you represent? Whose function do you fulfill? What are you all about? Who are you?

Our answer to that question is pretty much the same as John the Baptist's. He answers the question by quoting the prophet Isaiah - Isaiah 40:3 - "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

In the very 1st verse of John's gospel, he calls Jesus the LOGOS. In the beginning was the word - logos. He is the statement - nothing else needs to be said. The Greek word used here is phonē. It's pronounced like our English word, phony. But it's not the English word phony as in fake. But it's the Greek word we get our word PHONE. Literally the voice, the sound, the cry. The cry is to make straight the way for the Lord.

To make straight - to pilot a ship. To be the forerunner to the Messiah. Now these religious leaders knew exactly what Isaiah's prophecy meant. Ok, he's not the Messiah, he's not Elijah, he's not this Prophet person. But he claims to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of "the voice" that clears the way for the Messiah.

They're not ignoring the significance of his answer when they ask, "So why are you baptizing people?" What does this have to do with preparing the way for the Messiah? We have the benefit of hindsight and see clearly why John was baptizing people as part of preparing for the Messiah. But people weren't looking for a spiritual Savior. They were looking for more than a religious leader.

They believed the Messiah would redeem them from Roman occupation and re-establish the kingdom of Israel. When Rome conquered Israel, all the prophecies made sense. They must be referring to this time. And God will provide a deliverer from Roman occupation.

Ok...so you're the voice that Isaiah talked about, preparing the way for the Messiah. Why, then, do you baptize people? Baptizing Jews didn't seem to go with that. Under whose authority are you baptizing people? Certainly the Messiah would have other priorities than this. John, who you say you are and what you're doing do not line up. At least that's what they thought.

Still, a worthy thought to ponder. Does who you say you are and what you do line up with each other? Are they congruent with each other? Not to put too much emphasis on works, but this speaks to our authenticity as believers. It's WHO you say you are vs. WHAT you present to the world.

The religious leaders THOUGHT that what John did didn't line up with who he said he was. Even though they didn't have their facts straight, the principle is still true. If people see in you something different than what you say about yourself, they'll be confused.

Our passage today opens with, "Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was." His testimony pointed to Jesus. Completely in line with John's character when we read about in John 3:30 - **He must become greater; I must become less.**

So the question I'm asking you today is, "Who are you?" What is your testimony about yourself? What are you all about? Why do you do the things you do?

People answer those kinds of questions by talking about their job, family, personality, dreams and passions. Christians talk about who they are and their contribution to God's kingdom. Who are you? What are you all about? Answering in the spirit of John the Baptist would sound something like, "Man, my life is not about me at all."

What do YOU say about you? That is a much more difficult question to answer. When you say that you work in a certain place and have a certain title. Or maybe you are on staff at a church and responsible for small groups or preaching every week. That is what anyone else can say about you after only a few minutes of conversation.

What do YOU say about you? Why are you here? You're not here to pastor a certain church or earn a certain degree. You're not here to make a certain sum of money. John the Baptist summed up his entire existence by pointing to Jesus. That is our purpose. Lord, I will do THAT anyway I can.

Your purpose is not to use your gifts and passions somewhere in the Church. It's really not. I understand that God has given those gifts and passions. His plan is to use those to bring glory to Jesus. What I want us to see is that the gift is not the point. Your passions are not the point. Those things are not your purpose, they are just a means to your purpose.

So let's say that you have the gift of hospitality and you naturally gravitate to being a greeter in your church. Your purpose is not to greet people. That's just a means to the real purpose that we all share of pointing to Jesus. When you understand THAT, your greeting will go to another level.

Your GIVING will go to another level. Your small group will transform. If you are a pastor, your preaching will experience a breath of fresh air. If you are employed in a secular job, you're not there just to make money by offering a service of some kind to customers. Your purpose is to point to Jesus.

But you don't understand, that's not allowed at my job. That's not important. I'm not talking about holding a Bible study once a week before work. I'm not suggesting that you wear a Christian t-shirt everyday. It's not about whether or not you pray for your meal before eating lunch with a co-worker.

It's about who you are. We don't change who we are depending on where we find ourselves. You are who you are...and that points to Jesus. This means that you don't have to have Bible answers. You don't have to try to change minds.

We all share the same purpose of pointing to Jesus. He must become greater and I must become less. An interesting thing happened with John as he became less and less. The people admired and respected him more and more. Mark 6 talks about how much Herod thought of and admired John the Baptist. Matthew 14 talks of how the people revered him as a prophet.

There are so many today who have such a fear of speaking the truth plainly. Because we don't want people to think of us as weird. We don't want to present ourselves as anything that would be counter to the culture around us. But the message of Jesus IS counter-cultural. John had wild hair, wore camel skins and ate bugs. People could have thought of him as weird. But his life pointed to something greater.

**If we present ourselves as no different than anyone else, people will think of us no differently than they do of anyone else.** But if our lives point to something greater than ourselves, and we're not afraid or ashamed to show it, that will stand out to people.

But it's not about US standing out. It's about the message. It's about the one we represent. But all we want to do is blend in with everyone else. "I'm no different than you." If that is true, then there is a problem somewhere. There has to be a difference in those who live for Christ.

I'm not talking about a difference such as no swearing or crude jokes around the water cooler. We should not differ based on what we don't do. I began following Jesus as a teenager. I heard sermons that said, "You shouldn't cuss. If you don't cuss and everyone else is, they will notice and ask what's so different about you." "I want whatever difference that is that makes you not cuss." I never had any kind of conversation remotely like that. I've never had a conversation with anyone convicted of sin b/c of what I don't do.

Yet that's what Christianity is for so many people today. A list of what I should or, more prominently, should NOT do. Good Christians don't do certain things, right? I know there are exceptions to everything, but I just don't see that saving anyone.

Our lives--your life--really can present Jesus to the world around you. That's your purpose. He must become greater and I must become less. The most common objection to this I hear is, "I'm just not qualified. I'm so sinful and weak."

Paul said, "**We hold this treasure in jars of clay. That proves this power is not from us, but from God.**" (2 Corinthians 4:7)

**Don't look at your weaknesses and imperfections as a disqualification. Your weaknesses and imperfections add to your authenticity as one who is learning God's ways.** So our prayer today is that we would be like John the Baptist. A voice, crying out, making way for Jesus to be seen by those around us.