

JOHN THE BAPTIST, FORERUNNER OF CHRIST

BIBLE TEXT: Luke 1:1-25, 57-80; Mathew 3:1-12; 11:2-14; 14:1-12.

LESSON 16 Senior Course

MEMORY VERSE: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Mathew 3:3).

BIBLE TEXT in King James Version

Luke 1:1-25,

¹ Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us,

² Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word;

³ It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus,

⁴ That thou mightiest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed.

⁵ ¶ There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judæa, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife *was* of the daughters of Aaron, and her name *was* Elisabeth.

⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

⁷ And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were *now* well stricken in years.

⁸ And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course,

⁹ According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense.

¹¹ And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

¹² And when Zacharias saw *him*, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God.

BIBLE REFERENCES:

I The Birth of John the Baptist

1. The parents, Zacharias and Elisabeth, a godly couple, Luke 1:5, 6.
2. John's birth foretold by Gabriel as Zacharias officiates in the Temple, Luke 1:7-22.
3. John's birth, Zacharias' prophecy, and John's days in the desert, Luke 1: 57-80.

II John's Preaching in the Wilderness

1. His theme: "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," Matthew 3:1, 2.
2. Isaiah's prophecy fulfilled in John's mission; his mode of living, Matthew 3:3, 4; Luke 1:17;

Isaiah 40:3;

³ ¶ 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.

II Kings 1:8;

⁸ And they answered him, *He was* an hairy man, and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins. And he said, It is Elijah the Tishbite.

3. Sinners converted, the proud rebuked, and Jesus' ministry proclaimed, Matthew 3:5-12.

III The Tribute Jesus Pays to John

1. John's query from prison, and Jesus' answer, Matthew 11:2-6;

Mathew 7:20;

²⁰ Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

John 5:36;

³⁶ ¶ But I have greater witness than *that* of John: for the works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me.

John 10:25;

²⁵ Jesus answered them, I told you, and ye believed not: the works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness of me.

John 14:11.

¹¹ Believe me that I *am* in the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very works' sake.

2. Jesus' tribute to John as His forerunner to prepare the way before Him, Matthew 11:7-10;

Malachi 3:1;

¹ Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts.

Malachi 4:5, 6;

⁵ ¶ Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD:

⁶ 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.

Luke 1:76, 77;

⁷⁶ And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways;

⁷⁷ To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the

¹⁷ And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, 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.

¹⁸ And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years.

¹⁹ And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings.

²⁰ And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.

²¹ And the people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple.

²² And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless.

²³ And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house.

²⁴ And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying,

²⁵ Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on *me*, to take away my reproach among men.

Luke 1:57-80;

⁵⁷ Now Elisabeth's full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son.

⁵⁸ And her neighbours and her cousins heard how the Lord had shewed great mercy upon her; and they rejoiced with her.

⁵⁹ And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father.

⁶⁰ And his mother answered and said, Not so; but he shall be called John.

⁶¹ And they said unto her, There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name.

⁶² And they made signs to his father, how he would have him called.

⁶³ And he asked for a writing table, and wrote, saying, His name is John. And they marvelled all.

⁶⁴ And his mouth was opened

remission of their sins,

3. John, a representative of the prophets who prophesied of Jesus, Matthew 11:11-14;

Mathew 17:12;

¹² But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them.

Deuteronomy 18:15;

¹⁵ ¶ The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken;

John 3:28, 29;

²⁸ Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him.

²⁹ He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled.

IV John Beheaded by Herod the Tetrarch

1. John imprisoned by Herod for condemning his unlawful marriage, Matthew 14:3-5;

Exodus 20:14;

¹⁴ Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Leviticus 20: 10, 21.

¹⁰ ¶ And the man that committeth adultery with *another* man's wife, *even he* that committeth adultery with his neighbour's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.

²¹ And if a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an unclean thing: he hath uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless.

2. John beheaded on Herod's birthday to please Herodias, Matthew 14: 6-12.
3. Herod's fear that Jesus was John risen from the dead, Matthew 14:1, 2.

NOTES:

"Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist." John's ministry was very short, however. A public ministry was not begun, under the Law, until the age of 30; and as John was six months older than Jesus, he was preaching for only six months before Jesus began His ministry. John said of Jesus, "He must increase, but I must decrease"; and before Jesus' first tour of Galilee John was imprisoned which resulted later in his being beheaded by Herod.

His birth (not according to the ordinary laws of nature, but, through the interposition of Almighty power), character, and office, was foretold by the angel Gabriel. Previous to this there had been no prophecy or angelic ministry given to this people for about 400 years. But now, Jesus, the Son of Righteousness, is about to come, and they must be prepared for that kingdom of God which was at hand. And as Christ was to be born of a virgin, so incidents connected with His coming must also be miraculous.

John's father, Zacharias, was a priest. His mother, Elisabeth, was also a descendant of Aaron. Their home was in Hebron, in the hill country, where most of the priests lived (Luke 1:39; ³⁹ And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda; Joshua 21:11; 11 And they gave them the city of Arba the father of Anak, which city is Hebron, in the hill country of Judah, with the suburbs thereof round about it). They were a righteous couple, upright and holy in their conduct, and conscientious in their religious duties.

Zacharias was astounded and hardly believed the announcement made by the angel. But all things are possible with God, and nothing can hinder when His purpose is declared. God

immediately, and his tongue *loosed*, and he spake, and praised God.

⁶⁵ And fear came on all that dwelt round about them: and all these sayings were noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judæa.

⁶⁶ And all they that heard *them* laid *them* up in their hearts, saying, What manner of child shall this be! And the hand of the Lord was with him.

⁶⁷ And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying,

⁶⁸ Blessed *be* the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people,

⁶⁹ And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David;

⁷⁰ As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began:

⁷¹ That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us;

⁷² To perform the mercy *promised* to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant;

⁷³ The oath which he sware to our father Abraham,

⁷⁴ That he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear,

⁷⁵ In holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life. ⁷⁶ And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways;

⁷⁷ To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins,

⁷⁸ Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us,

⁷⁹ To give light to them that sit in darkness and *in* the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

⁸⁰ And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel.

Mathew 3:1-12;

¹ In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judæa,

² And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

³ For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

⁴ 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.

should be believed on His Word alone. Zacharias suffered nine months of silence for one questioning speech; and many others, by using the language of unbelief, have lost the language of praise and thanksgiving for months, if not years!

John was born "in the days of Herod the king." For the first time in Israel's history, Judah's throne was filled by a Gentile. The present king was appointed by the Roman government. Judah had lost the sceptre (Genesis 49: 10; ¹⁰ The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be), and they should have looked for the King from Bethlehem, Who was to rule and feed the people of Israel (Micah 5:1-4; ¹ Now gather thyself in troops, O daughter of troops: he hath laid siege against us: they shall smite the judge of Israel with a rod upon the cheek. ² But thou, Beth-lehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting. ³ Therefore will he give them up, until the time that she which travaileth hath brought forth: then the remnant of his brethren shall return unto the children of Israel. ⁴ ¶ And he shall stand and feed in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God; and they shall abide: for now shall he be great unto the ends of the earth).

John was to come in the "spirit and power" of Elijah. He was to resemble that prophet in his manner of life, it is true; but more than that, he was to come in the same power, authority, and zeal for the truth as Elijah, even reproving princes for their crimes. He wore a coarse or rough covering which, it seems, was common to prophets (**Zechariah 13:4** ⁴ And it shall come to pass in that day, that the prophets shall be ashamed every one of his vision, when he hath prophesied; neither shall they wear a rough garment to deceive; **II Kings 1:8**; ⁸ And they answered him, *He was* an hairy man, and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins. And he said, *It is* Elijah the Tishbite). His food was locusts and wild honey. Locusts were of the grasshopper species, considered clean under the Mosaic Law, and commonly used for food (**Leviticus 11:22**; ²² *Even* these of them ye may eat; the locust after his kind, and the bald locust after his kind, and the beetle after his kind, and the grasshopper after his kind).

John came as a forerunner of Christ, preparing the way before Him; and as a herald, proclaiming a matter of great importance to men. A herald is one who carries a message in the streets and fields so that he may be heard by many. Kings of those days, when on journeys, sent a group ahead of them, as heralds, and as forerunners to clear the way. This was a very necessary precaution when there were no public roads.

The Holy Spirit taught John, revealing the doctrine of salvation to him while he was in the wilderness alone with God, and the people who heard him later were suddenly aware that they were exposed to the judgments of the Lord, and sought an escape. No one but God gave John his commission.

He first appealed to the great masses of people, teaching them their duty one to another. He told them not to expect mercy from the hand of God if they acted towards others in a contrary manner. He instructed the tax-gatherers as to their duty. That office was detested by the Jews. But John does not condemn it; he speaks only against the abuse of it. Often the tax-gatherer exacted more from the people than the government authorized, pocketing the surplus.

He then instructed the soldiers. They were not to extort money by force, or to accuse anyone falsely in order to create a good impression before their superiors.

The Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptised also. ³The Pharisees posed as a religious people, more holy and pious than others. They were very numerous among the Jews. In the beginning they were probably a pure and holy people, acquiring their name from the fact that they separated themselves from the polluted

⁵ Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan,

⁶ And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷ ¶ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

⁸ Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance:

⁹ And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to *our* father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.

¹⁰ And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. ¹¹ I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and *with* fire:

¹² Whose fan *is* in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

Mathew 11:2-14;

² Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples,

³ And said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?

⁴ Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see:

⁵ The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. ⁶ And blessed is *he*, whosoever shall not be offended in me.

⁷ ¶ And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind?

⁸ But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft *clothing* are in kings' houses.

⁹ But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet.

¹⁰ For this is *he*, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. ¹¹ Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the

national worship. The name means "separatists," but they had degenerated, lost God's Spirit, and had only a form of godliness left, as we read in Matthew 15:9, "In vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." They observed the rules -- but the Spirit was gone.

The Sadducees denied the existence of angels and the resurrection of the dead. They were like Modernists of today.

These last two groups came in a self-righteous attitude, and not as the sinners they were. John told them to come in true repentance; and he reproveth them for their sins, warning them of the nearness of God's judgment.

So great was the effect produced by his preaching that some people thought he was the Messiah. A few verses contain all that is recorded of his preaching, and they are entirely on repentance and the subsequent change of heart and life. He was uncompromising in spirit, and did not hesitate to renounce evil. Herod knew that John was a holy and righteous man, and at first heard him gladly (**Mark 6:20**; ²⁰ For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly). But Herod married his brother's wife, while the brother was living, thereby committing one of the worst forms of adultery; and because of John's condemnation of the act, Herod put him in prison and eventually beheaded him.

During John's imprisonment he apparently felt some uncertain about Christ's Kingdom. Perhaps he had perplexing thoughts that harassed his mind. This great man was human and subject to temptation, doubts, and depressions the same as we are. He, too, knew how to get relief from them. He did not ask another man for an opinion but sent direct to Christ, asking the one question that would settle all his doubts: "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?"

John, and Christ's disciples also, envisioned Christ's Kingdom as an earthly one instead of a spiritual kingdom in men's hearts. Jesus showed John's disciples what He was doing. He tested His own ministry in the same way that we are to test another's spiritual condition, viz., by His fruit and not only by the profession that is made. The works that He was doing were proof that He was the Son of God. No other man was able to do them, or to speak the words that Jesus spoke. He was the true Messiah.

John's ministry closed the period of the law; and Jesus said, when speaking of him, that no greater man had ever lived, but that the least in the kingdom of Heaven (the time when the fullness of the Gospel is proclaimed) was greater than John. This does not mean that we are more holy than John, nor more devoted to God than he was. It means that we live in a period when the light is being manifested in a greater way, and when we can receive greater blessings from God. Many who lived in Old Testament times, and prophesied of these days, desired to live now and see what we see, but could not.

John was greater than the other prophets, because he was the privileged one who could announce Jesus' coming. We can say that Jesus not only has come, but died for our sins, has risen again, and has ascended to finish redemption's plan; so our position is even greater than John's. But John's greatness was due not only to the time in which he lived; God's Spirit dwelt in him, and he continually endured hardness for the cause of Christ. He had an ardent zeal to make Christ known, and outstanding fidelity and courage in rebuking sin, which proved to be instrumental in promoting a reformation among the Jews.

Jesus said that, "the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence." He meant that those who receive God's blessings will do so because they are determined to have them at any cost. They seek constantly,

kingdom of heaven is greater than he.
¹² And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.

¹³ For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.

¹⁴ And if ye will receive *it*, this is Elias, which was for to come.

Mathew 14:1-12.

¹ At that time Herod the tetrarch heard of the fame of Jesus,

² And said unto his servants, This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead; and therefore mighty works do shew forth themselves in him.

³ ¶ For Herod had laid hold on John, and bound him, and put *him* in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife.

⁴ For John said unto him, It is not lawful for thee to have her.

⁵ And when he would have put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet.

⁶ But when Herod's birthday was kept, the daughter of Herodias danced before them, and pleased Herod.

⁷ Whereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatsoever she would ask.

⁸ And she, being before instructed of her mother, said, Give me here John Baptist's head in a charger.

⁹ And the king was sorry: nevertheless for the oath's sake, and them which sat with him at meat, he commanded *it* to be given *her*.

¹⁰ And he sent, and beheaded John in the prison.

¹¹ And his head was brought in a charger, and given to the damsel: and she brought *it* to her mother. ¹² And his disciples came, and took up the body, and buried it, and went and told Jesus.

going deeper in consecration, preparing their hearts for the desired experience, until it is theirs.

We see in our lesson text that repentance, with sincere and heartfelt sorrow for sin, is the only way a sinner can come to God and receive pardon. A hypocrite can obtain nothing from God until he comes as a sinner, asking for mercy. God's stand against the sin of adultery is clearly shown here. Some people lay aside the Word of God on this important teaching, but it still stands. It is wrong to marry if one has another companion still living; and no matter how the state laws read, it is still wrong. The king was guilty, but John would not compromise. He held to the Word of God and was soon in Heaven with God Himself.

We are living in marvellous days, in which the fullness of the Gospel is manifested; an age when the Holy Spirit is being given to prepare the Bride of Christ. We can be in that number and have a place no Old Testament saint will have, if we, like they, serve God in holiness and righteousness all the days of our life; and, in addition, we shall receive what they could not receive: the anointing which was first given to the 120 in the upper room on the day of Pentecost the wonderful baptism of the Holy Ghost.

QUESTIONS

1. What position did John the Baptist's father hold in Jerusalem?
2. Where did John's parents live?
3. Who announced John's birth?
4. On what other occasions did this messenger bring tidings to other people?
5. Where did John get his commission to preach the Gospel?
6. Where do God's ministers of today get their authority to preach the Gospel?
7. What was the theme of John's preaching?
8. Did John believe that it was right to compromise the truth in order to save one's own life?
9. Who imprisoned John, and why?
10. What did Jesus say that tells us of the greatness of this man of God?