

## 5. The forerunner of Christ

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Nowadays, there are many mega churches in America that have everything. They have the presentations wired up and it is slick as Hollywood's with lights, smokes, top notch musicians and sound systems, then here comes a teaching pastor in his tailored made suits. The message is less than 20 minutes and would make you feel good about yourself – a great pep talk. It really boost you up, forget about all that convictions from the Bible. They have everything – catered programs, nice facilities, gigantic video screen and flat panel TV monitors everywhere. They even have restaurants in the church campuses.

Is it bad to have nice things and a great pep talk? Absolutely not! As long as they rely on God and preach the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth from the Bible to the people without any compromises.

Contrast to the those mega churches that give out feel-good messages, John the Baptist was anyone but ordinary. He didn't set up his meetings at a place where it would be convenient to the people. He held meetings dusty outdoors in the wilderness under the hot sun. His clothing was a smelly camel skin. His lunch box contained insects and honey. In other words, he was the original hippie. When he smiled, you probably could see a grasshopper's leg stuck between his teeth.

On top of that, he spoke offensively. He was an equal opportunity insulter. He called the people names – like "You snake". He embarrassed top-ranking government officials by exposing their shameful private lives. When crowds finally start coming, he sent them away to another minister who was about to enter into His public ministry.

John's methods and presentations were anything but seminaries or Bible colleges would recommend, but Jesus said otherwise.

*Matthew 11:11 "Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*

### A. A DARK BACKDROP

*Luke 3:1-2 Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, 2 while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.*

The fifteenth year of his reign would place the beginning of John's ministry about A.D. 28 or 29.

From the broad regions of the Empire, Luke zooms up to the land of Palestine, which had been apportioned to Pontius Pilate, Herod and Philip. The political hornet's nest of Judea belonged to Pilate, the cruelly anti-Semitic Roman governor. Herod – also called Antipas – and his half brother Philip, were tetrarchs, local rulers supported by Rome. Both governed parts of northern Palestine inherited from their father, Herod the Great. Along with territory, however, their father also passed down to his sons cruelty and corruption at its worst.

Also mentioned in Luke's list of rulers is Lysanias, whom we know nothing about except that he ruled Abilene, a territory north of Palestine near Damascus.

If that is not bad enough, Luke shifts his focus to religious rulers, introducing the high priests – Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas. Both of them were pompous, power-hungry and unspiritual. Even though Caiaphas was the official high priest, the former high priest Annas was the one controlling the religious systems of Israel.

Against this dark backdrop, John the Baptist shone bright and he was a breath of fresh air in Israel political and spiritual cesspool.

## **B. PREPARING THE WAY OF THE LORD**

*Luke 3:3-6 And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth; 6 And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"*

During that time, a king was going to be traveling through an area, people would be sent ahead to prepare the way. They would fill in the potholes and flatten out the bumps, so the way would be smooth for the king. This quote is from the Book of Isaiah chapter 40.

To a nation disillusioned by its leaders, John offered a message of hope. John's message convicted the people's hearts and they repented. The baptism itself was not the actual process of forgiveness, rather it was their way to show the world their change of heart.

The idea behind remission is not only forgiveness, but liberty and deliverance.

John's responsibilities were threefold: to "clear the way" for the Lord, to "prepare the way" for the Lord, and to "get out of the way" of the Lord.

He knew the authority that came with his role, but he also understood his limitations.

Jesus was the voice. Jesus was the Word.

Jesus was the lamp. Jesus was the Light of the World.

Jesus was a man. Jesus was the Messiah.

## **C. AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY INSULTER**

*Luke 3:7-9 Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. 9 And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."*

Addressing your audience as snakes is not a customary way to begin a sermon. Asking them "why are you here anyway?" isn't a smooth introduction either. But John wasn't interested in giving a nice pep talk or tickling ears. He spoke the truth.

These religious people may have had all the right things for their religion, but they didn't have repented with humble hearts before God. They believed that their heritage as Abraham's offspring secured them favor with God, but John had news for them.

I must say the same thing like John to some of you today. Some of you may have religion, "I am a Methodist, I am a Baptist, I am a Catholic or I am a Calvary Chapelite." God doesn't care. You won't find any denomination in heaven. God is not looking for someone with a religion. If that is the case, many devout Muslims, Buddhists, other religious people will enter into heaven before born-again Christians. But they will not. Why? Because they don't have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Because they've never received Jesus into their hearts as the Savior and Lord. That is why.

#### **D. PRACTICAL ADVICES FOR THE REPENTED HEARTS**

*Luke 3:10-14 So the people asked him, saying, "What shall we do then?" 11 He answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." 12 Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" 13 And he said to them, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you." 14 Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?" So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages."*

The people with the repented hearts asked for advices from John the Baptist. John's answers were painfully practical.

When a person accepts Jesus Christ into his heart and becomes a born-again Christian, he will start to change his lifestyle by the guidance of the Holy Spirit who now lives in his heart. If his lifestyle is the same as before and he continuously lives a sinful life, he has to wonder if his salvation is real or just an emotional hype.

A genuinely saved person wants to please the Lord, follows the Lord and obeys His commands in the Bible. If he used to have sex before marriage, he would stop it altogether at any cost. If he used to cuss or enjoy dirty jokes, he would stop that, too. If he used to lie and cheat in his business, he would be honest with his clients and even make restitutions.

Am I saying that to be saved, we have to do all that? No. Faith in Jesus Christ alone saves us. The reason is after we get saved we want to please our God, so we do the right things.

*James 2:17 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*

#### **E. I AM NOT THE ONE**

*Luke 3:15-18 Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not, 16 John answered, saying to all, "I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire." 18 And with many other exhortations he preached to the people.*

The people who saw what is happening in that area started to wonder if John was the Messiah they have been waiting for. John's answer was simple, "NO."

The contrasts between John and Jesus are loaded in these verses. Although John is effective, Jesus will be so mighty that John would not be worthy of a slave's most menial task, untying His shoes.

Although John purifies the people with water baptism, Jesus will purify them through Spirit baptism and fire which symbolizes judgement. God will separate people like a farmer separates wheat. Only the Messiah has that kind of power to judge between the righteous and the wicked.

People flocked to the Jordan to hear John speak. They marveled at him. They hung on his words. Yet he never lost sight of who he really was – "The voice of one crying in the wilderness".

John's clarity of vision and humble spirit are remarkable in light of the fame that launched him to celebrity status overnight. As more and more people's lives were touched, it must have been tempting for him to believe in his own power, to think he was indispensable, to become someone he wasn't in order to please the crowds. But he never did.

By the way, John the Baptist was not the founder of the Baptist denomination.

## **F. AN UNCOMMON COURAGE**

*Luke 3:19-20 But Herod the tetrarch, being rebuked by him concerning Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, and for all the evils which Herod had done, 20 also added this, above all, that he shut John up in prison.*

The story behind these verses was a major sorry excuse soap opera. Herod Antipas had several half brothers, and one of them had married the ambitious, vicious and trickery Herodias – the daughter of another half brother. She reminds me a certain Presidential candidate in the upcoming Presidential election. Antipas dumped and disgraced his wife, he eventually got Herodias. What a loser!

Only John had the courage to bring this dark secret into the light. And for that he was thrown in prison and eventually beheaded.

But all that was still in the future. In the next verses, Luke switches back to the present, as the Son of God quietly entered the scene.

## **G. THE FATHER, THE SON AND THE SPIRIT**

*Luke 3:21-23a When all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also was baptized; and while He prayed, the heaven was opened. 22 And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from heaven which said, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased."*

*23 Now Jesus Himself began His ministry at about thirty years of age,*

The baptism for Jesus was unique. It wasn't an act of repentance, but an opportunity for the Father to authenticate His Son, to declare the official start of His earthly ministry and to identify with the sinners.

In the muddy Jordan waters, the Trinity appeared before all humanity. You could see the Spirit in bodily form like a dove. You could hear the Father. You could touch the Son. Those who deny the Trinity have a difficult time explaining this event.

## **H. THE GENEALOGY OF JESUS CHRIST THROUGH MARY**

We find the genealogy of Jesus here as well as in the Book of Matthew chapter 1. Some people who don't know much about the Bible insist that there are contradictions in these two genealogies, thus Jesus is not real. Obviously, they didn't do their homework properly.

This genealogy is through His mother Mary, His biological line, traced all the way back to Adam. I guess you can say that Jesus was a member of "Adam's family".

This emphasizes the humanity of Jesus. Notice in v23, Joseph was the son of Heli while Matthew says, "the son of Jacob". Heli was the father of Mary. Since Joseph and Mary were both in David's line, these genealogies prove that Jesus of Nazareth has the legal right to David's throne.

The Book of John gives another genealogy of Jesus – divine one.

*John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

## **I. APPLICATIONS**

### **1) Those who make an impact must not fear being different.**

We need to stand for the truth of God which others have compromised. Don't be afraid to disagree with the majority.

### **2) Those who wish to change should not ignore being specific.**

Change takes longer when we deal in generalities. If we truly want to grow, we must ask for God's power in our specific areas of need.

### **3) Those who risk confronting dare not forget the consequences.**

John courageously confronted a king, and it cost him his freedom and ultimately his life. Throughout history, countless men and women like him have dared to speak God's truth, and they have suffered real and painful consequences. It may very well be the same for us in the near future.

### **4) Those who seek the Savior cannot deny the evidence.**

The heavens opened. The Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove. The Father spoke, "You are My beloved Son." We need to take God at His word: Jesus is the Savior of the world.