



John the Baptist

Preparing the Way

Part 1 - His Purpose and Message

In Yeshua's earthly ministry, He speaks of two men who exhibit greatness. Both occurrences appear in Luke's account of Yeshua's life, and both appear in the same chapter - chapter 7. The first is the Roman centurion, a man who had a clear understanding of authority and thus was - according to Yeshua - a man of great faith; thus He said of him -

^{ESV} **Luke 7:9** . . . "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."

The second is John the Baptist - a man who was born with a mission. The ministry of John was rather short, for his life was snuffed out when he was about 32 years of age. John spent the last few months of his life in a dungeon prison where his disciples would relay news to him about his cousin - Yeshua, the teacher from Galilee, and the many miracles He had performed throughout the Galilee and Samaria. After seeing a man being raised from the dead, some of John's disciples reported it to him, and this prompted John to send them back to Yeshua with a question. After hearing Yeshua's response to their question, they departed, but Yeshua talked with those who had gathered around Him and said -

^{NKJ} **Luke 7:28** "For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist . . ."

Why was John the Baptist considered by Yeshua to be the greatest prophet of all time . . . one greater than Jeremiah, Isaiah, Zachariah . . . even greater than Moses.

In this message, I want to share with you some of my studies about John the Baptist. We will:

- Discuss the reason John was born
- Find the message behind his ministry
- Try to understand some of the questions we might have about John
- Why is it said that John came "in the spirit of Elijah"?
- See how John's calling parallels our own

John's Purpose in Life

John was born to parents who were childless and well past the age of bearing children. Yet John's parents never gave up hope of having children, and thus prayed about it daily. One day, while performing his priestly duties in the Temple, an angel appeared to Zechariah - John's father, and said -

^{NKJ} **Luke 1:13-17** "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ "And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. ¹⁵ "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ "And **he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.** ¹⁷ "He will also 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.**"

Later - after John was born, Zacharias prophesied even more about John's purpose in life. He said -

^{NKJ} **Luke 1:76-79** ⁷⁶ "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, ⁷⁷ To **give knowledge of salvation to His people** By the remission of their sins, ⁷⁸ Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; ⁷⁹ To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace."

From Zacharias's prophecy, we see that in addition to what we've already seen, John would be a prophet. He would bring light to God's people Israel - a people who had no hope - by showing them that salvation and the pardoning of their sins would come through the Messiah.

In his prophecy, Zacharias used an interesting phrase - "Dayspring from on high". What does that mean?

The Greek word from which we get "dayspring" is *anatello* (Strong's 393) and simply means "to rise", but it is oftentimes coupled with another word that means "sun", thus it usually speaks of the "sun rising". There's an interesting passage in Malachi that seems to fit what Zacharias may have been indicating. It goes like this -

^{ESV} **Malachi 4:2** But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.

I believe this "Sun of Righteousness" is the Messiah who gives to those who follow him freedom and peace as if we were finally set free from years of bondage. This concept will become important as we continue through the study, but for now, let's summarize what we've seen so far. We've seen that John's purpose was to :

- **turn many of the children of Israel to the God**
- **give knowledge of salvation to God's people**
- **prepare the people for the coming of Messiah**

But there is one more thing John was called to do, and that's found in the book of John -

^{ESV} **John 1:6-9** ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

John was a *shaliah* - a sent one. He was sent by God to be a witness of Yeshua. You'll notice that John was to bear witness that Yeshua was yet to come. Though Yeshua had obviously been born by the time John began his ministry, Yeshua had yet to begin his. In fact, Yeshua did not really get started in His own ministry until John had been put in prison.

^{ESV} **Matthew 4:12-17** ¹² Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. ¹³ And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali . . . ¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

In fact, Yeshua did not even begin to call his disciples until after John's ministry was for all practical purposes - over.

Mark 1:14-16 ¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." ¹⁶ Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen.

So the job John was called to do was multi-faceted, just as was Elijah's calling. We'll see how he was able to fulfill his calling as we examine the message that John proclaimed.

The Message Behind John's Ministry

We first learn about John's ministry in the book of Mark. In this account of Yeshua's life, Mark seems to indicate that the "good news" of the Messiah actually begins with John the Baptist -

^{ESV} **Mark 1:1-3** The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ² As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, ³ the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

From this passage, we see that Yeshua's gospel message began when the messenger of God was sent to prepare the way for Yeshua's arrival. It's important to note that Yeshua's gospel message was not a message about himself, but rather a message about the coming Kingdom of God. Thus when Mark speaks of the beginning of the gospel of Yeshua, he is saying that the messenger will be doing works that prepare for the return of the Kingdom, which is the purpose of the Messiah's first coming.

The fact that John was the "messenger" is referenced in all four gospels¹. Thus we can assume that John's message would show us how to make the paths of YHVH strait, and that preparing the way of the Lord is to simply do that . . . make His paths strait. So how did John do that. He taught that we should all immerse - baptize - ourselves in repentance for the forgiveness of sin -

^{ESV} **Mark 1:4** . . . John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Luke's account says that John went throughout Judea and into all the region of the Jordan river - an area that spans nearly the entire length of the nation -

^{ESV} **Matthew 3:5-6** 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.

^{ESV} **Luke 3:1-3** In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar . . . the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

John's primary message was that the people - both individually and collectively - should repent so there could be a forgiveness of sins . . . not just repent, but to immerse themselves in repentance, just as the prophet Isaiah shows -

The Kingdom Gospel

The Kingdom of God is one of the most important topics in scripture, and the focus of the "good news" Yeshua came to proclaim. Even before He chose his disciples, He began to preach His "kingdom gospel"

^{ESV} **Matthew 4:17** From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Immediately after that, He again picked up on the same "kingdom gospel" theme.

^{NKJ} **Matthew 4:23** And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom . . .

In His famous *sermon on the mount*, Yeshua indicated that the first petition in our daily prayers should be "Thy kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10) then went on with the admonishment to -

^{ESV} **Matthew 6:33** . . . seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness

What is the "Kingdom of God"? To answer that we must go back to the time of the exodus. After Israel was miraculously saved from their Egyptian oppressors, God led them to Mount Sinai where He said to them -

^{ESV} **Exodus 19:5** Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples . . .; ⁶ and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Israel's calling was to become a kingdom unlike any kingdom before. They were to be a kingdom of people who believe in God and show their belief by obeying His words. On the other hand, if they failed to follow Him, God would curse them by removing them from the land. He said He would -

^{ESV} **Deuteronomy 28:64** " . . . scatter you (them) among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other . . ."

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¹ Matt. 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27; John 1:21

^{ESV} **Isaiah 1:16-17** ¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ¹⁷ learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.

And so John taught just that -

^{ESV} **Luke 3:10-14** ¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" ¹¹ And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." ¹² 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 you are authorized to do." ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."

John also taught against salvation by association. First century Judaism taught that a person had a place in the Kingdom of God simply by being a part of the "covenant people", i.e. - being a Jew². But John showed the foolishness of that way of thinking by making a very simple observation -

^{ESV} **Luke 3:7-8** ⁷ He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin 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. ⁹ 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."

The Kingdom Gospel (cont.)

But unlike what's commonly understood, this scattering would not be the end of Israel, but rather the beginning of their repentance so that they would ultimately fulfill their calling -

^{ESV} **Deuteronomy 30:1-3** "And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, ² and return to the LORD your God . . . and obey his voice in all that I command you today . . . , ³ then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you.

Yeshua's mission is to redeem and gather His people.

^{ESV} **Isaiah 59:20** "And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression," declares the LORD.

^{ESV} **Zechariah 8:7-8** Thus says the LORD of hosts: behold, I will save my people from the east country and from the west country, ⁸ and I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness."

This is what He set out to do. The time of Israel's gathering was to begin -

^{ESV} **Mark 1:14-15** Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

But the gathering did not, and is not happening as his followers expected (Luke 19:11). Instead, it's a work that has been taking place for the past 2000 years. It's a work Yeshua's followers are still called to be a part of -

^{ESV} **Matthew 24:14** And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

² The author teaches that in the 1st century, the term "Jew" was used loosely to indicate those people from the "house of Judah" as well as any from the other Israelite tribes who may have joined them. For example - Paul considered himself to be a "Jew" even though he was from the tribe of Benjamin.

For John, a person (or a people) who claimed to be a descendant of Abraham should bear fruit. If they did not, they would be cut down. Yeshua illustrated that thought later in His own ministry³, and it's something we must all take to heart for it's not uncommon to believe that being associated with this church or that synagogue is going to secure your salvation. What really secures salvation is faith in God which is shown by our good works.

Even though John taught on repentance and good works, his greatest message was his witness that the Messiah would soon appear. The disciple John, in his account of Yeshua's life, credits John the Baptist with first identifying the Messiah -

^{ESV} **John 1:14-15** ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'")

John's life was a witness of the coming Messiah. He avoided the limelight by making his home in the wilderness, yet his message and his walk seemed to be what the people were expecting in the promised Messiah. Because so many of the "common" people flocked to him, the leadership became concerned and began to question him. The apostle John continues his narrative -

^{ESV} **John 1:19-21** 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."

Though John continually denied that he was the messiah, the people continued to think John was someone special. Yeshua used that fact to further confound the Jewish leadership.

^{ESV} **Luke 20:1** One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up ² and said to him, "Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority." ³ He answered them, "I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, ⁴ Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?" ⁵ And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why did you not believe him?'" ⁶ But if we say, 'From man,' all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet."

King Herod - though an unlikely one - was one of John's most notable admirers. Herod Antipus was the son of Herod the Great and king over the area of the Galilee and down the eastern shore of the Jordan River - the area where John did most of his work. In his account of John's death, Mark says this about Herod -

Mark 6:20 . . . Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.

Of course, Herod eventually put John to death in spite of the fact that he knew John was sent from God. The narrative shows that later, Herod felt the same way about Yeshua, even thinking He was the resurrected John the Baptist. Speaking of Yeshua and His disciples, Mark says -

Mark 6:12-16 ¹² So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. ¹³ And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them. ¹⁴ King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." ¹⁵ But others said, "He

³ Matt. 21:19

is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." ¹⁶ But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

So John's life was an example of how the Messiah would live, yet he repeatedly showed that Yeshua was greater than he -

^{ESV} **Matthew 3:11-12** 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 with 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."

^{ESV} **Mark 1:7-8** And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

^{ESV} **John 1:26-27** ". . . 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."

^{ESV} **John 1:29-30** ²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.'

So John lived a life that represented the walk of the Messiah. He came before the Messiah to illustrate what Messiah would be like, and in doing so helped prepare the way for His arrival.

In the next installment, we'll discover why John was likened to Elijah and whether John latter questioned Yeshua's messiahship.

Shalom Alecheim