

The Cloud of Witnesses

John the Baptist

Lesson 1: John the Baptist – Set Apart By God From Birth

Reading

Luke 1:5-25.

Set Apart By God From Birth

John the Baptist – as we call him – was a very special person. As we read Luke’s Gospel we find his account opens with an introduction to John. John was the forerunner for the Messiah.

We find that John’s birth was a miracle. Zechariah and Elizabeth – like Abraham and Sarah – were old. The normal expectation was that they were past childbearing age. However, Gabriel came and told Zechariah that they would have a child – a miracle baby. No wonder he was speechless!

I love the way Gabriel announced the news. He began by giving the boy the name of John. His was a definite arrival. John was coming. Furthermore, he would be a delight not only to his parents but also to many others. He was to have an amazing influence beyond normal expectations. He would be great in the sight of God and filled with the Holy Spirit from birth.

What an amazing privilege was John’s. His birth was a gift from God to the world and one that would have an incredible influence on society. Yes, Zechariah and Elizabeth were to be blessed by having their barrenness broken and the joy of holding their very own son, but more than that – the people who were alive at the time would be thrilled because of who John was and what he did. Even God would look down upon John with joy and approval.

Wouldn’t it have been an awesome privilege to be John? To know that God made you special before you were born? To give you to two people who were dedicated to God and longed for a child? To find that you had been given a role straight from the Throne-room of God? To realise that you were filled with the Holy Spirit in order to complete your task with authority and power?

Yes, John was very special and privileged. One of a kind. Yet, God also used him to give us a picture of God’s heart.

God thinks you are very special. Your birth was a God-given miracle too. God knew all about you before you were born, and He looks down upon you today with a smile and joy in His heart that He made you.

No matter the circumstances of your birth – you are a gift from God to this world. No matter what you have done or where you are now – God still loves you and watches over you. He has an

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 1 continued: John the Baptist – Set Apart By God From Birth

awesome plan for your life and He longs for you to receive His Holy Spirit so you too can fulfil your God-given destiny.

You are not on this earth just to live an earthly life – you are here to represent God and fulfil the plan He has for you. An awesome plan, which will influence many others.

God is reaching out to you right now and saying: *I love you. I made you. Let's walk together and make a difference in this world, so that people looking at you will see Me and long to know Me too.*

John the Baptist would say to us today...

Recognise what God has planned for your life and then follow that plan to the end. You are here for a higher reason than you can dream or imagine.

Prayer

Father, please help me remember that I was not born for my own selfish pursuit of happiness but to fulfil the destiny that You ordained for me. Please help me stay focused so that I complete all You planned and purposed for me. Amen.

Additional readings

Psalm 139; Jeremiah 1:5-19; Judges 13:2-25.

Questions

Is it true that God knows all about you?

What has God set you apart to do?

How do you feel knowing God has a special plan for your life?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 2: John the Baptist – Knew What His Role Was – To Prepare The Way For The Lord

Reading

Luke 1:57-80.

Knew What His Role Was – To Prepare The Way For The Lord

Suddenly, with the coming of John the Baptist, we have new evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit of God. Not only was John filled with the Holy Spirit from birth but his father, Zechariah, was also filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to prophesy what John's role would be.

That role was not described as a baptiser but as a prophet of the Most High God. The mantle of prophet was not grabbed by John but rather given to him by none other than God Himself. John didn't decide as a young man that he would become a religious leader or guru – he was destined from birth. His father received the instructions directly from God through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

However, there was a definite direction and purpose behind John's prophetic words and work. His message was not man-made or of human origin. It was not to be a message of popularity but of truth. He was not to try and make people follow him – as many of the local prophets of his day were trying to do; to set themselves up as the next Messiah to set the people free.

No, that was not John's role. John's role was to prepare the people to receive their true Messiah – not him, but Jesus. John's message would precede Jesus' entrance on the stage. John's message was not a message to follow John but a message to prepare for the coming Messiah.

John's message was as much a warning as a message of hope. Yes, the Messiah was coming, but before He came, before the people could receive Him, there had to be some sorting out.

God was coming down to redeem His people – Jesus would make a way for them to be forgiven, but before that happened, there would have to be some soul searching. There would have to be some hard questions faced. There would have to be total surrender of arrogance, pride and independence.

John would challenge the people to repent. Repentance from sin was required. More than that – John expected the people to go down into the water and allow him to submerge them as a picture of being washed clean from sin.

However, there was even more to it than that. Repentance has, within its definition, an expectation of a confession of the wrong behaviour, an apology for it, and above all a sincere and humble determination to change course. To change behaviour – a 180-degree turn-around.

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 2 continued: John the Baptist – Knew What His Role Was – To Prepare The Way For The Lord

For the person repenting there would need to be a radical lifestyle change. It wasn't enough to say a change would be made – it had to result in a visible demonstration of a refocused life. The old pattern of life had to be replaced by a new set of values and choices.

John the Baptist heralded a new era. Where each person has to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Let go of selfish and self-centred ambition, and become a servant of the Most High God.

We still live in that era. Our job is also to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.

John the Baptist would say to us today...

There is only one Lord. His Name is Jesus. All we do is supposed to lift Him up for all to see and to follow.

Prayer

Father, please help me see clearly what You want me to do with my life, and then give me the power and determination to see it through. Amen.

Additional readings

Ephesians 2:1-10; 2 Corinthians 5:11-21; Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 1:1-8.

Questions

How do you feel about knowing God has a plan for your life?

What is the plan God has for you?

What is the next step you need to take in order to fulfil it?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 3: John the Baptist – Knew He Had To Point People To Jesus No Matter The Cost To Him

Reading

John 3:22-36.

Knew He Had To Point People To Jesus No Matter The Cost To Him

John the Baptist's life was radical. He was radically dressed – in clothes made from camel's hair; his diet was radical – locusts and wild honey; his message was radical – it challenged the lethargy and self-satisfaction of the people, and his attitude was radical – because he pointed people away from himself and towards Jesus.

In many ways John was an enigma. The people's perception of God was holy and righteous. John was eccentric. They considered God far too aloof to be represented by a strange caveman look-alike. If God came to earth He would live in a palace and look like a prince. He would establish law and order in a similar way to the Romans but from a pro-Jewish perspective.

Yet there was something magnetic about this self-styled outcast. His bearing was authoritative and his preaching dynamic. People flocked to see and hear him, and yet he wasn't building an army of resistance to Rome.

Indeed, there seemed to be a self-deprecation to all he did. He warned but he didn't threaten. He expected allegiance; not to himself but to his God. He was passionate about the message but it was never for his benefit – it was always directed for the benefit of his listeners.

When Jesus appeared on the scene, John was the first to introduce Him as the Lamb of God and to encourage people to follow Him. When John's disciples found Jesus was also baptising people and that some of John's followers were already beginning to follow Jesus, John just replied that it was the natural course of events.

John recognised that he was not the centre of attraction; his job was just to point to the One who was the centre of attraction – Jesus. Indeed, John's response was the eternal declaration of all true servants of Jesus Christ – He must become greater; I must become less.

Too often today we find people following a Christian super-star. Unfortunately, all Christian super-stars will eventually let you down. John had the wisdom to point people away from himself and on to Jesus.

The greatest privilege we have in our lives is to introduce people to Jesus. As I say to all my leaders – *sooner or later I will let you down – Jesus never will – follow Him!*

The Lord may give us a great teaching ministry, a great healing ministry, the privilege of leading a

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 3 continued: John the Baptist – Knew He Had To Point People To Jesus No Matter The Cost To Him

large number of people in worship or in a church fellowship, but we must never make the mistake that it is our doing. God will never give His glory to another.

It's all about JESUS.

John the Baptist would say to us today...

It isn't easy being a disciple of Jesus Christ. It takes all you have and all you are. But the price is worth paying.

Prayer

Father, please help me see that life is not all about me but about lifting Jesus up so others will see Him and learn to love and serve Him with their lives. Amen.

Additional readings

John 12:20-32; Matthew 8:18-22; Luke 9:18-26.

Questions

Why is it important for us to point people to Jesus?

What is the price we have to pay in order to do so?

Do you need to get back 'on track'?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 4: John the Baptist – Suffered Doubt Just Like You And Me

Reading

Matthew 11:1-6.

Suffered Doubt Just Like You And Me

How is it that even great people of God have doubts? Adam had doubts. Abraham had doubts. Jacob had doubts. King David had doubts. Job had doubts. Elijah had doubts. John the Baptist had doubts. And we all remember that Thomas had doubts. Recently there was huge bewilderment expressed that even Mother Theresa had doubts.

Why do Christians have doubts? Well, I guess the first thing we need to recognise is that it isn't a sin to have doubts. We are finite human beings with finite brains and acute emotions. We see natural reality much easier than we do spiritual reality. On top of that, we have human bodies, which suffer pain, exhaustion, and emotional stress.

Having doubts recognises we don't fully understand God and His ways. How can we? I've already pointed out that we are human and finite whereas God is infinite and divine. To have doubts can be an admission that we are not God – that God is indeed much bigger than we thought.

Miracles can create doubt because, by definition, they are outside our normal expectations. Just because miracles create doubts that should not lead us to assume miracles don't or can't take place.

Let's not be too hard on John. His job was extreme. He had an extreme lifestyle. He saw very high highs and experienced some very low lows too – not the least of which was his imprisonment for exposing King Herod's adultery with his brother Philip's wife.

Imagine being let down into a deep dungeon hewn out of rock and with the only light being a tiny hole letting in daylight some 20– 30 feet above you. Add to that the loneliness and anticipation of death. No wonder the enemy played games with his thoughts and memories. Did all his life amount to nothing? Had he really identified the Christ or was Jesus just another would-be saviour.

However, John knew how to combat doubts. Seek out the source of truth. Verify the facts and exclude the emotions. Fortunately, he had some loyal friends who had not deserted him in his time of need, and they were prepared to go on that awesome mission. They went to Jesus and asked the Son of God for the truth.

What was Jesus' reply? Tell John what you see... *the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear and the dead are raised...* Miracles are happening all around. Miracles never seen before in your lifetime. Miracles that declare that the Christ has

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 4 continued: John the Baptist – Suffered Doubt Just Like You And Me

arrived and that Jesus really is the true Messiah – the long awaited One – the One for whom John prepared the way.

Jesus declared the truth. He sent John the greatest message He could ever send. Yes, the Kingdom of God had arrived and was breaking out everywhere. *Let go of your doubts – the truth is – I AM is here.*

John the Baptist would say to us today...

If we are being effective in the Kingdom of God, Satan will attack us. Never forget his main weapon is to raise doubts: Did God say? Is Jesus really the Messiah? Will you get to Heaven when you die?

Don't be afraid of the doubts; just remember our faith is based on facts, not feelings.

Prayer

Father, please help me to understand that it is not unusual to have doubts but to remember that my faith in You is based upon facts, not feelings. Please guard me from giving into the lies of the enemy. Help me, like John, to see what You are doing in this world. Amen.

Additional readings

1 Kings 19:1-18; 2 Kings 6:8-23; John 20:19-31.

Questions

What are the doubts you wrestle with?

How could they be settled?

What are the facts you are 'standing on' today?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 5: John the Baptist – Confronted The Ways Of The World

Reading

Matthew 11:7-19.

Confronted The Ways Of The World

John confronted the world by his dress, by his lifestyle and by his words.

John did not set out to conform or to follow the temporary fads of the world. He came to show that the things of this world are not necessarily good, helpful or vital to life. This world that elevates popularity, pleasure, power, position, prestige and possessions, yet misses that whole point of life. His dress was a declaration that he had a higher goal than the acceptance of the masses.

John saw no need to conform to a world, which had ignored God by allowing its religion to embrace a secular society in order to survive. The religious leaders of the day were little more than puppets in the hands of Rome. On top of which they were exclusively focused on self-preservation and self-aggrandisement. Religion had become an industry, not a pathway to a relationship with God.

He challenged the people to stop and consider their ways. He challenged them to think beyond the temporary and consider the eternal. He challenged them to justify their actions in contrast to God's ways and expectations. He challenged them to re-evaluate their life in light of eternity. He exposed their self-satisfaction and emptiness.

He confronted the people's lack of righteous values. He confronted their hedonistic lifestyle and materialistic focus. He exposed their independence and loose relationships.

He confronted the shallowness of the people's commitment to change. He demanded that the people get baptised in water by immersion as a sign of repentance and a change of lifestyle.

He confronted the religious leaders by challenging their sincerity in turning to God rather than just following the crowd. Why were the religious leaders suddenly interested in getting right with God? Did they acknowledge their separation from God and His ways or were they just trying to appease the people so that the people would return to their synagogues and continue to pay into them their tithes and offerings?

John preached a better way. He was not going to get his values system from the world. He went back to the ancient Scriptures and found in them the wisdom of an unchanging God of love and faithfulness. He went back to the basics of life – the foundations of family and society.

He pointed the way to return to discover how God intended us to live. He, the Creator of the world

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 5 continued: John the Baptist – Confronted The Ways Of The World

– the Creator of humanity – had set down principles, which if followed would bring peace, security, prosperity and fruitfulness, but if ignored would bring barrenness, hopelessness and defeat.

He knew that the answers to life come from our Creator, not from the self-centred plans, wants and desires of mankind. Instant gratification never pays.

John the Baptist would say to us today...

It is no use expecting politicians or this world's leaders to show the way. Christians are the ones with the light – they are the ones God expects to give leadership, wisdom and guidance to the unchanging truth of life.

Prayer

Father, please help me remember that I am not supposed to get sucked into the ways of the world but rather to stand up for those things that You honour and have put in place for the eternal benefit of humanity. Amen.

Additional readings

Psalm 119:105; Proverbs 1:1-7; Matthew 5:17-20; Matthew 24:1-14 & 26-35.

Questions

From where or from whom do you get your values?

Which values would you hold on to against all opposition and why?

What values are you passing on to others?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 6: John the Baptist – Overcame The World

Reading

Mark 6:14-29.

Overcame The World

Herod beheaded John the Baptist at the request of Herodias through her daughter Salome, thereby re-enforcing the maxim that if you have a problem with the law, change the law. He continued the custom of changing moral codes of practice by changing the law, rather than submitting himself to the law which condemned him.

It continues today. If we don't like the straight-jacket of the moral law, we change the law so the jacket fits easier. The fact that a moral code needs to be fixed by external values has escaped us. Once we become the arbiter of the moral code, it will, of necessity, be continually reduced until it reaches the lowest common denominator as perceived by the law-makers – in a democratic society, the political party which happens to be in power or holds the balance of power.

The interesting fact is however that it is very difficult to legislate values. Try as we may we will still find a legal system has a few flaws in its make-up. It is not omnipotent. The outworking of the law often exposes its own weakness or misunderstandings – hence the need to constantly revise and change laws – it keeps governments busy.

However, I need to emphasise here that overcoming the world does not equate to illegality. John overcame by being honest in a hypocritical society. John overcame by understanding that the eternal values of the cosmos are greater than the temporary laws established by a political council. The eternal values of the cosmos only expose the inadequacies of the laws of the land.

A life of honesty, purity, generosity, and faithfulness will always overcome a world system that doesn't practise those values. It will challenge the world system, whether or not it changes it. Ironically, people who choose to live that way will also find huge benefits in doing so. Others may not follow them; they may even be mocked and derided, but the reality is they will be the better off for pursuing that way of life.

It's a better way of life for society on earth, and it will be a foretaste of what is to be experienced in Heaven. This world is passing away but eternity is a very long time. Those who want to overcome the world have to keep their eyes fixed on the goal – the goal of an eternity with the Creator God who has already established His irreversible moral code.

John the Baptist may have been beheaded by Herod but John had the last laugh. John is the one who has gone into the presence of God. He is the one who has been saved from having his soul and body consigned to Hell.

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 6 continued: John the Baptist – Overcame The World

Yes, John the Baptist joined that great throng that the writer to Hebrews describes as the great cloud of witnesses. Those who walked this earth in such a way that they challenged the ways of the world and chose to follow the ways and wisdom of the Creator of the Universe.

John was a trail-blazer. We have the choice – to follow in his footsteps, which always point to Jesus, or choose our own path dictated by the world.

John the Baptist would say to us today...

As Jim Elliot said, *“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”* Remember Jesus said, *“Don’t be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in Hell.”* (Matthew 10: 28.)

Prayer

Father, it is so easy to go for an easy way of life, and yet I know it is neither best nor satisfying. Indeed, I know it is contrary to what You desire. Please help me have the courage to stand for what is right even if the cost to me is total. Thank you that this is not my final resting place – Heaven is. Amen.

Additional readings

Revelation 12:10-11; Matthew 10:17-42; 2 Timothy 4:1-8; Hebrews 11:32-40.

Questions

You may not be forced to die for Christ – but will you live for Him?

How is your life different from the lives of those of the world?

What is there about Christianity, which makes it worth giving your life for?