

John the Baptist Appears

Khalil drained the last of his alcohol. He was out with his boys, enjoying the Christmas season.

But there seemed to be a far-away something, calling, whispering. He had begun to feel increasingly dissatisfied—but why? His job was going well. He had a beautiful, attentive girlfriend. He was an okay person. He wasn't perfect, but who is? He was going tomorrow to help a non-profit spread Christmas cheer, wasn't he?

The next morning, Khalil was an hour into helping pack up supplies for homeless shelters when the previous night began to slow him down.

"Rough night?" asked the man who had been paired with Khalil. His name was Ayren.

The two men worked well together. Ayren seemed like more than just a good guy. So, when he asked Khalil to grab a late lunch, Khalil agreed. They talked a while before Khalil learned he was a Christian. While Khalil had certainly heard about church and religion, he hadn't really been introduced to Jesus. Ayren's message was warm, engaging, and a little alarming. What did God expect of him? Khalil felt like he was just as good as anyone else.

"We are all sinners," said Ayren. "There is no way we can be saved—apart from Christ."

"So, where do I start?" Khalil asked.

"Repent. Now is the time—Jesus could come for any of us even today."

- 1.** *What is your natural response when told that Jesus is coming soon?*
- 2.** *What role does repentance, confession of our sins have in preparing for Jesus' coming?*
- 3.** *Why is it necessary to prepare our hearts for Jesus' coming?*

John Boldly Preaches in the Wilderness

Luke 3:2b-6, KJV

2b The word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.

3 And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins;

4 As it is written in the book of the words of Esaias the prophet, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth;

6 And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

Luke 3:2b-6, NIV

^{2b}The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

⁴As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.

⁵Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.

The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.

⁶And all people will see God’s salvation.’ ”

According to Luke 1:80, the young man John “grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.” Thus, he had been in the wilderness for some time before he went “into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (vs. 3).

This baptism was different from what Jews of John’s time were used to. Water baptism was for “lowly” Gentiles who wanted to become Jews—not for Jews who desired to repent of their sins and be forgiven by God!

Submitting to such baptism required a huge act of humility. And yet, this was the baptism John boldly preached, and performed. The fact that people were willing to go into the wilderness to be baptized served as evidence of the power of John's ministry.

Luke then reminded his readers that John's wilderness ministry of repentance had been prophesied hundreds of years earlier by Isaiah. Verses 4-6, which both quoted and echoed Isaiah 40:3-5, described John as, "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the LORD, make straight paths for him'" (vs. 4). Through John's ministry, "Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation" (vss. 5-6).

John was not the Messiah, but he had the critical role of preparing the way for Him. And the road would not be straight and smooth for Jesus until repentance had taken place and the people's hearts were ready to receive salvation from Him. These verses also echo the words of John's father Zechariah at John's birth: "You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins" (Luke 1:76-77). John had now begun to fulfill the promises Zechariah had pronounced over his tiny body three decades earlier.

4. *How had John the Baptist been prepared for his mission?*

5. *What was the nature of John's baptism?*

6. *How had John's ministry been predicted?*

John Humbly Points to the Messiah

Luke 3:15-18, KJV

15 And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether

Luke 3:15-18, NIV

¹⁵The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if

he were the Christ, or not;

16 John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire:

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

18 And many other things in his exhortation preached he unto the people.

John might possibly be the Messiah. ¹⁶John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." ¹⁸And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

Because of the power and authority clearly evident in John's ministry, the people naturally began to wonder: Is this the Messiah? Verse 15 stated clearly, "The people were waiting expectantly." They had not only come to repent and be baptized, but now their hearts were ready for the Messiah to come. John had indeed prepared the way.

And yet, in verse 16 John immediately made it clear to the people who he was and what his role was in God's plan: "I baptize you with water." Again, John's baptism was one of repentance for sin, to prepare the people's hearts. The one who could save them from their sins, the Messiah, was yet to come—but was coming soon, "the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." Despite what John had already accomplished, he recognized that his role in God's plan was tiny in comparison to what the Messiah, Jesus, would accomplish.

What's more, the coming Messiah's baptism would be different from John's: "He will baptize you with the Holy

Spirit and fire” (vs. 16). This baptism came fully after Jesus’ death and resurrection, when the Spirit was poured upon all believers at Pentecost (Acts 1:4-5; 2:1-4), and on every believer since (Rom. 5:5; 1 Cor. 3:16; Gal. 4:6). And yet, for those who would not listen to and believe in the coming Messiah, John promised a different kind of fire. The Messiah would separate the wheat from the chaff with “[his] winnowing fork” (Luke 3:17). This fire would purify those who believed—the “wheat”—while the chaff would burn with an “unquenchable” fire (vs. 17). Whatever was not worthy of God—made worthy through the Messiah—would be separated from God forever.

Verse 18 concluded, “with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.” John’s words strengthened those who believed them and infuriated those who didn’t—which would lead to John’s death not long after this passage took place. It was terrifying news to some—specifically, those who heard John’s words and refused to repent—but for those who would believe, it was the best news possible.

7. *What were the people expecting, and what was John’s response to them?*



John baptized somewhere along the Jordan River, the present-day border between Israel and Jordan.

8. *How did John say the Messiah’s baptism would be different from his?*

9. *How did verse 18 describe the rest of John’s ministry?*

Wrong or Right Preparation

James worked hard at living a good life. He respected his parents and elders. He attended church every Sunday and faithfully gave his tithes. He followed the golden rule of “do to others what you would have them do to you.” Although he didn’t know God personally, James believed that his works were pleasing to God and preparing him to live a good life on earth and for eternity.

One day, James’s life philosophy was shaken. His best friend and colleague stole all his savings— \$50,000. He was devastated. For the first time, James prayed and asked God, “Why me?!” Frantic and perplexed, he sought financial help from his uncle. James’s uncle provided the financial assistance he needed but told him not everyone shared James’s outlook on life. He also explained that to hear from God, James needed a relationship with Jesus. All his good works without faith in Jesus meant nothing. He prayed with James and gave him some Bible verses to read at home. Later, when James read the verses his uncle gave him, he realized his whole life philosophy and preparation to have eternal life was wrong. Doing good works without faith in Jesus was as “filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6).

Many people have the same life philosophy as James. They believe that by doing good on earth they are preparing to live eternally with God. Living a good life on earth is commendable but only faith in Christ and allowing the Holy Spirit to guide you through this life on earth will prepare you to live eternally with Jesus when He returns.

10. *Who do you know who believes that living a “good enough” life will get him or her into heaven?*

11. *Why do you think God regards our good works as “filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6) if we don’t know Him personally through His Son Jesus Christ?*

12. *Have you prepared for Jesus’ second coming by having a personal relationship with Him and living by faith? If not, would you seriously consider it?*

Prepare Your Heart

Every day you are busy preparing for something. You prepare for work, cooking, for a job interview and even for meeting with a friend. Yet, do you take time daily to prepare your heart for Jesus' second coming?

► *God's Word describes how you can prepare your heart for Jesus' return. Read the following Scripture verses and write next to it what you need to do to prepare your heart.*

John 10:7-10 _____

John 15:9-11 _____

Micah 6:8 _____

► *Is your heart prepared for Jesus' second coming? If not, what can you do to be prepared?*

KEY VERSE

And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. —Luke 3:3, KJV

He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. —Luke 3:3, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of December 19 through December 25

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross devotionals* on these passages.)

Mon. Matthew 1:18-25—A Virgin Will Conceive.

Tues. Micah 5:1-15—The Ruler from Bethlehem.

Wed. Isaiah 9:1-7—A Son Is Given.

Thurs. Isaiah 11:1-10—The Root of Jesse.

Fri. Luke 1:26-38—The Lord Is with You.

Sat. Luke 1:39-45—Blessed among Women.

Sun. Luke 1:46-55—My Soul Rejoices in the Lord.