

LESSON FIVE

JOHN THE BAPTIST

A. PROPHECIES OF HIS COMING:

Scriptural References:

"Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me" (Malachi 3:1).

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord" (Malachi 4:5).

"For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come" (Matthew 11:13-14).

Those who held to the Messianic Hope believed that the reign of the Messiah would be preceded by the appearance of a forerunner. In the Orient a herald went before the king, calling the people together to repair the roads which were usually very poor, that the royal party might pass safely. John was such a herald calling the people to repent. John's mission was to summon the people to make ready the way for the Lord. Every deep ravine must be filled in and every hill leveled down; the curved places in the road must be made straight and the rough places smooth.

B. JOHN'S BIRTH:

1. TIME:

"Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea...the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness" (Luke 3:1-2). This gives a fixed and definite date for the beginning of John's ministry, which would be between. The reign of Tiberius began around 12 AD which would place the beginning of John's ministry around 26 AD - 27 AD. John's birth would be thirty years earlier for he began his ministry at thirty years of age.

2. PARENTAGE:

John's parents were Zacharias and Elizabeth. They were humble, pious people who lived near Hebron. Zacharias was an aged man and belonged to the lower class of priests. They had no children and this was a reproach to them. They felt the humiliation of childlessness but had now reached the age when expectation and prayers for fruitfulness were abandoned.

3. MIRACULOUS BIRTH:

"But he angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John" (Luke 1:13). Zacharias was called to perform a priestly duty in the Temple and at the casting of lots; the duty fell to him of placing incense on the coals of the altar of sacrifice. This duty was considered sacred and the priest upon whom the office chanced by lot to fall was esteemed

highly blessed.

As Zacharias stood praying, there stood the archangel Gabriel on the right side of the altar. Gabriel declared his divine mission and when Zacharias questioned about it, he was struck dumb until the birth of the baby son. When John was born, relatives insisted that he be named Zacharias. However, Zacharias called for a writing tablet and wrote that his name would be John. Immediately the tongue of Zacharias was loosed and he fell to uttering praises to God and to prophesying the speedy coming of the Messiah.

C. JOHN'S BOYHOOD:

We do not know much about the boyhood and youth of John. Undoubtedly he lived a normal boyhood and was taught in the local synagogue. Since both parents were of the priestly lineage (Luke 1:5) we conclude that John spent his early years preparing for the priesthood.

John was brought up as a Nazarite. He drank no wine or strong drink and his hair was never cut. Before he began his ministry he retired into the wilderness.

D. JOHN'S APPEARANCE AND CHARACTER:

Sometime during his youth, John retired into the desert, adopted the life of an ascetic, restricted his diet to wild fruits, to locust and to wild honey, and applied himself to study and communion with God. For clothing he used a camel's skin.

When he emerged from his retirement, he was regarded as a holy man. He had disheveled hair and only raiment of camel's skin about his body, held in place by a leather girdle, bare-footed, bare-armed, and uncropped beard, must have been very striking.

He spoke with such earnestness, wisdom and pious zeal, that crowds flocked out to hear him, to be convicted and converted.

E. JOHN'S MESSAGE:

Scriptural Reference:

"Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand...Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his path straight" (Matthew 3:2-3).

John's message was simple: a) Repentance; b) Preparation for the Kingdom of Heaven; and c) Baptism by immersion.

John spared no one but denounced sin wherever it was to be found. He denounced the Pharisees, the religious leaders, but also sin in the life of Herod Antipas.

It was a time of great wickedness. In the Roman Empire there was great immorality. Violence, robbery, insults, murders without trial and cruelty were charged against the administration of Pilate. The Pharisees emphasized separateness but not true holiness. They prided themselves with being descendants of Abraham but lost sight of the necessity of personal character.

John's message was the message needed and crowds went to the Jordan to hear him preach. John preached for about six months before Jesus came to him to be baptized.

John plainly declared that he was not the Messiah and that he was unworthy even to unloose the thong that bound the sandal to His foot - an office which slaves performed for their Masters.

John prophesized of the "baptism of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 3:11).

It should be noted that although John preached the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven, he himself did not become a member of that kingdom. *"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 kingdom of heaven is greater than he"* (Matthew 11:11).

It should also be noted that John preached and baptized but he did no miracles. *"And many resorted unto him, and said, John did no miracle"* (John 10:41).

Another fact that should be noted about his ministry is that he remaineth very humble. He was never jealous of Jesus; he was satisfied to fulfill his calling. *"He must increase, but I must decrease"* (John 3:30).

F. JOHN'S DEATH:

Scriptural Reference:

"And immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought: and he went and beheaded him in the prison" (Mark 6:27).

So great was John's reputation that even Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee and Peraea, went to the Jordan to hear him. Herod heard him gladly and had great respect for John. Very likely he was brought under great conviction and did many things to live a better life. However, John boldly denounced the great sin of Herod's life.

Herod had married the daughter of the King of Arabia. He tired of her and began to live with Herodias, the wife of his half-brother, Herod Philip. Herodias had a daughter, Salome, and they both were very ambitious.

When John denounced him publicly, Herod had him arrested and cast into the fortress prison at Machaerus. This was a fortress rebuilt by Herod the Great on the east shore of the Dead Sea. John was placed in one of the dungeons beneath this fortress. Herod had no intention of killing John for in his heart he admired John and accepted his teachings as divinely inspired.

Herodias hated John and plotted to destroy him.

When Herod had a great festival on his birthday and a large crowd had gathered of the rich and nobility, Herodias saw her opportunity. Salome danced a shameful dance in wild lascivious motions, which won the applause of the drunken revelers. When Herod told her she could ask anything to the half of his kingdom, she asked for the head of John the Baptist.

Herod could have refused for John's head was worth more than half of his kingdom, but nevertheless, he consented and had John the Baptist beheaded. John was still a young man, 31 or 32 years of age.

After his death some of his disciples carried on his ministry for when Paul went to Ephesus he found some of John's disciples (Acts 19).

LESSON FIVE

SELF HELP TEST

A. Describe the appearance of John the Baptist.

B. Describe the message that John the Baptist preached.

C. Write briefly the story of John's death.