

Who Was John the Baptist and What Was His Ministry?

Luke 3:1-22

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"As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." - Luke 3:15-16, ESV

John the Baptist is one of the most compelling and confusing characters in the Gospels. All four Gospels clearly place the ministry of Jesus in the context of the ministry of John the Baptist. They all show us John baptizing and preaching throughout Judea before Jesus comes on the scene.

John wore a garment of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey, while living out in the wilderness. To the first century Jewish community, this bizarre clothing and behavior sent a clear message: John was a great prophet sent by God.

But who exactly was John and why was he sent? Luke gives us the most historical detail about John, while the Gospel of John gives us the clearest insight into his theological role in the coming of Jesus. What do we know about John?

- 1. John was conceived miraculously as God's gift to a childless elderly couple,** Zechariah and Elizabeth. In this way, John's conception and birth echo God's promise to Abraham and Sarah, fulfilled in the birth of Isaac. It signifies from God that John is a significant figure in God's dealings with His people.
- 2. John was the last of the Old Testament prophets.** If you ask most Christians who the last Old Testament prophet was, they would probably say Malachi. But the "Old Testament" indicates not so much a section of the Bible as an era in covenant history under the old covenant, the Law of Moses. In this sense, John was the last Old Testament prophet, and Jesus later indicates that John was the greatest of all of the Old Testament prophets.
- 3. John was sent to prepare the way for Jesus.** John's ministry was a fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3-5, as Luke 3:4-6 indicates. John's message was simple, "*Prepare the way for the Lord,*" for the long-awaited Messiah. If the people accepted John as a prophet, then they would be more likely to accept his testimony about Jesus.
- 4. John humbly exalted Jesus.** John did not try to steal Jesus' glory or role for himself. He humbly pointed people away from himself and to Christ.
- 5. John preached repentance and baptized with a baptism of repentance.** To repent means to change your mind, to turn away from your sin and toward God. John wanted God's people to see that just being Jewish, being descendants of Abraham, was not enough. They needed to repent of their sinful attitudes and actions and seek the Lord.

In the end, John the Baptist did not live to see Jesus bring salvation to God's people. He belongs to the company of Old Testament saints, who "*though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised.*" (Heb. 11:39) Yet through his testimony, many came to believe in Jesus. And he serves as a model of faithful witness for all of us who would seek to magnify Jesus and see others come to know Him!