

John the Baptist Quest

Everyone was going to Judea to see a man in the wilderness.

Admittedly, he wasn't just any man. He was a prophet of God. The first that the Jews had seen since Malachi wrote the closing words of the Old Testament centuries before. This prophet was dressed in camel fur with a leather belt around his waist and lived in the wilderness, despite having the opportunity to have a life of ease.

The people weren't being foolish or misled. John the Baptist was a great prophet worth their time and attention. He had been given the great work of preparing the Jews for the coming of the Messiah, and he did his work powerfully through God's Holy Spirit.

John the Baptist died a tragic death centuries ago, but his work and his example are capable of having a powerful impact on us if we allow them to. Christ declared John to be the greatest prophet of them all, so it is definitely worth the time to take a quick quest through Scripture to find out why John the Baptist was so great.

Selected From Birth

The Gospel of Luke reveals the extraordinary circumstances around John's birth, but none of those circumstances really had an impact on why John the Baptist became so great. Still, it's worthy of note that he was given God's Holy Spirit from before his birth to help him fulfill the work that God had given him-the work of Elijah, to prepare the way for the Messiah. From his birth he had a restriction placed on him-he was to never drink any wine or strong drink (Luke 1:15-17). This was God's command, and his parents readily agreed to it (not implying that it was optional, but they didn't try to dispute it either). There's no record of John breaking this commitment like Samson did, and there's also no record of him despising the limitation. It was a part of his work, and he readily accepted it. John the Baptist had far more important things on his mind than the pleasures of the world.

Most of John's life is encapsulated in one verse: "So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel," (Luke 1:80). John the Baptist had the Holy Spirit from birth, but this verse indicates that he stirred it and actively used God's power to make himself better. The Bible indicates that one of the tools he used to do this was fasting. In Matthew 9:14, Mark 2:18, and Luke 5:33 John's disciples ask Christ why they and the Pharisees fast often. Some of these Pharisees who "fasted often" fasted twice a week, so the joining of them with John's disciples indicated that they fasted at least weekly if not more. This is a habit and lifestyle that they would have picked up from John the Baptist himself, indicating that even though he was born with the Holy Spirit he still made a habit of fasting. This verse probably went from his birth until around age thirty (priests weren't able to work in the tabernacle of meeting until age thirty-Numbers 4- and Christ's ministry started when he was thirty years old-Luke 3:23).

The Ministry of John the Baptist

The three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) all record John the Baptist coming onto the scene very powerfully (Matthew 3:1-17, Mark 1:2-11, and Luke 3:1-22). John's message was simple but powerful: "Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand." This would also be the basis for Jesus Christ's message after John's imprisonment (Mark 1:14-15). John was preparing the people for the coming of Christ by introducing the concepts of the Messiah and

baptism as well as placing fresh emphasis on repentance. Due to John's work, Christ didn't have to introduce these concepts but could build on the foundation laid by John.

A distinction to make is that while John was an outsider from the rest of the society of his time, he wasn't a crazy hermit that lived out in the wilderness by himself. The Gospel accounts all reveal a man who was educated in the Scripture, had a following of loyal disciples, and was a powerful perceptive prophet who could speak with almost all of the different layers of his society.

John also didn't just blindly baptize, or the Pharisees would have been baptized. Instead, he would have walked those who came to him for baptism through a process very similar (if not identical) to the baptism counseling done by God's Church today.

John's ministry is a big case study in humbly accepting God's will. John knew that he was not the great Messiah, and he did his best to make sure that everyone else knew it too. He used his powerful preaching to tell everyone that Christ was coming, and that He would be much greater than John himself.

When Jesus came to be baptized, John was still humble and tried to be baptized by someone he respected and possibly suspected of being the Messiah (according to John's account, he wasn't sure until after he had actually baptized Jesus). When Christ helped him to realize that it was God's will for things to play out this way, he did as requested and had the unique privilege of baptizing the Messiah and God-in-the-flesh.

John After Jesus

After Christ was baptized, John didn't keep His identity as a Messiah a secret. It seems that shortly after Christ's temptation in the wilderness, John made a point to identify Him as the Lamb of God to his disciples and to whoever would listen. Still, John stays humble and doesn't mention his role in baptizing the Messiah. Instead, he just identifies Christ as the Messiah and mentions the Holy Spirit descending on Him like a dove as proof (John 1:29-34). John also reveals that he had been given a vision by God or a visit from an angel that gave him the mission to baptize and prepare the way for Christ.

John preached this with such power and sincerity that two of his disciples turned to follow Jesus Christ—Andrew the brother of Peter and John, the brother of James (John 1:35-42). When Jesus and those same disciples grew to be more popular than John himself, John didn't get hurt or prideful. Instead, he humbly acknowledged that Jesus was supposed to surpass him and counted his joy as being full because of it (John 3:22-36). John had wrapped himself so much in his mission that he counted himself as being fully happy because God's will was being fulfilled.

This leads to a powerful question: Are we so wrapped up in the will of God that we're full of joy when it's fulfilled, even if it's not in our short-term best interests or against our personal desires?

John in Prison

Shortly after Christ's ministry started, John the Baptist was arrested by Herod Antipas. At some point, Herod divorced his wife in order to marry his brother's ambitious ex-wife Herodias. To the Jews under Herod's domain, this was scandalous and sinful. Secular records indicate that most of the Jews were in an uproar over it. One of the Jews who spoke out against this was John the Baptist, earning Herodias' unforgiving ire. The hatred that Herodias has for John seems to indicate that it wasn't just something he preached, but that he had told this to Herod's face. It's very possible that Herod had come to John to be baptized, only to be told that he

couldn't after marrying Herodias. Whatever the case, Herod arrested John the Baptist officially for inciting a rebellion, although Josephus and the Gospel writers all state that it was widely known to be Herodias' doing.

This was a very trying time in John's life (Matthew 11:2-19 and Luke 7:18-35). He was expecting Christ to open the prisons and start God's Kingdom on Earth, but instead he just heard reports of a preacher healing people. Discouraged, he sent two of his disciples to Christ to ask, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" It seems unlikely that John's faith was wavering, but he was getting impatient and possibly sent these disciples to remind Christ that he was still in prison. Christ showed the disciples the miracles He was doing and told them to bring their report to John, finishing with the statement, "And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me." The reality of God's plan was not matching up with John's expectations of God's plan, and the great prophet was starting to struggle due to this mismatch (which also caused all of Christ's disciples to stumble). Jesus then went on to give John some of the highest praise available, calling him the greatest of the prophets.

Sadly, Herodias bid her time and eventually used her daughter to manipulate Herod into a situation where he had to kill John the Baptist. Herod was hesitant to kill John the Baptist because he didn't want the people in an uproar over killing the popular prophet and because he valued listening to John, even going so far as to change and listen to John (Mark 6:20). Yet, in a famous incident the two women forced Herod to bring John's head on a platter (Matthew 14:1-12, Mark 6:14-29, and Luke 9:7-9).

An interesting historical side note is that Herodias' scheming advice and endless ambitions led to her and Herod both being banished to Gaul years later. Herod's refusal to listen to John the Baptist in this one thing led not only to the prophet's tragic demise, but also to his own political downfall.

Results of the John the Baptist Quest

Even though John the Baptist has been dead and buried for centuries, his life still matters today. Through John, we can see a very vivid picture of a man given great gifts who humbly accepted God's will, even when God willed that he decrease in stature. When the time came, he willingly stepped aside so that God's work could be done.

John reached this point by fasting often and dedicating himself completely to the mission that God had given him. This is something that we all can do in our lives. What are your gifts? Where is God putting you within His work and His plan? Wherever that is, embrace it like John the Baptist, the greatest of the prophets.

The quest is over, but the lessons are not. What will you do now?

Recommended Reading:

[The Powerful Life and Example of John the Baptist](#)
[John the Baptist: No Greater Prophet](#)