

John *the* Baptist: Preparing *the* Way for Jesus



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 14:1–12, Luke 1, Col. 2:8, Rev. 14:6–12.*

Memory Text: “I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he’ ” (*Matthew 11:11, NIV*).

Key Thought: John the Baptist had a special calling from God; we, as a church, have been called in a similar way. What can we learn from the example of John?

Followers of the ancient Mandaean religion venerate John the Baptist as the last and greatest of the prophets. Today Mandaean believers still can be found, mostly in Iraq and Iran. The great irony is that although they venerate John, they believe that Jesus was a false prophet, which is hard to understand since the whole purpose of John's message was to prepare the way for Jesus.

From his base near the Jordan River, John preached a message of repentance, forgiveness, and social justice, all to prepare people for the coming of the Messiah. Large crowds gathered to hear him speak; and many followed his teachings. In fact, several of Jesus' disciples were first disciples of John the Baptist.

This week we will discover more about the mission of a man whom Jesus praised more highly than anyone else; plus, we will look at the parallel between John's calling and ours.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 19.*

A Special Calling

John is one of a small group of people whom the Bible says God chose before birth for a special mission, people such as Samuel and Samson, and even Jesus Himself. Hundreds of years earlier, the prophet Isaiah prophesied the ministry of John as one who would be “a voice of one calling: ‘In the desert’ ” (*Isa. 40:3–5, NIV*; see also *Luke 3:4–6*). John’s father, Zechariah, also predicted that his son would prepare the way for the Lord (*Luke 1:76*).

Skim over Luke 1, where John the Baptist’s mission and calling are prophesied. Make notes on the things that it said that John would accomplish. Compare those prophecies with what we know about John the Baptist. In what ways were they fulfilled?

After looking at John’s accomplishments, look at John’s ignoble end (*Matt. 14:1–12*). How does that end match all the glorious things predicted about him?

John the Baptist’s calling and ministry brought him to a hard and difficult path, one that ended almost as ignobly as His cousin’s, Jesus. Despite the trials, the sufferings, and the misunderstanding, he remained faithful, fulfilling the prophecies made about his life. John is an example of the suffering that any of us could face if we seek to remain faithful to God and to whatever calling He has for us.

By most standards, John the Baptist’s life and, especially, his death, would not have made him someone whom the world would call successful. What should that tell us about the difference between God’s ideals and the world’s? Are your standards of success more like God’s or the world’s, and what does the answer tell you about yourself?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Matthew 11:11*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: The content and validity of the comparison between John the Baptist and the remnant church.

Feel: A sincere assurance of belonging to God’s last-day people with a special mission to the world.

Do: Develop a plan to spend time participating in a “John the Baptist” ministry.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. A Special Calling (*Luke 1:76*)

What are the parallels between John’s “special calling” and the “special calling” of the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

II. A Special Message (*Matt. 11:14*)

A As a class, review the historic Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the “Elijah message.”

B There are those who either do not understand this message’s importance or do not wish to *recognize* its importance. Why is the historic Seventh-day Adventist understanding still valid?

III. Crucial Lessons (*Matt. 3:2*)

A What did Jesus refer to when He said that the “least” in the kingdom is “greater” than John (*Matt. 11:11*)?

B What are some of today’s answers to the people’s question to John in Luke 3:10 “What should we do then?” (*NIV*).

C In Colossians 2:8 Paul talked about “hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition.” What contemporary application might that have in your church or personal life?

▶ **Summary:** John the Baptist was called to prepare the way for Jesus’ first advent. His mission parallels that given God’s people at the end of time.

C O N T I N U E D 

Preparing the Preparer

The Lord made many predictions about the life of John the Baptist, saying even before John was born what he could accomplish in his life. This raises the difficult question: Was John predestined to do these things simply because God predicted that he would? In other words, did John have any choice other than to do what God had predicted? Though the question of God's foreknowledge and our free will has challenged theologians and philosophers for centuries (and so we certainly cannot answer the question right now), we can be sure of one thing: John needed a special preparation for the work he was to undertake.

Read Luke 1:80. What is found in the text that helps us understand some of the preparation John needed? What principles can we draw from here that could help us strengthen our own spiritual life?

Luke 1:15 says that John would be filled with the Holy Ghost “‘even from his mother’s womb’ ” (*NKJV*). And yet, even with that special promise, he needed the kind of preparation found in the harshness of the desert. Often in the Bible the desert or wilderness is portrayed as a place for spiritual discipline and growth. Here it was that “the word of God came to John” (*Luke 3:2, NIV*). Certainly, John became a man of prayer and later taught his disciples how to pray (*Luke 11:1*) and fast (*Mark 2:18*). He knew the importance of a spiritual connection to heaven.

The spiritual power John received from God allowed him to proclaim his message with great force. He was a voice crying in the wilderness or, according to the literal Greek, “bellowing like an ox.”

As Jesus later suggested, nobody went to see John because he was some kind of weakling—“‘a reed shaken by the wind’ ” (*Matt. 11:7, NKJV*). On the contrary, they went to hear a man who spoke the truth with power and conviction.

Take an honest look at your own spiritual life. How often do you pray? How often do you study the Word? How immersed are you in the world and worldly things? What changes do you need to make? Might you need to spend some time in a desert somewhere?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

John the Baptist's life was not an easy or pleasant one by ordinary standards. Not only did his message and way of life put him strongly at odds with much of society, but there was no ego gratification in it. His whole purpose was to prepare the way for Someone else. As far as he knew, when Jesus came he would be forgotten, or at most a footnote. And yet, John the Baptist was not forgotten. Not by his fellow humans, not by Jesus, and not by the Bible.

Ask class members to describe any instances in which they felt that their efforts to serve God or follow God's will seemed to be failing. What did they learn from these experiences that could be of value to others?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. Preparing the Way (*Review Matt. 11:11 with your class.*)

In his time, John often was compared to Old Testament prophets. Jesus here points out that he was in fact much greater and more fortunate, in that his whole purpose was to announce the coming of the kingdom of heaven in the person of Christ. Any of the prophets of the Old Testament would have given anything for the certainty that they would not only be the ones to predict this happening imminently but would live to see it themselves.

Conversely, he was not quite as fortunate as those who actually would live to see Jesus' ministry fulfilled in His death, resurrection, and ascension.

Consider This: We live in the time after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension and thus know things that completely eluded Jesus' own apostles and followers when He walked the earth. Therefore, according to Jesus Himself, we are "greater" (more privileged, actually) than John the Baptist or any of the others who didn't live to know about the death and resurrection of Jesus. What do you think of this idea? Are we really more privileged than these people?

Also, what advantages do we have over them in terms of seeing a lot of prophecy fulfilled that they, in their own time, didn't?

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The Spirit of Elijah

The angel who appeared to Zechariah alluded to Malachi’s prophecy and applied it directly to John (*Luke 1:17*). Jesus Himself confirmed it—“ ‘If you are willing to accept it, he [John] is the Elijah who was to come’ ” (*Matt. 11:14, NIV; see also 17:11–13*).

Elijah stands tall among the great prophets of the Old Testament. He called on King Ahab and the people of Israel, who were steeped in idolatry and apostasy, to return to God and reform their ways. The test on Mount Carmel, where he stood up for God against the pagan prophets, is one of the watershed moments in the entire Bible.

The “Elijah message” is a phrase deep with meaning for Seventh-day Adventists. Ellen G. White parallels the tasks of Elijah, John the Baptist, and God’s end-time people. She describes the “Elijah message” simply as “ ‘Prepare to meet thy God.’ ”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 1184.

THE ELIJAH MESSAGE

Elijah	John the Baptist	God’s End-Time People
Called to reform Israel and call them to obedience to God’s laws. He delivered a message of judgment to King Ahab and a chance of repentance to Israel.	Preached repentance and the principles of the kingdom of heaven. Delivered a message of judgment to religious leaders and people. Prepared people for Jesus’ first coming.	Reformers who preach righteousness by faith and call people to worship God, repent, and obey His commandments. Message: “ ‘The hour of his judgment has come’ ” (<i>Rev. 14:7, NIV</i>). Prepare people for Jesus’ second coming.

The apostle John wrote about three angels with special messages to proclaim to the world (*Rev. 14:6–12*) at the end of time. These messages include a call to worship God (because His judgment has come) and to remain faithful to Jesus. The gospel is central to this warning message. Ellen G. White wrote, “Several have written to me, inquiring if the message of justification by faith is the third angel’s message, and I have answered, ‘It is the third angel’s message in verity.’ ”—*The Review and Herald*, April 1, 1890.

Read Revelation 14:6–12, the three angels’ messages. Where do you see warnings, as well as hope, mingled? In what sense was John’s message both warning and hope? How can we use warnings to point people toward hope?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**II. Responding to the Call** (Review Luke 1:80 with your class.)

Consider This: The Gospels make clear that John was called to his ministry long before he even existed. But he didn't merely wait for things to "fall into place." Look at Luke 1:15, 80, and Matthew 3:2.

"God does not force the will of His creatures. . . . It remains for us to choose whether we will be set free from the bondage of sin, to share the glorious liberty of the sons of God."—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, pp. 43, 44.

III. The Elijah Message (Review Matt. 11:14 with your class.)

Elijah is one of the most compelling prophets in the Bible. Like John the Baptist and Jesus, he wasn't much of a writer. All the surviving material concerning him is about—not by—him. Yet, his message didn't require much writing. It was the message of the whole Bible before and after his time, stripped to essentials: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand."

Consider This: Of all the prophets, Elijah was the one most associated as an individual with the hope for the end of days. Why do you think this is the case?

IV. Repent and Change (Review Matt. 3:2 with your class.)

Consider This: In John's message, it could be suggested that the repentance was to be followed by action. How is our faith revealed by our behavior?

"James contends that 'faith' which does not result in good 'works' is worthless. Genuine faith is obvious to others from the 'works' it produces; its existence does not rest on mere personal testimony."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, pp. 520, 521.

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Changed Behavior

There were two key parts to John the Baptist's message—repentance and behavior. Both were closely connected.

The Greek word John uses for repentance (*metanoeo*) is a compound word: *meta*, meaning “change,” and *noeo*, meaning “thinking.” Thus, repentance means to change one's thinking about something.

When John says “ ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near’ ” (*Matt. 3:2, NIV*), he is telling the people that the coming kingdom of heaven requires a totally new outlook. In other words, in preparing the people for Jesus' arrival, in preparing the way for the Lord and making “straight paths” for Him (*vs. 3, NIV*), John was challenging the people to change their worldview and how they live.

Read Luke 3:10–15. What is the essence of John's message here? What is he telling the people? See also James 2:14–26.

One key aspect of repentance was the confessing of sin (*Matt. 3:6*). The other key aspect was changing behavior according to the principles of the kingdom of heaven (*vs. 8*). Nothing less could prepare them for Jesus, who would bring a time of refreshing such as they had never seen.

Baptism was closely associated with repentance. In fact, Luke says John preached “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (*Luke 3:3, NIV*). Being washed in the water symbolized the changed view of life, the fresh start, and the forgiveness of sin.

Although John's strong words offended some people, the Bible indicates that large crowds came to hear him. “People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan” (*Matt. 3:5, NIV*). But not only did they come and listen, they confessed their sins and were baptized (*vs. 6*).

OK, you believe in God, believe in Jesus, believe that He died for your sins, and that you have salvation only through His righteousness credited to you, by faith alone. The question is, How well are you following the principles of righteousness as expressed by John the Baptist? How well does your life reveal the faith that you profess to have?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**V. Tradition** (Review Col. 2:8 with your class.)

Consider This: What exactly is tradition, and why might it be harmful to one's spiritual life?

When we speak of tradition, it might help to know exactly what we mean by the term. According to the online Wikipedia, “the word tradition comes from the Latin word *traditio* which means ‘to hand down’ or ‘to hand over.’ However, on a more basic theoretical level, tradition(s) can be seen as information or composed of information. For that which is brought into the present from the past, in a particular societal context, is information. This is even more fundamental than particular acts or practices even if repeated over a long sequence of time. For such acts or practices, once performed, disappear unless they have been transformed into some manner of communicable information.” —“Tradition,” *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tradition>.

■ *It is clear that tradition in Jesus' time was much more than “things we do over and over” as we tend to think of it today. As such, it became a substitute for God for many people, especially as it touched upon the relationship between human beings and God. We can assume that this was the major point of the antipathy to “tradition” we find in the New Testament.*

► **STEP 3—Practice****Thought Questions:**

❶ John and his message were obviously attractive to many people. What was it about him and his teaching that drew some and repelled others?

❷ Can justification by faith be found in John's message? If so, where?

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A Crucial Lesson From John

Read Colossians 2:8. What is it saying to you, in your own culture and tradition? What must you be careful about?

The Bible has much to say about tradition, and little of it is good. On one occasion the Pharisees and the teachers of the law asked Jesus why His disciples broke the tradition of the elders by not washing their hands before they ate (*Matt. 15:2*). This tradition was based on rules and regulations established by the rabbis, not by the Scriptures.

Read Matthew 15:3 and Mark 7:13. What specific points is Jesus making that gets at the heart of why tradition can be faith-destroying?

An essential part of John the Baptist's mission was to speak out against tradition and point people back to the revealed Word of God. Ellen G. White writes: "What was it that made John the Baptist great? He closed his mind to the mass of tradition presented by the teachers of the Jewish nation, and opened it to the wisdom which comes from above."—*Conflict and Courage*, p. 276.

John the Baptist was not bound by tradition or by accepted modes of speech. He spoke against sin in all its forms, from adultery to social injustice. Whenever God's message is given in a clear, unambiguous way, people react differently. Some people responded to John the Baptist by accusing him of being demon-possessed (*Matt. 11:18*). Of course, exactly the same thing happened with Jesus (*John 7:20*).

Is tradition always bad? Why, or why not? How can we, in whatever culture we are in, retain aspects of that culture while still staying faithful to the Lord?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Application Questions:**

❶ John was sure of his calling. Can we be sure that God has a distinct calling for each of us? How might we find it?

❷ Does anything in our lives/society today exert a force comparable to that exerted by the “traditions of men” in the New Testament era?

Witnessing

How can we call people to make the changes necessary in their lives? Is it enough to introduce them to Jesus and allow the rest to follow?

► STEP 4—Apply

Consider This: Ask class members to share ways in which God has guided them in their spiritual lives. Offer the following suggestions for claiming God’s help in becoming the people He intends for them to be and to act on what they learn.

❶ Take a day, a weekend, or an hour to shut out the distractions and listen to God’s voice. Set aside a special time and—ideally—a place to communicate with God and have Him communicate with you.

❷ The next time you are tempted to indulge in instant gratification, maybe you should skip it just this once. Do something else with the money: for example, give it to a person or cause that really needs it.

❸ Reconcile with somebody. If you were in the wrong, admit it and fix it.

❹ Inform yourself. Take action or speak out on a social issue that concerns you. Pray for the situation and the people involved.

Invite a class member to close with prayer.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Voice in the Wilderness,” pp. 97–108, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“God had directed John the Baptist to dwell in the wilderness, that he might be shielded from the influence of the priests and rabbis, and be prepared for a special mission. But the austerity and isolation of his life were not an example for the people. John himself had not directed his hearers to forsake their former duties. He bade them give evidence of their repentance by faithfulness to God in the place where He had called them.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 150.

“In this age, just prior to the second coming of Christ in the clouds of heaven, such a work as that of John is to be done. God calls for men who will prepare a people to stand in the great day of the Lord. The message preceding the public ministry of Christ was, Repent, publicans and sinners; repent, Pharisees and Sadducees; ‘repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ As a people who believe in Christ’s soon coming, we have a message to bear,—‘Prepare to meet thy God.’” (Amos 4:12).—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 55.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What dangers are there in following tradition? Is there any way that tradition actually can help your spiritual life? If so, how? As a class, talk about the traditions in your own culture. Which ones are helpful to faith, and which ones go contrary to it? How can you know the difference, and how can you help others who might have trouble breaking away from the traditions that are harmful to their Christian walk?
- ❷ What has been your own “desert” experience, if any? What have you learned that could be a blessing to others who might be going through something similar?
- ❸ Review the parallels between John’s mission and ours as a church. How well are we doing? What could we be doing better? How could we, as individuals and as a local church, help in fulfilling this high calling?

Summary: John the Baptist had the high calling of preparing the way for Jesus. In many ways his mission parallels that given to God’s people at the end of time—to preach the Elijah message to prepare people to meet God.