

John the Baptist: Preparing the Way for Jesus



SABBATH—JULY 12

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Matthew 14:1–12; Luke 1; Colossians 2:8; Revelation 14:6–12.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘What I’m [I am] about to tell you is true. No one more important than John the Baptist has ever been born. But the least important person in the kingdom of heaven is more important than he is’ ” (Matthew 11:11, NIV).

KEY (IMPORTANT) THOUGHT: John the Baptist had a special duty from God. We, as a church, have been called almost the same way. What can we learn from the example of John?

THE MANDAEAN RELIGION is very old. Followers of the Mandaean religion worship John the Baptist as the last and greatest of the prophets.¹ Today Mandaean believers still can be found, mostly in Iraq and Iran. The great puzzle is that they worship John. But they believe that Jesus was a false prophet. This is hard to understand because 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,² forgiveness, and social justice. John’s message was to prepare people for the coming of the Messiah. Large crowds heard John 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 John the Baptist. Jesus praised him more highly than anyone else. And we will study how John’s calling is the same as ours.

1. prophets—men or women sent by God to warn us about what will happen in the future.

2. repentance—the act of being sorry for your sins and turning away from sinning with the help of the Holy Spirit.

SUNDAY—JULY 13**A SPECIAL CALLING
(Isaiah 40:3–5)**

John is one of a small group of people whom the Bible says God chose before birth for a special mission. Samuel and Samson and even Jesus Himself belong to this special group. Hundreds of years earlier, the prophet Isaiah prophesied³ the ministry (work) of John as one who would be “a voice of one calling: ‘In the desert’ ” (Isaiah 40:3–5, NIV; read also Luke 3:4–6). John’s father, Zechariah, also prophesied that his son (John) would prepare the way for the Lord (Luke 1:76).

The first chapter of Luke shows that John the Baptist’s mission and calling are prophesied. Make notes on the things that John would do. Compare⁴ those prophecies⁵ with what we know about John the Baptist. In what ways were the prophecies fulfilled?

Read what John did. Then read about John’s sad death (Matthew 14:1–12). How does that end match all the glorious things foretold about his life’s work?

John the Baptist’s calling and ministry brought him to a hard and difficult path. This one ended almost as sadly as his Cousin’s, Jesus. Through all the

trials, the sufferings, and the misunderstandings, John remained faithful. He fulfilled the prophecies made about his life. John is an example of the suffering that any of us could face if we try to remain faithful to God and do whatever work God has called us to do.

John the Baptist’s life and death would not have made him successful in the world’s eyes. What should that tell us about the difference between God’s idea of success and the world’s? Is your idea of success more like God’s or the world’s? And what does the answer tell you about yourself?

MONDAY—JULY 14**PREPARING THE PERSON WHO
PREPARES THE WAY (Luke 1:80)**

The Lord made many prophecies about the life of John the Baptist. The Bible says even before John was born what he would do in his life. This raises the hard question: Did John have to do these things simply because God prophesied that he would? In other words, did John have any choice other than to do what God had prophesied? The question of God’s foreknowledge (knowing beforehand) and our free will has challenged Bible experts and philosophers⁶ for centuries. (And so we certainly cannot answer the question

3. prophesied—said what would happen in the future.

4. compare—to show how two things are the same.

5. prophecies—messages from God that tell what will happen in the future.

6. philosophers—persons who study human thought about the meaning of life, how mind relates to matter, and the problems of right and wrong.

right now.) But we can be sure of one thing: John needed special preparation (training) for the work he was to do.

What is found in Luke 1:80 that helps us understand some of the preparation (training) John needed? What principles (rules) can we learn from here that could make our own spiritual life stronger?

Luke 1:15 says that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit “‘even from his mother’s womb’” (NKJV). And yet, even with that special promise, John needed the kind of training that the hard life in the desert offered him. Often in the Bible the desert or wilderness is pictured as a place for spiritual discipline (training) and growth. Here it was that “the word of God came to John” (Luke 3:2, NIV). John became a man of prayer and later taught his disciples (followers) how to pray (Luke 11:1) and fast (Mark 2:18). John knew the importance of prayer that connected him to heaven.

The spiritual power John received from God let him preach his message with great power. John was a voice crying in the wilderness. The Greek language describes John as “bellowing [voicing; preaching; shouting out] like an ox.”

As Jesus later suggested, people did not go to see John because he was some kind of weakling—“‘a reed shaken by the wind’” (Matthew 11:7, NKJV). Instead, the people went to hear a man who spoke the truth with great power.



John spoke the truth with great power.

Take an honest look at your own spiritual life. How often do you pray? How often do you study the Word? How deep 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?

TUESDAY—JULY 15

THE SPIRIT OF ELIJAH (Matthew 11:14)

The angel who appeared to Zechariah hinted at Malachi’s prophecy and used it to mean John (Luke 1:17). Jesus Himself supported it—“‘If you are willing to accept it, John is the Elijah who was supposed to come’” (Matthew 11:14, NIV; read also Matthew 17:11–13).

Elijah stands tall among the great prophets of the Old Testament. He challenged King Ahab and the idol-worshiping people of Israel to return to God and reform (change) their ways. The test took place on Mount Carmel, where Elijah stood up for

God against the pagan⁷ prophets. This test is one of the key stories in the entire Bible.

The “Elijah message” is a message deep with meaning for Seventh-day Adventists. Ellen G. White compares 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*, volume 4, page 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 ⁸ who preach righteousness by faith and call people to worship God, repent, and obey His commandments. Message: “ ‘The hour of his judgment has come’ ” (Rev. 14:7, NIV). Prepare people for Jesus’ second coming.

The apostle John wrote about three angels with special messages to preach to the world (Revelation 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 connected to this warning message. Ellen G. White wrote, “Several have written to me, asking if the message of justification [forgiveness of sin] by faith is the third angel’s message. And I have answered, ‘It is truly the third angel’s message in verity [truth].’ ”—Adapted from *The Review and Herald*, April 1, 1890.



The three angels’ messages are for the world at the end of time (Revelation 14:6–12).

Read Revelation 14:6–12, the three angels’ messages. Where do you find warnings and hope joined

7. pagan—having to do with the worship of idols (false gods) or nature instead of God.

8. reformers—church preachers or members who preach sermons or live holy lives that encourage other people to change and lead more spiritual (godly) lives.

together? In what sense was John's message both warning and hope? How can we use warnings to point people toward hope?

WEDNESDAY—JULY 16

CHANGED BEHAVIOR⁹ (Luke 3:10–15)

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 word¹⁰: *meta*, meaning change, and *noeo*, meaning thinking. So, repentance means to change one's thinking about something.

For example, John says, "Repent,¹¹ for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 3:2, NIV). He is telling the people that the coming kingdom of heaven requires a completely new life. In other words, John was preparing the people for Jesus' arrival, preparing the way for the Lord, and making "straight paths" for Him (verse 3, NIV). In this way John was challenging the people to change their thinking and how they live.



To make "straight paths" for Jesus means getting ready for His return by changing our lives.

What is John telling the people in Luke 3:10–15? Read also James 2:14–26.

One key part of repentance was the confessing¹² of sin (Matthew 3:6). The other key part was changing behavior to follow the principles (rules) of the kingdom of heaven (verse 8). These two parts were the best way of preparing people for Jesus. His coming would bring a time of refreshing such as they had never seen.

Baptism¹³ was closely connected with repentance. Luke says John preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3, NIV). Being washed in the water symbolized (meant) the changed view of life, the fresh start, and the forgiveness of sin.

9. behavior—the way you act.

10. compound word—two words joined together to form one new word.

11. repent—to say you are sorry for sinning and to turn away from sin with the help of the Holy Spirit.

12. confessing—admitting to God that you have sinned.

13. baptism—when a person is put completely under water and brought back up out of it. This shows that Jesus has forgiven this person's sins and has given him or her new life.



John baptized many people in the river Jordan. Being washed in the water means to begin a new life.

John's strong words made some people feel bad. But the Bible shows that large crowds of people came to hear him. "People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea. They also came from the whole area around the Jordan River" (Matthew 3:5, NIV). They came to listen. But they also confessed their sins and were baptized (verse 6).

OK, you believe in God, believe in Jesus, believe that He died for your sins and that you are saved only through His righteousness (holy life) given to you, by faith alone. The question is, How well are you following the principles (rules) of righteousness as preached by John the Baptist? How well does your life show the faith that you claim to have?

THURSDAY—JULY 17

A CRUCIAL (IMPORTANT) LESSON FROM JOHN (Colossians 2:8)

What is Colossians 2:8 saying to you, in your own culture¹⁴ and tradition?¹⁵ What must you be careful about?

The Bible has much to say about tradition. And little of it is good. At one time the Pharisees and the teachers of the law asked Jesus why His disciples broke the tradition of the elders. They failed to wash their hands before they ate (Matthew 15:2). This tradition was based on rules established by the rabbis. It was not established by the Bible.

What important points in Matthew 15:3 and Mark 7:13 is Jesus making that explain why tradition can destroy faith?

An important part of John the Baptist's mission was to speak out against tradition. He also was to point people back to the Word of God. Ellen G. White writes, "What was it that made John the Baptist great? He closed his mind to many traditions taught by the teachers of the Jewish nation. He also opened his mind to the wisdom that comes from

14. culture—the way people live, dress, think, eat, and socialize with one another.

15. tradition—customs or rules created by people.

above.”—Adapted from *Conflict and Courage*, page 276.

John the Baptist was not tied down by tradition or by accepted rules of speech. He spoke against all kinds of sin, from adultery to social unfairness. When God’s message is given very clearly, people answer in different ways. Some people answered John the Baptist by accusing him of being taken over by demons (Matthew 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, keep parts of that culture while still staying faithful to the Lord?

FRIDAY—JULY 18

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read Ellen G. White, “The Voice in the Wilderness,” pages 97–108, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“God had led John the Baptist to live in the wilderness. In this way John might be protected from the influence¹⁶ of the priests and rabbis. In the wilderness he was also prepared for a special mission. But living a lonely, strict life was not an example for the people. John himself had not advised his hearers to leave their former duties. He just instructed them to show their repentance by being faithful to God in the place where He had called them.”—Adapted from Ellen G.

White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 150.

“In this time period, just before the second coming of Christ in the clouds of heaven, the same kind of work that John did is to be done by us. God calls for men and women who will prepare a people to stand faithful in the great day of the Lord. The message before the public ministry of Christ was, Repent, 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 preach—‘Prepare to meet your God!’ (Amos 4:12, NIV).”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, page 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? Which ones are not helpful? How can you know the difference? 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? What have you learned that could be a blessing to others who might be going through something almost the same?
- ❸ Review how John’s mission and ours as a church is the same. How

16. influence—the power to affect or change persons or things.

well are we doing? What could we be doing better? How could we help in supporting this important work?

SUMMARY: John the Baptist had the high calling of preparing the way for

Jesus. In many ways his mission is almost the same as the mission (special work) of God's people at the end of time—to preach the Elijah message to prepare people to meet God.