

“One Extraordinary Life: John the Baptist”

Matthew 3:1-6

Every year since 1999, Time magazine has been publishing an annual list of who it believes are the year's top 100 most influential people. The list is known simply as the “Time 100.” In its online presentation, those at Time say of the list, “In our annual Time 100 issue, we name the people who most affect our world.” In last year's 2013 edition, some of those included were:

- Political leaders--Barack Obama, Chris Christie
- Religious leaders--Pope Francis
- Pop artists--Jay Z and Beyonce
- Sports figures--Peyton Manning, Jeremy Lin

The list mentions many whom we would not know, such as those who have led out in certain initiatives in other countries. To be on the list is impressive and no doubt desired by many.

God's list of “who's who” is altogether different than the world's list. In fact, Hebrews 11 is a good place in Scripture to find out what kinds of people make God's list. Scripture describes them as:

Hebrews 11:33-38 - “...who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented--of whom the world was not worthy.”

Located among their ranks would no doubt be John the Baptist. You will not find his name mentioned anywhere on the world's lists of “who's who,” and he's probably not even mentioned on their lists of “who's not.” In the gospels, no life received a higher compliment from Jesus than did the life of John the Baptist.

Matthew 11:11 - “Assuredly I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

Jesus had nothing but sterling remarks for John and the way that he lived his life. Thus, we could rightfully say that his was “one extraordinary life!”

John signified the end of the Old Covenant and the arrival of the New. The purpose of his life and ministry was to announce the King’s arrival, the very One of whom Moses in the law and all the prophets did write.

John’s life pointed others to Jesus.

There’s a lot of talk these days about how to have your best life now, and everyone has their own opinion. Jesus says that those who lose their lives for His sake find them. Such was John’s life.

There is much that we can glean from a careful study of the life of John the Baptist, a life which I am calling one that was extraordinary.

1. The MAN that John was (3:1)

“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea.”

What do we know about John from Scripture? Several things are worth mentioning:

He fulfilled a SPECIFIC promise

Matthew doesn’t give us any of the background details about John. He only begins with John’s public ministry. To find out more about who John was, we go to Luke’s account.

According to Luke 1, John was born to a priest names Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth who were described as:

Luke 1:6 - “And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.”

Both of them were known for their godly lives:

- Inwardly-- “...they were both righteous before God”
- Outwardly-- “...walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.”

They were godly people who had lived blamelessly before God and others, but they also knew the depths of suffering:

Luke 1:7 - “But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.”

Throughout their years, they had no doubt longed for a child and prayed that God would allow them to conceive, but for whatever reason unbeknownst to them, God had not allowed it.

God always works in His own time and in His own way!

Luke’s account goes on to tell of how Zacharias was performing his priestly duties in the temple one day when an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. Such a sight caused him to be troubled and fear fell upon him:

Luke 1:13-17 - “But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John...’”

The angel gives Zacharias the remarkable news that a son would be born to he and Elizabeth. The angel goes on to mention several things that would be true about their son:

Luke 1:14-17 - “...And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

How does Zacharias respond to such news? The Bible says that he responds with doubt. For that reason, the angelic messenger says that he would be unable to speak until the day the child was born. How true it often is that we pray for things, and when God comes through in a powerful way, we often find ourselves in the midst of doubt.

John was an answer to the prayers of his righteous parents.

He served a SPECIAL purpose

Much more was involved with John’s life than Zacharias and Elizabeth were able to understand. Heaven had its own special purpose for John’s life.

The Old Testament had promised that one would come and pave the way for the Messiah's entry into the world. This person would serve as the forerunner of the Messiah Himself.

In verse 3, Matthew references the prophet Isaiah and tells us that John's life was in direct fulfillment of prophecy:

Isaiah 40:3-5 - "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth; the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'"

Prophetically, the Scriptures foretold of one who come and cry out in the wilderness, calling on people to prepare for the coming King.

Malachi 3:1 - "Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,' says the Lord of hosts."

John MacArthur - *"In ancient times it was common for a herald to precede the arrival of the monarch, to announce his coming and to prepare for his safe and proper travel. With a coterie of servants, the herald would make sure that the roadway was smooth and uncluttered as possible. Holes would be filled, rocks and debris would be removed, and unsightly litter would be burned or hidden. As the group traveled along and worked, the herald would proclaim the king's coming to everyone he encountered."*

The purpose of a herald was to PROCLAIM the King's coming as well as to call on others to PREPARE for the King's coming. This was the purpose of John's life.

In Matthew's day, many of the Jews were looking for the reappearance of the prophet Elijah because of what the prophet Malachi had said:

Malachi 4:5-6 - "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."

These are the last words of the Old Testament. It would be 400 years before another prophetic voice would be raised in Israel. When John stepped onto the scene, he would be that prophetic voice that Israel needed to hear.

Jesus said of John that he was the “Elijah” which was to come:

Matthew 11:13-14 - “For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come.”

In a spiritual sense, John was the “Elijah” that they had been looking for to come, for he came in the spirit and power of Elijah. He even dressed as Elijah did and preached the same message.

In many ways, John’s life was parallel to Elijah’s life:

- he preached in a climate of dryness
- people were in a place of neutrality
- a wicked king was ruling

Like Elijah, John was a prophet who was calling the people back to God after there had been a long draught.

He lived a SEPARATE life

John knew what his purpose was, and he kept his life clean. He kept his life free from clutter. Instead of being like the world, he lived a separated life of personal holiness.

We see this in where he LIVED:

Luke 2:80 - “So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel.”

Matthew tells us that John could be found preaching in the wilderness. He was not to be found in the palace, nor was he to be found in the market square. He didn’t walk the halls of the schools of higher learning, or sit down at the table with men of means. John carried out his ministry in an unlikely place--the wilderness.

The way we live as Christ-followers is different than the way unbelievers live. We live with a different set of priorities, values, and a different purpose.

We see this in how he LOOKED:

v. 4 - “Now John himself was clothed in camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.”

John wasn’t afraid to be different. He stood out in a crowd and his colors were clear.

We see this in who he LIFTED UP:

John pointed others to Jesus. The purpose of his life was not to point people to himself. As the Lord's messenger, he lived his life for an audience of One:

John 1:27 - "It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose."

John 1:29 - "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'"

John's humble attitude is reflected further:

John 3:26-30 - "And they came to John and said to him, 'Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified--behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!' John answered and said, 'A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.'"

John willingly got out of the spotlight so that Jesus could be in the spotlight.

2. The MESSAGE that John preached (3:2-4)

"In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!' For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness...'"

John was a unique man who proclaimed a unique message.

"Preaching" - Greek word is 'kerusso' and the idea is that of proclaiming something loudly; to herald/trumpet forth

John's preaching contained the element of crying out truth. He wasn't a silent witness, but was very vocal in his faith and message.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer - *"Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act."*

Our current day is not a time to be silent; it is a time to cry out.

It is not enough that we simply curse the darkness; as Christ-followers we are to shine His light. There are some things that we must cry out against, as well as some things that we must cry out for.

- We cry out against sin, but we cry out for repentance.
- We cry out against injustice, but we cry out for mercy.
- We cry out against falsehood, but we cry out for truth.

Matthew shows us how John's message was two-fold:

He preached a message of REPENTANCE (v. 2a)

"...and saying, 'Repent...'"

"Repent" - *means to turn around; a change in direction; a change of heart that results in a change of behavior*

John Broadus - *"Wherever this Greek word is used in the New Testament the reference is to changing the mind and the purpose from sin to holiness."*

A faulty understanding of repentance can lead to a false assumption of salvation.

Luke 13:3 - **"Unless you repent you will all likewise perish."**

Warren Wiersbe - *"The word 'repent' means to change one's mind and act on that change."*

John's message was a message of repentance by which he called on people to surrender their lives and turn to God, to have a change of heart, and to live a completely different life.

He preached a message of READINESS (v. 2b)

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

In verse 2, we are told of the reason for repentance. John called on others to repent because the "kingdom of heaven" is at hand.

"Kingdom of Heaven" - *the first of 32 usages in Matthew; other gospel writers use 'kingdom of God' which carries the same meaning; speaks of the rule and reign of God*

The nearness of God's kingdom points us to two realities:

- salvation is here

- judgment is near

There was a sense of urgency in John's message. The word "repent" is a verb, a word that denotes action. It is in the present tense. It is active and imperative and communicates urgency.

It means that there was no time for hesitation or delay. It shows us how we must always communicate the gospel with a sense of urgency.

3. The MINISTRY that John had (3:5-6)

"Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins."

He had an INFLUENTIAL ministry (v. 5)

Notice how Mathew tells us that crowds of people flocked to where John was out in the wilderness. Some scholars have even estimated that upwards of one million people went out to hear him preach.

John didn't have any of those things that the professionals are telling us we have to have these days to reach people. But what he did have was evidently more than enough, for people were coming and lives were being changed by his ministry.

He had an IDENTIFYING ministry (v. 6)

"...and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins."

Herein is where John got his name--John the Baptist. Literally, it means he was known as "John the Baptizer."

People would hear John preach, be convicted of their sin, confess their sin, and publicly be baptized by him which indicated their turning from sin.

John MacArthur - *"That act symbolized before the world that they realized their national and racial descent, or even their calling as God's chosen and covenant people, could not save them. They had to repent, forsake sin, and trust in the Lord for salvation. It is that of which the baptism was a public witness..."*

Thus, baptism was the public act of their personal repentance. From that point forward, they were identified by repentance.

What can we say about the life of John the Baptist? His life was one extraordinary life that pointed people to Jesus. His message was one of repentance and readiness for the King, and his ministry influenced the lives of multiplied thousands who turned from sin to God.

What about me?

- Have I genuinely 'repented' from sin and turned to Christ?
- Is my life different because of my walk with God?
- Do I live with a sense of mission to point others to Jesus?