

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

by David Robinson



Jesus Our Lord— Building a Strong Relationship with Christ

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Preparation for Christ

Scripture: Matthew 3:1–12

Aim: By the end of the lesson I will understand and discuss the ministry of John the Baptist.

Start Here



The ministry of Jesus had a beginning. Jesus' public ministry began when He was approximately thirty years old. During this ministry He established the principles of the kingdom of God. Jesus instituted His church, and He proved repeatedly that He was the Son of God. The world had to be prepared before the public announcement about Jesus' ministry was made.

That preparation was the job of a remarkable man named John the Baptist. There had been no prophet in Israel for nearly five hundred years before John came out of the Judean wilderness preaching repentance and the coming kingdom of God. John was sent by God to set the stage for the ministry of Christ (John 1:6-8).

As we build our relationship with Jesus, there must be a beginning. Preparation must be made in our own hearts for Jesus to do His wonderful work in us. In the ministry of John the Baptist, we see the kind of preparation that each of us should make to establish a foundation for a lifelong service to Jesus.

Take a Closer Look



Prophecies about John. Years before John was born, Isaiah the prophet had foretold his work. We find this mentioned in Matthew 3:3 and also in Luke 3:4, 5. This prophecy is found in Isaiah 40:3. John was given a specific task to perform. He was to make a straight way for the Lord. He was to fill in the valleys, bring down the hills, make the

crooked ways straight and make the rough ways smooth. All these illustrations relate to a pathway or a road. They are metaphors of road building, and they all suggest that John's ministry was not an end in itself but was preparing the way for something and someone. We know that someone was Jesus.

In a similar way, God had prepared the whole world for the coming of Jesus. Israel had been under Roman control for sixty-eight years. As a region of Rome, whatever happened in Israel would be known throughout the empire. God was opening a window of history so that the gospel could be preached throughout the world in a relatively short time. God prepared the world, and John's ministry was to prepare the hearts of the people.

As the first prophet to speak in nearly five hundred years, John could have said many things, and most of them would have been believed. There was a hunger in the land of Israel to hear the words of the Lord. However, John did not choose to promote himself. He chose to point others to Jesus. John's message also points us to Jesus.

Often it seems that the Lord has a difficult time getting into the hearts of men. Because our hearts are so filled with other things, we don't have any room left for God—the way needs to be made straight. How different things would be if God found a smooth straight pathway into our lives and hearts. Observe the ministry of John the Baptist, and you will see how this can happen.

John's preaching. John didn't come as a political figure. He didn't come as a king, a governor, a reformer, a priest or a rabbi. He came as a preacher. We read in the Bible that "it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (1 Cor. 1:21). Many things can change one's attitudes, but only preaching has the power of the gospel to change the souls of men. John was preaching a message of repentance. He told men that they were sinners who needed to be changed spiritually. This is accomplished through repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. We can't change ourselves. Repentance is not reformation. John wasn't saying that men should sincerely try to do better. He was saying that they should turn away from the unprofitable path of sin and turn to the coming Messiah. Their faith should be in Jesus, not in their own ability.

Some men heard this message and wanted the result without the faith that brought the result. We read about the Sadducees and

Pharisees who came to be baptized but had not repented of their sins (Matt. 3:7-9). John refused to baptize them. He called them a generation of snakes because they were pretending. As the serpent in the Garden of Eden deceived Eve, they tried to deceive John.

The result of preaching and of faith in God is always change. If we come to Christ and leave the same way we came, we have missed the point. Jesus changes what we are because of our sin nature into what we can become through His wonderful power. To prepare people for the coming of Jesus, hearts had to be changed. This is what repentance is all about.

John's baptism. John was preparing the hearts of men to receive the public ministry of Jesus. He was also preparing the material for the church that Jesus would establish. His message was twofold. There was a message of repentance, and there was a message about the kingdom of God. Please note that the first precedes the second. Unless men have repented of their sins, they are not candidates for baptism. This is why John refused to baptize the Sadducees and Pharisees. There was no evidence of repentance and change in their lives. There was no evidence of faith in Christ; therefore, there was no reason to baptize them.

The word *baptize* means "to immerse in water." Scriptural baptism has always been by immersion. No one who has been sprinkled has been baptized. We have to realize what baptism symbolizes to understand why immersion is necessary. Baptism pictures the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. When someone dies, he is buried. When believers are resurrected, they will come up out of the earth to live a new life. Likewise, a candidate for baptism comes up out of the water to live a new life in Christ. Nothing less than immersion can show this.

John's message was popular. Many men in Judea and all the regions around Judea came to John to be baptized. Evidently, John did not baptize everyone who came. The incident with the Pharisees and Sadducees suggests that John considered each case and only baptized those who had truly shown repentance from his sins.

Then one day, John's ministry came to its fruition when Jesus came to be baptized. John readily and immediately stepped aside and proclaimed Jesus as the Lamb of God (John 1:29). John realized that Jesus was the Messiah, and he asked Jesus to baptize him, but Jesus would not. Jesus knew that to show the proper meaning of baptism, He had to be baptized. Jesus was going to die.

He was going to be buried, and He was going to be resurrected. The ministry of Jesus began symbolically when John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, and it ended in reality when Jesus actually died, was buried and rose again on the third day.

When Jesus came on the scene, the ministry of John the Baptist began to decrease (John 3:30). Not long afterward, John the Baptist was arrested by Herod and was executed at the request of Herod's evil wife. John died, but not before he accomplished his goal. John introduced Jesus as the Lamb of God, and the way was straight for Jesus to accomplish the will of God in His public ministry.



All believers have something to do for God, but they do not all do the same thing. Paul declared in 1 Corinthians 3:6, "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase." John the Baptist was a great man who had a great job to do, and he did it to the best of his ability. When Jesus came on the scene, the world was ready for what He had been sent to do. John's work was a success.

We can't measure success or failure from the perspective of the world. To the world, John was an obscure prophet, but to God, John the Baptist was one of the greatest men who ever lived. He did what God had sent him to do. Ultimately, doing the will of God determines success or failure for any of us.

How do you look at the things God has given you to do? How do you see the place where God has asked you to serve Him? Are you disappointed that your service is not glamorous or that you don't have more obvious success? We can be, but we should not. God needs all of the saved to serve Him in the many ways He has chosen for them. John did and so can each child of God.

Building Blocks

In a real way each person must make a decision about the message of John. We can make it easy for Jesus to come into our lives, or we can make that path difficult. We can put up many

barriers and roadblocks for the Lord. We can put many things in our lives ahead of our service for Him. It's all too easy to let things in this world take away our time and energy so that when it's time to serve the Lord, we just don't want to do it.

The key to making a straight path for Jesus is to make a complete break with the world. This is why John preached repentance. This is why John baptized people. The repentance was an inner decision that men made to turn from evil and to turn to Jesus. Baptism was an outward ceremony to show that the inner decision had taken place. We need to do both. We need real repentance and faith in our hearts, and then we need to follow with our physical service in honor of the spiritual decision of salvation. Baptism is one way we can do this. Only then have we made a straight pathway for Jesus into our hearts.



You are following someone and you are leading someone else. No one is alone. Romans 14:7 states, "For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself." You are where you are in life because someone went before you and made a way for you to follow. The best way you can show that you are thankful is to look behind you and make a way for others to follow in the same way.

We should concentrate on making it as easy as we can for those who follow us to have the same faith in Jesus that we have. We should then challenge them to act according to the courage of their convictions based on their faith. John the Baptist is a great example of a good and righteous man doing exactly that.