

The Message Of John The Baptist
John 1:19-23

To say that our "small minds" have a difficulty comprehending the eternal Nature and the eternal Plan of God is truly an understatement. But His eternal Nature and His Plans are very real folks, and they are taking place all around us every moment of every day.

And I especially love the sometimes momentary glimpses of His Nature and His Plans that He gives to us. He spoke about that in 1 Corinthians chapter 2 when He said,

⁶ . . . among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. ⁷ But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. (1 Corinthians 2:6-7)

Here, as we read this account of John the Baptist given to us in our scripture passage for today, God is doing exactly this. He is revealing some of the "secret and hidden wisdom" of His Nature, and of the plans that He made in those eons past before the foundations of the earth were created.

Because even though He, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit knew that they had created everything in existence to be good and perfect, they also knew that their beloved creation would one day fall into sin, corrupt everything within it, and would then have need for a Savior.

And that brings us to this passage of scripture that we'll study about today, God's beginning steps in the restoration and redemption of His beloved children. And John the Baptist would be an essential part of those beginning steps.

But who was this man "John The Baptist"? And why was he so important within the Eternal Plan of God.

That is a question that is being considered in these first words of this Book of John, and a question that the religious leaders of John's day were also wanting to know.

And very importantly for us, for you and me, why is the message and the mission of this man so very important for us as we are drawn into the personal relationship that our Lord wants us to have with Him?

Pause with me and let's read about this man, John the Baptist. Here, beginning in John chapter 1 verse 6, we read,

⁶There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, (the light of Christ) so that through him all men might believe. ⁸ He (John) himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ⁹The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

¹⁴ And the Word (the Lord Jesus) became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the Only Begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.' ") ¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. ¹⁹ . . . The Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him (John) who he was. ²⁰He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ."

²¹They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." ²²Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

²³John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord". (John 1:6-9,14-23)

In the gospel of Luke, we are told that just a few months before the Lord Jesus was born, this man, John the Baptist, was born into the household of Zechariah, the priest, and to his wife Elizabeth, a cousin of the Virgin Mary.

John's birth was a very special occasion in the family of Zechariah and Elizabeth because Elizabeth was quite elderly and had been barren all her life, with no expectation of a child until John was born to her.

We read there in chapter 1 of the Book of Luke that while Zechariah was serving as a priest in the temple and angel came to him and told him about John's coming birth, and especially about all the wonderful and mysterious things that John would do. Listen to what the angel had to say! He said,

¹³Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. ¹⁴He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. ¹⁶Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (Luke 1:13-17)

Later on in chapter 1, Zechariah also sang a song. And in that song he said of his son,

⁷⁶ "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,
⁷⁷ To give knowledge of salvation to His people
By the remission of their sins,
⁷⁸ Through the tender mercy of our God,
With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us;
⁷⁹ To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1:76-79)

And then in verse 80 we're told,

⁸⁰And the child (John the Baptist) grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel. (Luke 1:80)

Also, in Mark chapter 1, the Lord tells us about the ministry that John was given to carry out as He "prepared the way" of the Lord. In verse 4, we're told that,

⁴ . . . John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Mark 1:4-8)

John the Baptist was given a unique calling and mission from the Lord. He was a “herald”, a “messenger” sent ahead of Jesus, “crying out in the wilderness” that Jesus was coming. And John's message carried with it a very special kind of power, a power that would prepare the hearts of the people for the day that the Lord Jesus would come to them.

Over the several hundreds of years just prior to Jesus' birth, the hearts of the people of Israel had grown hard and had drifted into darkness, not remembering the special goodness that God had shown to them in times past.

The prophets of God had all fallen silent. God's Word and His promises, especially the promise of a coming Messiah, had all but been forgotten. Only in the hearts and minds of a very small remnant was the promise still alive.

Now, here at this special moment in history, for reasons known only to God, the time had come to change the world. The scriptures call it the “fullness of time”. Listen to these words given in Galatians chapter 4.

⁴When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, ⁵To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. (Galatians 4:4-5)

For reasons known only within the timeless counsels of God, it was determined that the “fullness of time” had arrived, and that Jesus would enter into this world and bring redemption to any and all who would hear and receive His salvation.

And as an intimate part of God's plan, an emissary, a herald was to go just ahead of Jesus to declare His coming and to prepare the hearts of the people to receive Him, “to make straight His paths”. And John was that emissary, that herald.

But His job would not be an easy one. During those several hundred years before Jesus' birth, God had followed through with the warnings He had spoken to Isaiah some 700 years earlier and had exacted the severest of punishments against His chosen people Israel.

Using the Babylonians and the Assyrians, and the exile, God had cut the nation of Israel down, as He would a giant oak tree, to even the smallest of “stumps”, leaving only the choicest of “sprigs” to be able to grow out of that “stump”.

Listen to those words given in Isaiah chapter 6!

¹³ And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.” (Isaiah 6:13)

And Israel, even though after their return from their exile, they would remain in their beaten-down condition, during the next several hundreds of years, those choicest of “sprigs” were given strength to grow, making way for the next part of God’s Plan for His people.

Listen to this prophecy given through Isaiah in chapter 11. There we read,

¹ A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse,
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

² The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of power,
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD—

³ and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. (Isaiah 11:1-3)

Folks, the Lord Jesus was to be that “Shoot”, that “Branch” that would come forth from the “stump of Jesse”.

And now here at this special moment in history “the fullness of time” had arrived and Jesus would begin to walk the earth and bring the “good news” of salvation and redemption.

But before He would do that, God the Father would send John the Baptist ahead of Him, to soften the ground, to make His path straight.

And although during the many hundreds of years the faithful remnant of believers had begun to grow back, the darkness of the world, the flesh and the devil had done their evil work within that remnant and had brought a severe muddling of God’s covenant and plan. The religious leaders had not remained faithful and had exchanged the religion of God for one that they had designed themselves.

John would need to “clear a path” so that the people could hear and accept this “new truth”, this “good news”, the “gospel of salvation”. And so he was sent ahead of Jesus to “prepare ye the way of the Lord.”

Listen to that prophecy given by Isaiah some 700 years earlier. This was the special assignment given to John to prepare the hearts of the people to receive Jesus.

Listen, these words given to us in Isaiah chapter 40,

¹ Comfort, yes, comfort My people!”

Says your God.

² “Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her,

That her warfare is ended, That her iniquity is pardoned, For she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”

³ The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,

Make straight in the desert

A highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be exalted

And every mountain and hill brought low,

The crooked places shall be made straight

And the rough places smooth,

⁵ The glory of the Lord shall be revealed,

And all flesh shall see *it* together,

For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

⁶ The voice said, “Cry out!”

And he said, “What shall I cry?”

“All flesh *is* grass,

And all its loveliness *is* like the flower of the field.

⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,

Because the breath of the Lord blows upon it,

Surely the people *are* grass.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades,

But the word of our God stands forever.”

⁹ O Zion,

You who bring good tidings,

Get up into the high mountain,

O Jerusalem,

You who bring good tidings,

Lift up your voice with strength,
Lift *it* up, be not afraid.
Say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"
¹⁰ Behold, the Lord God shall come with a strong *hand*,
And His arm shall rule for Him,
Behold, His reward *is* with Him,
And His work before Him.
¹¹ He will feed His flock like a shepherd,
He will gather the lambs with His arm,
And carry *them* in His bosom,
And gently lead those who are with young. (Isaiah 40:1-11)

John was born into this world with this one special and distinct calling, a purpose above all other purposes in his life. He was,

³The voice of him that cries in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. (Isaiah 40:3)

And before John was even born it was said of him in Luke chapter 1,

¹⁵ He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. ¹⁶ Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (Luke 1:15-17)

Oh dear Christian, this was the beginning of what you and I have now. No, John was not Elijah, people are never "reincarnated". But yes, he did come in the spirit of Elijah, bridging the gap between the Old Testament prophets and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

John's message was very different from all of the messages that the prophets before Him had given. Before John, the instructions from God had been like those given in Joshua chapter 1 saying,

⁷ Be strong and very courageous! Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. ⁸ Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. (Joshua 1:7-8)

And that message was an excellent one and it is still effectual. But obedience to the laws of Moses could not bring eternal salvation into a soul.

And so, as John stepped forward onto the scene, His message was distinctively different. His message declared that eternal salvation does not come through our struggles to obey the law, but would instead come through the perfect righteousness provided to us by "Grace" through "faith" in the person and the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

And no, the concept of "salvation through a person" was not completely new. The Israelites had been looking for a "Messiah" for a long time, but in their waiting their hearts had grown calloused.

John was the "softener" that God sent to prepare the hearts of the people. And John had been given one message, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand".

But why was this one message, "the message of repentance", so vitally important to the preparation of the hearts of the people for the coming of Christ?

It's because, "sin", "our personal and individual sin" was a barrier that separated us from the holiness of God and the salvation that He wanted to provide to us. And "Repentance" was the beginning remedy necessary to remove that sin.

But unfortunately, the heart in its human form was not able to recognize its sinful condition. It would require the special power of the Holy Spirit that came within John's preaching to humble the people's hearts and to bring them to the "Repentance" necessary for the salvation that Jesus would provide to them.

Folks, true repentance carries with it a deep and profound "humility", the humility of knowing that we truly are sinners, incapable of coping with the power and the control of sin on our own. And until our hearts are softened by God's Holy Spirit and we recognize our continual propensity to sin, we will never be able to hear the message of salvation that Jesus brings.

And please do remember that salvation does not deal with just the specific and individual sins that we commit each day. No, salvation gets down to the very "root" of our sin and deals with our "sin nature", that "nature" that abides within

each of us and continually gives itself over to all the many temptations that come our way each day.

More than anything else, that is what God was dealing with in Jesus' death on the cross, removing from us that corrupt sinful nature that fosters and brings about all of our individual sins.

But to bring all that about, John had to first cause a softening to take place within the hearts of the people. The people needed to take their sins personally. Sin could not remain something that was out there somewhere, outside of a person that would occasionally visit upon their soul, something that could be wiped away by the simple offering up of a sheep and that would make everything be alright.

No! Sin was personal, abiding within each person's soul. And the people needed to know that there would come a time when they would have to stand before God and be personally accountable for that sin. And their only hope would be to see their sin ahead of time and repent of it.

And that was what John came to say to them. That was why God sent him on ahead of Jesus to say, "Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand".

Repentance was specific and individual to every person then, and it is still specific and individual to every person now. And that special message that God gave to John to give to the people has now been passed on to you and to me.

You and I need to first recognize and repent of the sin that abides within our own souls. And then, after dealing with our own sin, we need also to step forward and begin to declare to others, to our friends, our families, our co-workers that they too must "repent" of their sins, for the kingdom of God truly is at hand.

Let me say this again so that we will know how so very important it is! Why is the message of repentance so importance? It is so important because repentance is a required step in the forgiveness and the "wiping away" of the sin that abides within our souls and separates us from the salvation that the Lord Jesus provides.

Oh dear friends, too often well-meaning preachers and teachers leave out this all-important step of repentance when they present the salvation message to people. But please listen, God does not skip over this requirement. We must "repent" else we might surely fall short of the salvation that our Lord is providing to our souls.

Fellow Christians, please know that John the Baptist had a very important message to give to every soul! And you and I who have the Lord Jesus as our Savior, have been given that same message from the Lord, "repent for the kingdom of God is at hand", and we need to get about giving it to anyone and everyone who will listen.

Just as John the Baptist did, we need to be preparing the way of the Lord, making straight His path, crying out in this wilderness that we live in, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand"!

Pray with me.