

JOHN THE BAPTIST THE MAN WHO PREPARED HIS WAY

THE BIRTH OF JOHN:

After the death of the prophet Malachi the Jewish nation did not hear from God for 400 years. During those long years the kingdom of Israel which began its secession from the kingdom of Judah during the reign of Rehoboam, king Solomon's son and successor. The new kingdom which was made up of ten of the twelve tribes of Israel continued its slide away from God allowing foreigners to coexist with her people, mingling with them through intermarriage, and worshipping their gods. The final step that they took was to drop the name "Israel" and adopt a new name for their kingdom, which they called "Samaria", and so they became known as the "Samaritans". The kingdom of "Judah" retained its name and waited for the promised Messiah. During those 400 years, most of its people, while keeping their religious practices, yet they lost hope that the Messiah is coming. As a result they indulged in a carnal living, enjoying the world and the things of the world. Few maintained the faith that even though God has not communicated with them for a long time, nevertheless He will keep His promise, and will not only send the savior, but also his predecessor who is supposed to prepare the way before Him.

This mysterious messenger's coming was clearly foretold in two prophecies, the first which came about 750 years before he was born, by the prophet Isaiah who wrote, "A voice cries in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make in the desert a highway for our God." (Is. 40:3). The other by the prophet Malachi after this one by about 350 years, who wrote, "Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me." (Mal.3:1).

The birth of John was not a normal birth. As a matter of fact nothing about John was normal; his birth, his childhood, his life, his food, and

even his dress were all abnormal as if God planned things this way to use all these abnormalities to draw people's attention to him and his message.

His birth was announced by Archangel Gabriel, something that never happened before. His father Zachariah was a priest, and he and his wife Elizabeth did not have any children. Elizabeth was barren. At the time the Archangel announced the birth of John, Zachariah and his wife were old and advanced in their years, and they were righteous in the sight of God. On that memorable day, Zachariah was selected by lot to enter the sanctuary and burn incense before the alter designated for that purpose. In those days, there was about 5,000 priests divided into 24 groups, each of which was given a name, and was to serve in the Temple for a whole month. This meant that every group was to serve once every two years. Since there were few jobs to be performed, and many priests to perform them, the ones to serve were chosen by lot. The most prestigious job was burning incense in the Sanctuary. This is why any priest who was selected for that honor, was dropped from the lot for the rest of his life, to give the rest of the group an equal chance to be selected. So Zachariah, a member of the group called Abia, was performing the most important service in his life, and while he was praying and deeply involved in the worship of the God of his fathers, suddenly the Archangel Gabriel with the glory befitting his position appeared on the right side of the alter. Zachariah was shaken and felt afraid. This was a typical reaction when the reality of God penetrates the concrete shield of our human existence, and touches our lives, we become afraid. The shepherds were afraid when the angel of the Lord appeared to them to announce to them the birth of our Lord. The Jewish people were afraid when God descended on Mount Sinai to address them and give them the ten commandments. Their fear was so great that they, after that experience, asked Moses not to expose them to God again. So Zachariah was afraid, and shaken. This was why the Archangel tried to calm his fear by beginning his message telling him, " Don't be afraid", and by telling him without delay the purpose of His visit. He told him that his prayers and his wife's were heard, and that his wife will give birth to a child, and that his name will be John.

The Bible tells us that after the Archangel detailed to Zachariah the role that his son will play in the drama that will shortly unfold, and his greatness before God, Zachariah doubted the message. He told Gabriel, " How do I know this, for I am old and my wife is advanced in her years". Gabriel answered him harshly telling him, "I am Gabriel who is standing before God, and I was sent to tell you this. Behold, you will be silent until the day that what I told you is fulfilled"(Lk 1:19,20). When we compare what happened to Zachariah when he questioned Gabriel, and what happened to St. Mary when she questioned him using almost the same words, " How can this be and I don't know a man?". We find a big difference, Zachariah was punished while St. Mary was not. The reason for this is the fact that old barren women have given birth to children before when it was the will of God. Sarah, Hannah, and Rebecca were all barren but God opened their wombs and gave them children. All this was recorded in the Old Testament. Zachariah being a priest was supposed not only to know this, but also to believe it, and teach to the people, so he had no reason to doubt what the Archangel told him. So when he questioned him, he showed either his ignorance or lack of faith, or both, and in God's judgement deserved punishment. But St. Mary was justified in her confusion, which made her question the angel. Never before did a virgin give birth to a child, also what was supposed to happen to

her will affect her reputation, and may lead some to doubt that she has committed adultery, a sin punishable by death. St. Joseph himself when he saw that she was pregnant, thought of letting her go. Our God, the understanding and sympathetic God realized that and did not permit Gabriel to punish her, but rather to explain to her what and how, what he said would happen. He told her that, " The Holy Spirit will descend on you, and the power of the most High will overshadow you. Therefore He who is born of you will be holy and will be called the son of God" (Lk1:35).

After the vision, Zachariah finished his service, and went home. His wife must have wondered what happened to her husband, and why he was unable to talk. She must have asked him, but what kind of answer he gave her, we do not know. Most likely he communicated to her what the angel told him. So there was jubilation in the hearts of those two old

people, and a gratitude to God for answering their prayers. But Zachariah's joy was marred by his doubt which he was constantly reminded of every time he wanted to talk and found himself unable. He must have asked himself over and over again, why did he doubt. He must have blamed himself for not recalling those two prophecies which foretold the coming of his son. He must have read them hundreds of times, thanking God that He found him and his wife worthy of bringing such an unusual child into the world. Being unable to speak for nine months, which was supposed to be a punishment administered by Gabriel was really a blessing in disguise. Because it enabled Zachariah to reflect and think about what happened, repenting of his disbelief. He must have gone over the prophecies about the Messiah, the savior who was supposed to come after his son. This reflection and meditation raised the level of his spiritual awareness, which showed itself in what he said after John was born, and his tongue was loosened. He praised God saying, "Blessed be the God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised for us a horn of salvation, in the house of his servant David" (Lk 1:68). This is a far cry from what he told Archangel Gabriel when he told him about the birth of his son.

Elizabeth too must have spent those nine months praying, meditating, and praising God. Her joy was evident when she said, "This is what the Lord has done to me, when he took away my shame among the people" (Lk 1:29)

JOHN AS THE PREPARER OF THE WAY:

The two prophecies about him, clearly define his mission, to prepare the way before the Lord. As we think of this, many questions come to mind. What does this mean, to prepare the way?

What was he supposed to do? Was that necessary? Does God need man to do something for Him? Did John succeed in his mission? In answer to these questions, we begin by examining what happens in similar situations. When someone in authority such as a king or a president decides to visit a town or a city, he usually sends a cadre of 5 or 6 people ahead of him to examine the route that he will travel, the place that he will stay in, meet the people whom he will meet, in an attempt to

make his trip to that place as comfortable and safe as possible. So if an earthly king or a president sends 5 or 6 people to prepare what is necessary, Jesus being the king of kings and the lord of lords should have sent many more, but He only sent one; John the Baptist. His mission was not to make sure that his Lord will be safe and comfortable, when He begins His ministry. The Lord couldn't care less about His safety and comfort. He wanted John to prepare the people spiritually, to receive His message.

When we ask, was that necessary? We find that it was. As we mentioned before, the Jewish nation did not hear from God for 400 years. As a result, they felt that either God has forgotten His chosen people, or that He has reneged on His promises to them, which were repeated over and over again throughout the Old Testament. This pushed them further in the direction of the physical, and the worldly. So they became more and more obsessed with their physical existence, and their daily needs. And because of this worldly orientation, they misread the prophecies about the Messiah, and instead of recognizing His mission as a spiritual one, they were waiting for a savior who will lead them out of their bondage to Rome as Moses led their fathers to freedom from their bondage to Egypt, and as other saviors such as Samson, Gedeon, David and others did before. Even Zachariah in his praise after John's birth does not sound that he meant a spiritual leader. Listen to him saying, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for He has visited and redeemed His people, and has raised for us a horn of salvation,... that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us" (Lk 1:68). It is hard to see that Zachariah meant anything other than a political salvation from the rule of Rome. The Jewish people tried to crown Jesus king several times, and the Bible tells us that every time He refused, becoming an earthly king. It is interesting that when they decided to destroy him, they accused him of wanting to be their king. This was one of the crimes that he allegedly committed and were reported to Pontius Pilate. This is why he asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" (Lk 23:3) Jesus answered saying, "You have said so" (Lk 23:3). We notice that He did not deny it, because He was not only the king of the Jews, but He was the king of all the universe. So in a way being the king of the Jews

was a demotion, which He did not try to explain to Pilate, but He tried to explain to him the nature of his kingdom, so He told him that his kingdom is not from this world.

When we ask, did John succeed in his mission? There are two ways any effort can be evaluated. The first is to evaluate what the effort was. Did the worker do what he was supposed to do? Did he believe in what he was doing? What was the depth of his commitment? How enthusiastic was he about his work?

In other words what is being evaluated here is the behavior of the person who is supposed to effect certain changes in others. The second approach is to evaluate how much of that change really took place. This is very similar to the two approaches in evaluating any educational process. you either evaluate the teaching that took place or the learning that happened as a result of that teaching.

In answering the question about how successful was John the Baptist in his work, using the first approach we find that he did what he was supposed to do. He told the people that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, he asked them to repent of their sins, and he declared several times that he is not the Messiah, and that the Messiah will come soon. We also find that he strongly believed in what he said. His enthusiasm and zeal were evident to everybody. So on this count we can say that he was very successful. Using the second approach, we also find evidence of his success. The Bible tells us that the people responded to him, and that they, "all came out to him and were baptized by him, confessing their sins"(Mk 1:5)

THE UNIQUENESS OF JOHN:

As we examine John's life, and personality and compare him with other prophets, we find that he was unique. His uniqueness is due to several aspects in his life, which profoundly affected every thing that he did and left deep marks on his personality.

First, his birth was announced by none other than Archangel Gabriel. No other prophet shares with him that honor. He was named by God. Very few people share with him in that honor, these are Isaac, Ishmael, Israel, Abraham, Sarah, and Jesus. While he was still a young

boy, he was carried by angels to the wilderness where he lived in the company of God, who raised and trained him. When he graduated from God's school at the tender age of thirty, he came out of the wilderness to begin his ministry. He was a strange looking man. He was rugged, strong both physically and spiritually. He was dressed in a rough garment made of camel hair, and ate locust and wild honey. His eyes were ablaze with the fire of the Holy Spirit, and his voice was deep, strong, and authoritative. When he told the people that the kingdom of heaven is near and called them to repent of their sins, despite the fact that he was not a priest, nor a scribe, nor a pharisee, nor anybody with any kind of official authority. Yet the people, the same people who were described by God as people with stiff necks and cruel hearts, responded to John as if he was imbued with heavenly authority, which of course he was.

Another aspect of his uniqueness is the fact that he is considered the last of the Old Testament prophets, yet he was the one who ushered in the New Testament. He was the first one to worship Jesus when St. Mary visited St. Elizabeth. St. Luke wrote, "And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ear, the babe in my womb leaped with joy." (Lk 1:41-44)

Another fact about John is that he had the distinct honor and the rare privilege of baptizing the Lord. When Jesus came to him with the rest of the people who came to be baptized, John immediately recognized Him and must have asked himself, "Isn't He the Messiah? If He is why is He submitting to my baptism, while He is the one who will baptize people with the Holy Spirit? Who should be baptizing who?" He must have shown signs of his dilemma, while Jesus got into the water and lowered His head waiting for John to baptize Him. At that moment John could not proceed. He felt unworthy to receive this great honor, and in a voice filled with humility told the Lord, "I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me." (Mt 3:14). But Jesus told him, "Please,

because We ought to fulfill all righteousness."(Mt 3:15). Also, as he proceeded to baptize Him, he had the privilege of observing the holy Trinity of God as never revealed before, The son the second person of the trinity was in the River Jordan, God the Father the first person of the trinity was proclaiming in an audible voice, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3:17),and the Holy Spirit the third person of the Trinity descended on Jesus in the form of a dove. Why did God choose to reveal His Trinity at that time and in this unusual way we do not know. He may have done it to make John a strong witness to the identity of His son, or to give Jesus assurance before He begins His ministry.

THE GREATNESS OF JOHN:

John's message was well received in all quarters except in two; the temple leadership, and the king. The temple leadership which included the scribes, the priests, and the pharisees felt that John was an outsider. He was not one of them, he was not educated by them, and he came out of no where to claim a spiritual authority which is not his but theirs by training and by lineage, an authority given to them by God himself at the hands of Moses. In a way they considered him an imposter. Afterwards, they would judge Jesus the same ways. They also felt that his message implied that they have failed in doing their job; guiding the Israelites to God, and they strongly resented that.

King Herod had a personal reason for rejecting John's message. John was asking the people to repent of their sins. If this was the case, Herod could have just ignored his call and continued his sinful life . But John went public with his accusations, that Herod is committing adultery by living with his brother's wife,thus exposing his sin for every body to see. The king had no other alternative but to put him in prison, at least to contain him and his criticism from spreading. The bible tells us that he feared John and did not plan to harm him, but was forced to kill him, when Herodia asked him to deliver to her John's head on a platter, in fulfillment of his vow to give her anything she wanted if she danced for him. So it seems that it was inevitable that John will suffer at the hands of his influential enemies. When king Herod put him in prison, it

certainly was a new experience for him. Just imagine such a free spirit who lived all his life not confined by any kind of wall, was confined by the dark walls of a prison. The man who roamed the country side freely was limited to a dark dungeon few square feet in size, and he couldn't even move freely there because he was chained to the wall with a heavy chain.

We do not know what were his thoughts as the long days and nights passed by him in that filthy and smelly dungeon. He may have asked himself, "why was I punished ? What did I do to deserve this? If the Messiah whom I baptized is the true son of the living God, why didn't he free me ? As a result of all that, he probably doubted that Jesus is the Messiah, and so he sent two of his disciples, with whom he was somehow able to communicate, to ask Jesus," Are you he who is to come or shall we look for another?"(Mt 11:3). Some Bible scholars do not agree that what John did was because he doubted, but rather because the two disciples whom he sent were the ones who doubted and that he sent them to Jesus to see and hear what would dissipate their doubt. Any way the two disciples reached Jesus while He was talking to the people. And when they asked him the question in the hearing of all who were present, our Lord did not answer by a "Yes " or a "No", He responded with a question of his own. He told them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense in me"(Mt 11:4-7). He was really asking John or his disciples the crucial question: Can anybody do all these miracles other than the Messiah?

The Bible does not tell us what was John's or his disciples' answer to that question, but very likely whoever doubted, felt that his doubt was unfounded, and regretted it. The doubt shown here was nothing new, it happens everyday, not only in those who are far away from God, but it also happens in many of those who are close to Him. Adam and Eve doubted the word of God, that they will die if they ate of the forbidden fruit, Abraham and Sarah doubted the word of God when He told them several times that they will have a son, Moses doubted the word of God when He told him to go to Egypt to lead His people to freedom to the

extent that he did not want to go, and Thomas doubted when the rest of the disciples told him that they have seen the Lord, and that He has risen. Some say that to doubt is to admit your humanity. The reason is that we are concrete entities and when we are presented with a spiritual fact, we find it difficult to believe. This is because the physical has been always doubtful of the para physical.

What is important here is not the fact that someone doubted, but what was God's reaction to what happened. In this episode we saw how our Lord handled the situation, first He provided the evidence needed to dispel the doubt. This was not all the response, the Bible tells us that after the two disciples left, he turned to the people and praised John as He never did before. This gives more credence to the opinion that John was the one who doubted not his disciples. This was the reason why He praised John. So instead of condemning him for his doubt, He praised him. This again demonstrates one of God's unique qualities that we seldom talk about, and that is His tolerance, and understanding of the human nature. God is not only a loving and forgiving father but He is also a sympathetic father who understands and tolerates his beloved man, even if he errs a little.

The reason for this is the fact that He is the only one who really understands human nature before and after it was corrupted by sin, and that His love for man is great. The result is that He tolerates certain actions by humans, that a stricter and less compassionate God would have not tolerated. The following examples will help us understand what we mean.

The Book of Genesis tells us," that Lamek took two wives, the name of one was Adah,and the name of the other was Zilah"(Gen4:19). Lamek was Noah's father , and the first man to marry two wives. This was not one of the features of the institution of marriage as God designed it. If He wanted man to have two or more wives, He would have created more than one Eve for Adam, but He did not.

So when Lamek married two women, God tolerated that for him. As a matter of fact He tolerated that in few of His favorite people. Abraham had two wives; Sarah and Hagar, Jacob had four,David had six, and

Solomon had 700 wives, and 300 concubines.

Another example of God's tolerance is His permission to the Jewish people to have divorce. This was one of the questions that the pharisees wanted to catch our Lord with. They asked Him if He approves of divorce, and if He did not, they would accuse Him of going against the Law as given to Moses by God. But we find that the Lord did not dodge the question, but He gave them the truth telling them that God allowed that because of " the cruelty of your hearts", and He reminded them that, "What God has united let no man put asunder" (MT 19:6)

Let us listen to what our Lord said about John. He said, " What did you go out in the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft clothes? behold those who are gorgeously arrayed live in king's palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you more than a prophet. I tell you among those who are born to women, none is greater than John the Baptist."(Mt 11:11)

Recalling what Archangel Gabriel said to Zachariah, he told him that, "He will be great in the sight of God"(Lk 1:15), which means that his greatness will not be confirmed by the people. He was judged to be great by God himself, and not the world. It is rather evident that God's judgement is different from man's. Man has his criteria for greatness, and God has His. Man usually values the concrete qualifications, and achievements, God does not. Man looks at the outside, God looks at the inside. Man looks at the mind and its superiority, God looks at the heart. So when man sees somebody with a great deal of knowledge, intelligence, money, political or physical power, or skill, he judges him as great. When he sees someone with unusual achievements in any physical field, he is great. Using these criteria the world considers men such as Alexander, Napoleon, Genkis khan, even Hitler great men, and also Mohammed Ali, excuse me he is the " greatest". In the sight of God, all these people are sick people who were extremely self centered who had inflated egos and were so obsessed with themselves that they found nothing wrong in using others and even destroying thousands of their fellow men to accomplish their selfish

goals of domination and control. On the other hand we find that God values the spiritual qualities of men. So He considers people like Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, Joseph, Moses, Samuel, David great. By the same criteria, He found John the Baptist to be great, not only great, but greater than all those who came before him, including those whom we mentioned above.

Again people ask why. What was the secret of his greatness which surpassed that of Abraham , Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David? Here we have to guess, because God never revealed His rationale for making that judgement. We already mentioned some of the things that contributed to his uniqueness. These could also contribute to his greatness. As mentioned before, his miraculous birth, his life in the wilderness with God, being named by Him, and having the honor of baptizing the Lord, are all aspects that account for his greatness. But as we examine these, we find that all of them are privileges that were given to him by God. If we apply the conventional wisdom, which says that a person can only be judged on his behavior not on the gifts that he receives, then in the case of John we have to look for something other than those gifts that he received from God. As we examine John's life, and what he did with those gifts that God so richly bestowed on him, we find two characteristics which distinguished him from all the others.

The first of these is his humility. John probably knew from his parents about his miraculous birth, that his birth was announced by Archangel Gabriel, that he was named by God, and the rest of the distinctions that made him unique. Any of these distinctions could have turned any man's head, and changed him into an arrogant person. God knew that John with this impressive list of distinctions was an excellent candidate for the sin of pride, something He was sure that Satan also knew and that he will undoubtedly try to exploit. This may have been one of the reasons why God chose to keep him away with him in the wilderness, to protect him from pride, and help him develop the most important quality that God wants in all those who serve Him to have, humility. We are sure that Satan never left him alone, but being so close to God, must have helped him overcome all the temptations that Satan tempted him with. John's humility became obvious during the early stages of his

ministry. It was expected that some will think that he is the Messiah. When they asked him, he told them that he was not. And when they asked him, "Are you Elijah?" he said, no. And when they asked him if he was a prophet, he said no. Then they asked him, who he was. John who was certainly greater than any prophet, answered them that he was just a voice in the wilderness. And when they asked him again, why is he baptizing people if he is none of the above? He answered them that he baptizes with water, but among you is he who is going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit, whose sandal I am not worthy to untie (Jn1:27). What humility! And when the Lord came to be baptized by him he refused.

This was expected since he felt unworthy to untie the Lord's sandal he certainly felt more so when Jesus came to be baptized by him. One day his disciples came to him complaining that Jesus and his disciples were baptizing people and that more were going to him than those who were coming to him. This was a normal human reaction that John undoubtedly recognized. It is normal for somebody to envy the growing reputation and success of another, especially if they are both in the same field, doing more or less the same job. When John heard this, he probably smiled sympathetically, recognizing that his disciples have fallen victims to two of the most difficult sins; jealousy, and arrogance. Trying to explain to them why they should not feel the way they did, he told them that we are not talking here about a fellow worker who is of equal status as his. But we are talking about the promised savior, God in the flesh, the lamb of God who is to carry the sins of the world. He told them again what he told those who asked him that he is not the Messiah, and that he is only the one who prepares the way before Him. Then he told them that their observation is correct, and that He is getting more attention, but this is the way it is supposed to be, this is why "He should increase and I should decrease" (Jn3:30). He was really saying to them, "I am not important, I am only the trumpeter who blows the trumpet before the king enters in. Once he does all the attention must be focused on him. I am not the bride groom, I am only his friend. My job is to help in preparing things for the wedding, but He is the groom who will be married to the bride.

John had also a number of excellent qualities that contributed to his

greatness. He was brave, unwavering in his loyalty to the truth, and his determination to proclaim it even if it hurt him. His confrontational style, and courage produced a reverence in the hearts of the Jewish people who considered him a powerful prophet and advocate of God's word. Jesus used this to silence the leaders of the Temple when they approached Him on Palm Sunday after He overthrew the tables of the money changers and chased them out of the Temple. When they asked Him, "By what authority do you do that?" (Mk 11:28) He answered by asking them, "From whom was John's baptism, from God, or from the people?" (Mk 11:33). They thought for a while, and realizing that they could not say that it was from the people, because they feared their reaction, for they considered him a prophet. They also could not say that it was from God because they have rejected it. So they said to Him, "We do not know". The Lord said to them, "And I also will not tell you by what authority I do these things" (Mk 11:33).

John's most dramatic event happened at the end of his life, and was in a way the grand finale of his public life and ministry, which lasted for about two years. The Bible describes the graphic details of that event in which John was beheaded by king Herod, to join the long line of martyrs who were killed by the Jewish people during its long black history. King Herod was living with his brother's wife Herodia. She and her daughter from her first husband, Salome were living in the royal palace. The king not only committed adultery with the mother, but he lusted after her daughter. During a celebration of his birthday, he asked Salome to dance for him. She must have danced a very seductive dance, that the king was so infatuated with her and being drunk that he promised to give her anything she wanted up to half of his kingdom. When she asked for John's head, he was very upset because he never intended to kill him, but because of his promise, he ordered his execution. So John the Baptist's life which began with a miracle, ended by a swing of a sword. He lived and died serving God, he never lived for himself, so he deserved to be called great by God.