

Lesson 3

JOHN THE ADVANCE MAN FOR JESUS

Anyone who wants to be a public figure and have a widespread following needs a good advance team. For instance, if a candidate for president wants to speak somewhere he will have someone go in advance, secure a location, spread the news and get a good crowd out. Your favorite music group would not think of making a tour without good advance work.

So it was with Jesus. God in his wisdom was far ahead of modern thinking. He had planned for an advance man for Jesus hundreds of years before Jesus was born. God did not call him the advance man, that is a modern term. He called him the MESSENGER. We call him John the Baptist to distinguish him from the apostle John.

Now let us look at some of the reasons John was so important, admired, and loved:

1. The prophets said that during his lifetime the Messiah would be revealed. Isaiah 40:3-5, Malachi 3:1.
2. Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist." Matthew 11:11-15.
3. The gospel writers used at least 281 verses to describe John and his work.
4. He did his job extremely well drawing large crowds and baptizing multitudes.
5. He condemned sinners of all types including Pharisees, Sadducees and King Herod.
6. He gave simple answers to those who wanted to change.
7. He never tried to become number one, always deferring to Jesus.

One can only write about such a man with love and admiration. The apostle John wrote, "There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that Light, so that through him all might believe." John 1:6-7.

Luke gives the most details about the background of John the Baptist. Luke 1:5-80. The details will be summarized in this lesson but, those scriptures are well worth reading.

John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, were descendants of Aaron. They were a righteous couple but VERY OLD and childless. One day when Zachariah was performing his priestly duties the angel Gabriel told him that he and Elizabeth would have a son and name him John. Gabriel added, "He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for 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 before he is born. ¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel 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 parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Luke 1:14-17.

It came to pass with much rejoicing by Elizabeth and Zechariah and their friends and even a visit by Mary, the mother to be of Jesus. Zechariah was so filled with the Holy Spirit that he sang a song part of which is, “And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.” Luke 1:76-77.

“And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.” Luke 1:80. Matthew adds, “John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.” Matthew 3:4. We don’t know how long John lived at home. He may have stayed until his ‘very old’ parents died. His mother may have made his coat of camel’s hair. Camel hair coats were special in the nineteen forties because they insulated well against cold and rain. A leather belt would have been special. I am sure God saw to it that he found plenty of food. When he began preaching, Jesus indicates his clothing was worn.

When the word of God came to John in the wilderness “He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Luke 3:3. “But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” Matthew 3:7-10. But when the crowds asked what to do he said, in effect, ‘care, share, be honest, don’t extort or accuse falsely.’ Luke 3:10-14.

John was so powerful and popular that many people begin to ask if he was the Messiah. John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. ¹⁸ And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.” Luke 3:16-18. This was one of the many times John deferred to Jesus.

“Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ ¹⁵ Jesus replied, ‘Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then John consented. ¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending on Him like a dove. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well-pleased.’” Matthew 3:13-17.

When the Jewish leaders sent priests and Levites to ask John who he was, John told them, “I am not the Messiah or Elijah or a Prophet. I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’ He is the one who comes after me whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” John 1:19-27 condensed.

“The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’³¹ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”³² Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him.³³ I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.” John 1:29-34.

“The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God!’ When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus.” John 1:35-37. This was the first of John’s disciples to follow Jesus.

Later when both John and Jesus were drawing crowds one of John’s disciples complained to John that Jesus is baptizing and everyone is going to Him. John explained to him, I told you I am not the Messiah. The joy is mine. He must become greater and I must become less. The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. John 3:22-31 condensed. John’s joy came from doing his job well.

Herod had John put in prison because he rebuked Herod for having his brother’s wife, Herodias, and other evil things he was doing. John must have known his time was short. “When John heard in prison what Jesus was doing he sent his disciples to ask Jesus ‘Are you the one who is to come, or must we expect someone else?’ Jesus replied, ‘Go back and report to John what you hear and see:⁵ the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.⁶ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.’” Matthew 11:2-6. Anyone could have said, “Yes” but Jesus’ answer was reassuring.

When John’s disciples were leaving Jesus began to compliment John and identified him as “the Messenger.” This is when he ended with the most beautiful verses about John. “¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. Matthew 11:11. Then he adds, “He is the Elijah who was to come.” Matthew 11:14.

Herod was hearing all the wonderful things Jesus was doing. Some was saying Jesus was John the Baptist, raised from the dead. Herod knew better. He gave a great banquet for many of his officials. During that event he had his niece, the daughter of Herodias and his brother, dance for the officials. She highly pleased everyone so Herod offered her whatever she asked, up to half his kingdom. She asked her mother what to request and hurried to the king and said, “I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” Mark 6:25. King Herod was distressed but he gave the order and it was carried out. John’s disciples came and took the body of John and buried it.

After the transfiguration of Jesus in the presence of Peter, James and the apostle John, Jesus identifies John the Baptist to the disciples who were with Him. “As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, ‘Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.’¹⁰ The disciples asked him, ‘Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?’¹¹ Jesus replied, ‘To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things.¹² But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.’¹³ Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.” Matthew 17:9-13.

Was it important that John the Baptist die before Jesus was crucified? Your author thinks it was. John was so popular, respected and even idolized, that had Jesus died first many of John’s disciples may have turned to John as their leader. God’s foresight and plans are always right.

Let me repeat what Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” Matthew 11:11. Therefore, being in the kingdom of heaven should be the goal for each of us.