

Messianic Prophecies: John the Baptist

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Before he was born, an angel announces to Zacharias that his son John will be a prophet in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:13-17). For Zacharias, a priest (Luke 1:8-9), this association to Elijah (Mal 3:1-3; 4:5-6) would have been mind boggling, because it was well known among the priesthood that Malachi was the last genuine prophet of the Old Testament tradition, and roughly 450 years had passed. The association was not the mere mention of Elijah, the angel quoted portions of Malachi's prophecy to indicate the divine purpose of John the Baptist.

"Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says Yahweh of hosts. "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a smelter's fire and like fullers' soap. And He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to Yahweh offerings in righteousness. (Mal 3:1-3, LSB)

"Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and awesome day of Yahweh. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land, devoting it to destruction." (Mal 4:5-6, LSB)

1. Read the following passages and underline the messianic prophecy. From what you know of John the Baptist, was the prophecy literally fulfilled? What does it mean "prepare the way before the Lord?" Discuss your answer.

But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will call his name John. 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 he will not drink any wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. And he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (Luke 1:13-17, LSB)

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High,
For you will go on before the Lord to make ready His ways,
To give to His people the knowledge of salvation
By the forgiveness of their sins,
Because of the tender mercy of our God,
With which the Sunrise from on high will visit us,
To shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,
To direct our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1:76-79, LSB)

Calling for repentance and forgiveness, John the Baptist testified of the coming Messiah and the kingdom of God (Matt 3:1-12; Mark 1:1-8; Luke 3:1-16; John 1:6). However, John the Baptist did not see himself as Elijah in the flesh; instead, he sees himself as a fulfillment of a prophecy of comfort from Isaiah.

Isaiah prophesized for about 40 years (approximately: 740-701 B.C.) in his attempts to turn Judah back to God. Isaiah's prophetic words of comfort were intended to encourage God's people to persevere in their faith with an expectation of the Lord's return.

"Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God.

"Speak to the heart of Jerusalem;

And call out to her, that her warfare has been fulfilled,

That her iniquity has been removed,

That she has received from the hand of Yahweh

Double for all her sins."

A voice is calling,

"Prepare the way for Yahweh in the wilderness;

Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.

Let every valley be lifted up,

And every mountain and hill be made low;

And let the rough ground become a plain,

And the rugged terrain a broad valley;

Then the glory of Yahweh will be revealed,

And all flesh will see it together;

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2. Read the following passages and underline the messianic prophecy. From what you know of John the Baptist, was the prophecy literally fulfilled? Whose path does John the Baptist make straight? What does that mean?

Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet, saying,

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And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness,

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Every ravine will be filled,

And every mountain and hill will be brought low;

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And all flesh will see the salvation of God." (Luke 3:3-6, LSB)

And this is the witness of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." Therefore, they said to him, "Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as Isaiah the prophet said." (John 1:19-23, LSB)

The Teacher Note for this lesson is at:

<http://Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/25Curriculum/Class9-12/print/Jesus.MessianicProphecy.JohnBaptist.9-12.pdf>

Messianic Prophecies: John the Baptist Teacher Notes

Of all the Messianic prophecies mentioned, the New Testament places an emphasis on two prophecies, one from Malachi (Mal 3:1-3) and the other from Isaiah (Isa 40:1-5), which foretell the forerunner to the Messiah. Although separate prophecies, they appear to be understood synonymously as one and appear more than once in all four gospels. Discover why it is so important to validate John the Baptist!

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“Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,” says Yahweh of hosts. “But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a smelter’s fire and like fullers’ soap. And He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to Yahweh offerings in righteousness. (Mal 3:1-3, LSB)

“Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and awesome day of Yahweh. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land, devoting it to destruction.” (Mal 4:5-6, LSB)

Review with the student who these people are: Zacharias, Elijah, and Malachi. Encourage the student to use a Bible dictionary.

1. Search “Holman Bible Dictionary” and select “SudyLight.org Browse by letter Holman Bible Dictionary.”
2. Select the letter and locate the name of the person of interest.

Zacharias: A priest in Jerusalem and the father of John the Baptist (Luke 1:5-64). As he was burning incense in the Temple as part of his duties, the angel Gabriel appeared to Zacharias and announced that he and his elderly wife, Elisabeth, would have a son. Since both were past the age of childbearing, Zacharias asked for a sign that the birth would occur. Because of his lack of faith, the angel struck him dumb. When John was born, the people assumed that he would be named after his father despite Elisabeth's objections that the boy be called “John.” When Zacharias confirmed the name by writing it on a tablet, his speech returned.

Elijah: On Mount Carmel his greatest public miracle involved his encounter with the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah (1 Kings 18:19-40). The contest was to determine the one true God. The false prophets called on their gods, and Elijah called on His God to see which would rain fire from heaven. After the false prophets failed to hear from their gods, Elijah wet the wood on his altar to the true God by pouring four jars of water over it three times. In response of Elijah's prayer, Yahweh rained fire from heaven to consume the wet wood. As a result of their deception, Elijah ordered the false prophets killed.

Malachi: The people of Israel who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon and Persia in 536 B.C. came with high hopes. In Isaiah 40-55 the prophet Isaiah painted a future for those repatriated people in such glowing terms that they expected the messianic age to come immediately. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah added to these hopes by assuring the people that unprecedented blessings would come when the Temple was complete. They finished the Temple in 516 B.C. (Ezra 6:14-15) and waited and waited, but no blessings came. Instead of blessings they faced drought, famine, poverty, oppression, and unfaithfulness to spouses and to God. Moral and spiritual laxity, pride, indifference, permissiveness, and skepticism were rife. Malachi tried to rekindle the fires of faith in the hearts of his discouraged people.

1. Read the following passages and underline the messianic prophecy. From what you know of John the Baptist, was the prophecy literally fulfilled? What does it mean “prepare the way before the Lord?” Discuss your answer.

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For you will go on before the Lord to make ready His ways,
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Help the student with his observation of the text. Guide the student by asking questions about key words and concepts in the OT passages and locate them in the NT passages. The bold print is the messianic prophecy in each passage.

Ask the student: What does it mean “to prepare the way before the Lord?”

Start the observation process with the Old Testament.

Malachi 3:1-3 speaks of “the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant.” The old Mosaic Covenant is no longer so Moses is not in view. The only person associated with a covenant (New Covenant) is the Messiah.

Malachi 3:1-3 asks, “who can endure the day of His coming? Who can stand when He appears?” In this context, there is a sense of judgment. The implication of the Day of the Lord forbodes Final Judgment.

Malachi speaks of the Messiah as “He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to Yahweh offerings in righteousness.” In this context, there is a sense of discipline or refining of moral character so that one may come into the presence of God.

Observe the New Testament passages.

The divine purpose of John the Baptist was to “clear the way” before the Messiah, giving “His people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins,” and to “restore the hearts” of Israel back to God. John the Baptist prepared God’s people for the arrival of Jesus Christ, and because of Malachi’s prophecy, John the Baptist’s testimony identifying Jesus as the Messiah was validated.

Calling for repentance and forgiveness, John the Baptist testified of the coming Messiah and the kingdom of God (Matt 3:1-12; Mark 1:1-8; Luke 3:1-16; John 1:6). However, John the Baptist did not see himself as Elijah in the flesh; instead, he sees himself as a fulfillment of a prophecy of comfort from Isaiah.

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Ask the student: what was the prophet Elijah known for? Why didn't John the Baptist see himself functioning in the same manner? Why did he see himself more like the prophet Isaiah?

Elijah was known for his public demonstration of the reality of God against the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, which caused people to turn back to God. John the Baptist, cognizant that he didn't do such spectacular miracles, saw himself more as a comfort to the people of God in the same vein as the prophet Isaiah. However, turning the people's heart back to God did not require spectacular acts, and Jesus certainly saw John the Baptist precisely as Elijah.

And His disciples asked Him, saying, “Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” And He answered and said, “Elijah is coming and will restore all things; but I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist. (Matt 17:10-13, LSB)

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Ask the student: what was John the Baptist preaching? Point the student to Mark 1:4-8. Give time for discussion.

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the region of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. And John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and was eating locusts and wild honey. And he was preaching, saying, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the strap of His sandals. I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Mark 1:4-8, LSB)

John the Baptist was calling people to repent and return to God, because the kingdom of God is at hand. It is the earliest form of the gospel where human beings can find forgiveness and be accepted as God's own possession. Jesus preached in the same manner.

From that time Jesus began to preach and say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matt 4:17, LSB)

Ask the student: did any other person preach in the same manner? What do you observe in the biblical text?

The statement, "voice in the wilderness," indicates that John the Baptist alone preached in this manner. Additionally, he confronted Jewish religious authorities for their failure of serving God.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? (Matt 3:7, LSB)

Ask the student: why did Jesus see John the Baptist the greatest of all prophets? Refer the student to Matthew 11:7-14.

Now as these men were going away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' palaces! But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

'Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You,
Who will prepare Your way before You.'

Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force. For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come. (Matt 11:7-14, LSB)

John the Baptist was the greatest because: 1) he was fearless in his preaching about repentance and the coming kingdom of God (which was uniquely different from what Pharisees were teaching), 2) he was fearless in preparing people for the coming Messiah, 3) to the Jews in Jerusalem challenging His claim of being the Son of God, Jesus presents the testimony of John as one piece of evidence (John 5:31-35), and 4) to the genuine Old Testament Believer, John the Baptist's testimony was instrumental to the calling of Jesus' first disciples (John 1:35-42).