

The Forerunner

Isaiah 40:1–9, Acts 13:23–25

At public events it is customary for a master of ceremonies to come out onto the platform and introduce the main speaker. He will typically talk about the speaker's background and accomplishments, warm up the audience, then turn the mic over to the main speaker. There is no requirement that people do this; it is a pattern that seems to happen spontaneously across many cultures.

God planned something like this in connection with the coming of his Son, the Messiah. Messiah's coming had been foretold since the earliest times. Actually, the first announcement—what's called the *protevangelium*¹—was given in the garden of Eden, when the Lord said to the serpent, "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; he shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." The serpent—unmasked in Revelation as the devil—had tempted Eve, and she and Adam had eaten the forbidden fruit, bringing death and destruction upon the whole human race. The serpent had caused all this ruin, yet the LORD God speaks to him and announces that the seed of the woman ("*her* seed," feminine, a highly unusual construction) would bruise his head. The Lord had just pronounced a curse upon the serpent. Because of his involvement in the fall he would be cursed above all the cattle and beasts of the field. He would move about on his belly and eat dust all the days of his life. Because he was confined to the ground, he would be able to bite the woman's Seed only on the heel; nevertheless, he would kill him.² Jesus would be crucified and die for our sins, but in so doing he would crush the serpent's head and ultimately destroy the serpent.³

In our Old Testament text there is a prophecy of a voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the LORD." This voice is identified in the gospels as the voice of John the Baptist, the son of Zecharias and Elizabeth, a kinswoman of Mary the mother of Jesus. John, six months older than our Lord, became his forerunner, the one who went out first onto the platform, as it were, and introduced the main speaker—the Word, the promised Messiah.

In his sermon that we are considering Paul retold the story of the Bible. He began with the words "The God of this people of Israel chose our fathers." Paul omits any mention of Moses; the emphasis is totally on God. As a matter of fact, there are thirteen verbs in the opening section of the sermon, and the subject of all of them is *God*. *God* chose. *God* exalted the people. *God* brought his people out of

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/protevangelium>

² https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis.3.15.3?lang=bi

³ The medieval Jewish commentator Rashi totally passes over this part of the verse; there is no explanation of "*her* seed."

Egypt. *God* put up with their ways in the wilderness. *God* destroyed seven nations in Canaan. *God* gave their land to the Jews as an inheritance. *God* gave them judges. *God* gave them a king: Saul. *God* removed him. *God* raised up David as king. *God* testified about David. *God* says, “I have found David, a man after my own heart.” *God* raised up for Israel a Savior, Jesus. Thirteen active verbs, and the subject of every one of them is God.

Do you get the point? Here, Paul is preaching a sermon, and his whole emphasis is on God. He’s not telling the people that they can better their lives if they just try harder. He’s not telling them that they have all the power they need within themselves, and that they’ve got to begin using that power to solve all their problems. He’s not telling them to utilize the power of positive thinking, avoid negative thoughts, “name it and claim it,” and they will get what they want in life. Paul knows that “salvation is of the Lord,” so he points people to God. In the end, this is the most loving thing to do—tell people the truth. The truth is, as sinful sons and daughters of Adam we are “without strength” (Rom. 5:6); we cannot save ourselves. Our help is in the Lord, who made heaven and earth. God raised up for Israel a Savior, Jesus. *God* took the initiative. He sent his Son to die, so that all who trust in him might have everlasting life.

But before the Christ would come (*Christ* is the Greek translation of *Messiah*—*Anointed One*), he would be preceded by the man we know as John the Baptist. A lot of people hear that term and think of a denomination. I myself was raised in a Baptist church. I knew from an early age that *Baptist* meant believers-only baptism by immersion and the autonomy of the local church. We can sit down and talk about the mode of baptism and how the church ought to be organized, but for now let me just say that *John the Baptist* is more accurately translated *John the baptizer*. John himself testified that Christ “sent me to baptize with water” (John 1:33). This was his divinely-ordained mission.

So the three verses of our New Testament text speak of John the Baptist. Before we get into the main part of Paul’s message, consider this: in this sermon Paul doesn’t mention Moses. He mentions God’s bringing his people out of slavery in Egypt. He mentions the period of the judges. He mentions Saul. He mentions David, the man after God’s heart. But no mention of Moses! After David, he skips right to Christ, his main theme. He says, “God raised up for Israel a Savior—Jesus,” then adds the words “after John had first preached.” So notice the sequence: David, then Jesus, David’s greater Son, but Jesus came “*after* John had first preached.” John was the forerunner—the master of ceremonies, as it were—who introduced Jesus to the people. We read in John’s gospel that when John the Baptist was preaching to the people he looked on the edge of the crowd and saw Jesus and said, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” John has the unique privilege of introducing the main speaker, so to speak: the

Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. Let's consider four things that we see in this text: (1) John's calling, (2) John's message, (3) John's attitude, and (4) John's finish. First,

1. John's calling

John was conscious of the fact that he was called to be Christ's forerunner, the one who would announce Jesus to the world. As we learn in the opening chapter of Luke's gospel, John's father Zacharias was a priest, and his mother Elizabeth was herself a descendant of Aaron. They were both advanced in years and were childless. One day, while his father Zacharias was offering incense in the temple in Jerusalem, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and told him that he would have a son who was to be named John. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb and would turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord. Then the angel said something fraught with deep meaning: John would minister before the Lord "in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children' ... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

How Zacharias' heart must have leaped with joy and amazement when he heard these words! As an observant Jew and a priest serving in the temple he would have been very familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures. He would have immediately recognized the allusion to the closing words of the Hebrew prophets, from the book of Malachi. Listen to the closing words of our Old Testament text, Malachi 4:5–6: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse." God had promised that before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord he would send Elijah the prophet. Jews had long wondered about these words. Would this be a kind of reincarnation? Would God really send Elijah the prophet reincarnate—the man of courage who many hundreds of years before had confronted wicked Queen Jezebel and the 400 prophets of Baal? Could it be possible? But now Zachariah was hearing the angel of the Lord say that the miracle son that would be born to him and his wife in their old age was going to come "in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children.'" So *that* had been the meaning of the perplexing prophecy at the close of the book of Malachi! The fulfillment would not be a reincarnation of Elijah but a man who would come *in the spirit and power of* Elijah, who would "turn the hearts of the fathers to the children." This would be Israel's one last chance. If they didn't listen to God this time, then he would come and strike the earth (עָרַרְתִּי)—that is, the land of Israel—with a curse. Jerusalem and the temple—the *holy place* where the priests daily offered animal sacrifices to God, and the *most holy place*, the *holy of holies* containing the ark of the covenant, into which the high priest alone was allowed to enter but once a year on the Day of

Atonement—would come under God’s **הַרְגָה** judgment. It would be destroyed, never to be rebuilt. Instead of a physical temple in a particular geographic location, the faithful people of God would comprise a *spiritual* temple, no longer tied to a specific location but distributed throughout the whole earth—the church of Jesus Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God. The Jews would lose their uniqueness as a peculiar people, and the faithful church of Jesus Christ would become the “chosen generation ... royal priesthood ... holy nation ... peculiar people” (1 Pet. 2:9).

So the man we know as John the Baptist had a unique calling. He was called to come in the spirit and power of Elijah to introduce God’s long-promised Messiah. In a sense John would be the last of the Old Testament prophets. “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets,” would now speak by his Son, the Lord of glory incarnate. The voice would boom out of the bright cloud, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye *him*” (Matt. 17:5). Would Israel hear? If not, then the temple and the holy city would be destroyed, and the gospel would go forth to the Gentiles. Second, consider

2. John’s message

In our New Testament text, verse 24, there is the phrase “before his coming.” The “coming” here refers to the coming of the “Savior—Jesus,” as the previous verse makes clear. Verse 24 sums up the message that John preached: he preached “the baptism of repentance.” Here, in a nutshell, is John’s message: he preached repentance. The word that is used for repentance is *μετάνοια* which literally means *a change of mind*. This word is used of true repentance, a change of mind and purpose and life, to which remission of sin is promised.⁴ You can get a little flavor of John’s preaching in Matthew 3 (turn with me if you will), where we read that “In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!’ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.’” ’ Now John himself was clothed in camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.” Notice how Matthew, summarizing John’s message, begins with the word “repent”: “*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” What he was saying was “Change your mind and hearts, O Israel. The Messiah, the divine king, is at hand. Prepare the way of the Lord. He is here among us. He is about to begin his public ministry.”

⁴ Easton’s Bible Dictionary (Logos Bible Software)

So John's message is summed up in one word: "Repent." Our Shorter Catechism summarizes repentance as "a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin ... doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience." True repentance involves hating our sins and grieving over them as something repulsive and offensive to a holy God. God is not like an indulgent parent who, watching a child throw a temper tantrum, smiles and thinks it's cute, and turns away, not doing anything about it. God is a God of absolute holiness. He cannot overlook sin. He cannot wink at it. He cannot allow sin into his holy presence. He is a God of justice. All sin must be punished, either by the death of the sinner, or by the death of the Substitute, Christ. In true repentance a sinner turns away from his sin and purposes to obey God every moment of his life.

Luke summarizes John's message as "the baptism of repentance." He preached Messiah's imminent coming. His burden was to prepare Israel to receive the Messiah. Those who responded in true sorrow over their sins were baptized, and apparently there were thousands. Baptism with water did not save them, but water baptism was an outward testimony to heartfelt repentance. We have considered John's calling and John's message. Thirdly, consider

3. John's attitude

In verse 25 we read that "as John was finishing his course, he said, 'Who do you think I am? I am not He. But behold, there comes One after me, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to loose.'" John was a popular preacher. He was widely esteemed as a prophet. We read in Luke 3 that "*multitudes* ... came out to be baptized by him." Imagine that! People from Jerusalem and the surrounding towns left the comfort of their homes and daily routines and walked many miles through the Judean desert down to the Jordan valley to listen with rapt attention to the preaching of this blunt and plainspoken preacher. The crowds thronged him. Multitudes came to hear him. Would this not stroke a preacher's ego? "I must be pretty important. Look at all these people coming out to see me." Some preachers make it their business to please men. The Bible calls them "menpleasers." But this is a sin to be avoided. As Paul would later write, "not by the way of eye-service, as *people-pleasers*, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart" (Eph. 6:6 ESV). The main concern of many people today is the number of "likes" or followers a person has on Facebook or Twitter. People fawn over a preacher based upon the number of people who follow him, but that is not the test of truth. Just because a preacher is popular doesn't mean he is preaching the truth. Make no mistake: a preacher's message is not validated by the number of people who like it but by its faithfulness to the word of God.

The man known to us as John the Baptist was not a people-pleaser. He was not smooth and suave. He did not dress in fine suits and live in expensive houses,

surrounded by assistants catering to his every whim. He did not travel in high society and hobnob with the rich and powerful. He was savagely beheaded in a filthy prison in the prime of his life because he spoke truth to power, telling King Herod that he was an adulterer because he had married his brother's wife (which, of course, was true).

The secret of John's success was his attitude. As Peter would later say, "be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble" (1 Pet. 5:5). John the Baptist showed true humility, as we see in our text in Acts, where he says, "Who do you think I am? I am not He. But behold, there comes One after me, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to loose." At the time he spoke these words John had the adulation of the crowds, and Jesus was still unknown. But John said, "I am not He—I am not the Messiah. If you are following me because you think I am the Messiah, you are in error. No! The Messiah is still to come, he is coming after me, and I'll tell you this: I am not worthy even to stoop down and unloose the sandals on his feet. Don't follow me, follow Christ. *He* must increase, but I must decrease."

John's attitude was one of humility, and this is the attitude every one of us must have as well. "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble." How hard it is for us to learn this lesson! How God hates the sin of pride! In Isaiah 14, Lucifer, son of the morning, is cut down to the ground. He had said in his heart, "I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God . . . I will be like the most High." But the prophet had warned him, "Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit." Such will be the final end of those who walk in pride and refuse to submit to the lordship of Christ.

Though he was a great speaker, though he attracted the crowds, though he baptized thousands, John was at heart a man of humility. This was his attitude, and it was of great price in the sight of a holy God. "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble." May we all learn that lesson before it is too late. Finally, consider

4. John's finish

This is just a brief statement in our text, but it is actually very weighty. Notice that in verse 25 it says that "John fulfilled his *course*." The word in the original referred to the course of the heavenly bodies, the moon and the planets following their prescribed courses year after year. The way we measure time into days, months and years is based upon the movement of the heavenly bodies along their divinely-prescribed courses. God is a God of order. He wants everything to be done decently and in order. Man does not always comply, but thankfully the heavenly bodies do! God is a God of great power and infinite wisdom. He has a plan and purpose for every component of his creation. So it is with man. With regard to his elect people it specifically says, "whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate

to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29). Before he formed us in the womb he knew us. He had a plan for us. He appointed us to a particular calling. John fulfilled his course. Later, so would Paul. At the end of his life Paul would write to Timothy, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my *course*, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.” Or as the risen and ascended Christ would say to John, “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” John fulfilled his course; he was faithful to his heavenly calling. He didn’t deviate or diverge from his message, he stayed on track, on point, faithful to the Lord, boldly speaking God’s truth, even if it meant imprisonment or martyrdom. He overcame by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of his testimony. He loved Christ more than life itself and became one of those who “did not love their life even when faced with death” (Rev. 12:11 NASB).

How did John die? The account is found in Matthew 14. There we read that Herod had arrested and imprisoned John for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because John had said to him, “It is not lawful for you to have her.” Herod wanted to put him to death right away, but he didn’t do it because he feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet. But on Herod’s birthday Herodias’s daughter danced before the celebrants and pleased the king. He, wanting to make a big impression on his dinner guests, and with his lips loosened up by too much alcohol, he made a rash promise. He promised with an oath to give the damsel whatever she might ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me John the Baptist’s head on a platter.” The king was sorry, but because of his oath which had been heard by all those who sat at his table, he sent and had John beheaded in prison. How did John die? He was murdered by a power-mad king. John the Baptist was a martyr, a man who bore witness to the truth, and suffered death for the cause of Christ. As John the apostle would later write (quoting Jesus), “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (Rev. 2:10). Here was John’s finish. It was an inglorious finish from the perspective of man, but a glorious finish from the perspective of God. John the Baptist died. He never flinched. He stood for the truth, even unto death. He finished his course; henceforth there would be laid up for him a crown of righteousness presented by the Lord, the righteous judge. May we likewise be bold and unflinching for the sake of truth!

Here then are John’s calling, John’s message, John’s attitude, John’s finish. John the Baptist was Christ’s forerunner, the one who went out on the stage, as it were, to introduce Christ to the world. We, too, are called by God to serve him with our whole lives. We, too, have a message, and that message is Christ. We, too, are

called to humble ourselves in the sight of God, that he might lift us up. And we, too, are called to be faithful unto death. May we, each one, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might, to live our lives for his glory, and to finish well. Amen.