

The Mind of Christ

Preparing The Way

INTRODUCTION:

- I. During the 18 years between the time when Jesus made His first trip to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover at the age of 12, to the time He left His home in Nazareth at the age of 30, Jesus was preparing Himself for the task that lay ahead.
 - A. Luke records that, *Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man. (Luke 2:52)*
 1. During these years Jesus was developing the basic skills and knowledge He would need to complete the task of turning the hearts and minds of men and women back to God.
 - B. However, the Scriptures tell us that when Jesus reached the age of 30 **(Luke 3:23)**, it was time to begin the tremendous task before Him. But how would He start, and where?
 1. Through divine providence, and according to God's eternal plan, the way Jesus would take had already been determined by God.
 2. Furthermore, that course would be prepared by the preaching of a man known as John the Baptist.
- II. John was born to Zacharias, a priest, and his wife Elizabeth, when the couple were in their old age.

- A. What makes the story of John even more interesting is that that his mother, Elizabeth, was the cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus.
1. When John was born, it became immediately clear to his parents that he was no ordinary child – he had been brought into the world for a very special reason.
 2. Unlike Jesus, who grew up in Nazareth and Who was known to have socialized frequently, John grew to manhood in the solitude of the desert.
- B. Although the Scriptures tell us a few things about John – such as who his parents were, when and where he grew up, and that he is suddenly seen baptizing crowds of people in the Jordan River – there are still a number of things about John that remain a mystery.
1. But even here, we can get a fairly good idea about those areas of John’s life that are somewhat of a mystery by understanding the time in which he lived.
 - a. We know that it was during the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar (A.D. 25), that John began to preach.
 - b. **Matthew 3:1-2** – The Scriptures tell us that John, *came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”*
 - c. **Mathew 3:3** – Furthermore, the Scriptures say; *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.'*"

- d. In other words, the prophet Isaiah prophesied some 700 years before about the coming of John to prepare the way for Jesus.
- C. John certainly would have been considered an eccentric in our day and time, but even in his own day, his dress and diet were not the norm.
1. **Matthew 3:4** – We're told, *"Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey."*
 2. But, it was the message of John that people came to hear.
 - a. In fact, people came by the hundreds and perhaps thousands to hear this great prophet of God.
 - b. **Matthew 3:5-6** – The Scriptures say, *"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."*
 - c. The fact that John's ministry was so closely coupled with baptism lead people to simply call him *"John the Baptist"* – meaning, he was known as "John, the one who baptizes."

BODY:

- I. To understand the purpose for John's ministry, we need to understand why John baptized, and where this practice of baptism originated?

- A. To the surprise of many, when John came on the scene at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the pagan world was already familiar with baptism.
 - 1. The practice of baptism, or ceremonial washings, was considered the way through which people entered the pagan religions of the day.
 - 2. These washings, or "lustrations," ranged from a practice similar to washing in a bath, to being completely immersed in water.

- B. The Jewish world was also familiar with baptism, because it was one of the things a Gentile (a non-Jew) needed to do to convert to Judaism.
 - 1. According to the Mishna – the traditional laws of the Jews – a Gentile who wanted to convert to Judaism went through a series of steps to gain entrance into the Jewish faith.
 - a. In the presence of three witnesses, the Gentile candidate was first circumcised.
 - b. His hair and nails were then cut.
 - c. Next, he was completely immersed in water so that his whole body was completely covered.
 - d. Then upon rising up out of the water, the essence of the Law of Moses was read to him, and he confessed his sins to the men who were known as "the fathers of baptism."
 - e. Finally, after blessings and further exhortation, the candidate emerged as a Jew.

(1). According to the Mishna, he was said to emerge as “a little child just born” – meaning that even the Jews associated baptism with a new birth.

C. While Gentile converts to Judaism underwent a form of baptism, or immersion in water, what was the purpose for John’s baptism?

1. In the days of Jesus, Jews didn’t practice baptism to gain entrance into the Jewish faith – they gained entrance into the Jewish faith because they were **born** Jews.

a. However, baptisms, or ceremonial washings, were a common practice among Jews in the days of Jesus – not for the purpose of becoming a Jew – but as an act of purification, symbolizing the washing away of that which was impure.

2. John came from the wilderness of Judea, preaching and baptizing throngs of people in the Jordan River.

a. His message was powerful, and cut deep into the calloused hearts of the people who came to hear him speak.

b. He was truly a voice of one crying in the wilderness, pleading for God’s beloved children to prepare for the coming of the kingdom.

D. That’s why he came preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

1. And it was that message that often shocked those who heard him preach.
2. He came to summons the people of Israel to repent.
3. Why? Because the reign of the Messiah was about to begin, and John had been sent to turn men and women back to God – to get sinners to repent and change their hearts and lives.
 - a. This message struck to the very roots of Jewish traditional belief.
 - b. The Israelites had never lost the belief that they were the chosen people of God.
 - c. But they interpreted their being chosen of God more in terms of privilege rather than of responsibility.
 - (1). There were many who felt that simply being a Jew – a descendent of Abraham – was enough to guarantee entry into heaven, no matter of what kind of life they lived.
 - d. And it was this belief that John vigorously attacked, insisting that merely being a descendent of Abraham did not guarantee favor with God.
 - (1). It was a man's character that mattered.
- E. On one particular occasion, John clashed with Jewish religious leaders who were corrupt to the core.

1. **Luke 3:7-18** – *Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." So the people asked him, saying, "What shall we do then?" He answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you." Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?" So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages." Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not, John answered, saying to all, "I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into*

His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire." And with many other exhortations he preached to the people.

- F. John came with a threat.
 - 1. The Messiah was coming, and the axe was already laid against the root of the tree – ready to cut down a tree that had borne no fruit.
 - 2. John warned everyone that the time of judgment was on the way.

- II. John had a tremendous impact on the minds of the people -- there were at least four things that stood out in the message and the personality of John.
 - A. First, in John, the voice of prophecy was speaking again after being silent for about 400 years.
 - 1. The last great prophet of God had been Malachi – the last book in the Old Testament.
 - 2. But following the days of Malachi, the voice of prophecy was silent – silent, that is, until John came from the wilderness of Judea 400 years later saying, *“Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*
 - 3. The people immediately recognized the voice of authority in John – God was now revealing His message to mankind again through John the Baptizer.

 - B. Second, John was demanding repentance – demanding that men and women turn from their wickedness out of a godly sorrow, and cleanse their lives.

1. Years later, the apostle Paul would write to the church at Corinth, urging these Christians to also turn from their wickedness out of a heart filled with godly sorrow.
2. **2 Corinthians 7:9-10** – He wrote, *“Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death.”*
 - a. Godly sorrow is simply genuine, heart-felt sorrow and regret over the sins we’ve committed – a sorrow that motivates us to change our lives and put our sinful lifestyle behind us once and for all.
 - b. This kind of sorrow, says the apostle Paul, is vastly different from the *“sorrow of the world”* – which is simply being sorry we got caught, or sorry for having to face the consequences of our wrong choices.
 - (1). That kind of sorrow never produces lasting change.
 - (2). Change – permanent and lasting change – only comes from experiencing *“godly sorrow.”*
3. In the same way, John’s message called for change out of a godly sorrow that would lead to a cleansed and changed life.

- a. Why was this change necessary? The King of kings, and Lord or lords was coming – the Christ, the Son of God.
- C. Third, there was something entirely unique in the message of John.
1. He came demanding that his Jewish brethren repent **and** be baptized to receive forgiveness of their sins.
 2. Never before in history had a Jew been commanded to be baptized in order to receive forgiveness of sins.
 - a. That was for Gentiles who wanted to convert to Judaism, but not for Jews.
 - b. But John was, in essence, placing these sinful Israelites in the same category as sinful Gentiles – guilty of sin and in need of forgiveness.
 3. Some 25 years later, when the apostle Paul wrote his inspired letter to the church at Rome, he likewise criticized his own Jewish brethren who looked down with contempt on the sinful lifestyle of the Gentile world, but engaged in similar sins themselves.
 - a. **Romans 2:3-6** – He wrote, *“And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart*

you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who "will render to each one according to his deeds. . ."

4. So in the same way, John told his Jewish brethren they were no better off spiritually than the Gentiles they were trying to convert to Judaism.
- D. Finally, it was the belief among the people of Israel in John's day – and still is – that one like the prophet Elijah would return to announce the coming of the Messiah, and of the last days.
1. When the people heard the preaching of John the Baptizer, they clearly understood John had come in the spirit of Elijah to preach and turn the hearts of men and women back to God in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.
 - a. **Malachi 4:5-6** – Malachi the prophet wrote, *"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."*
 - b. At one point during the ministry of Jesus, His disciples asked Him about the belief that Elijah would come back, and said, **Matthew 17:10-13** – *"Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Indeed,*

Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist.

- E. John's message clearly had a tremendous impact – the people came by the hundreds to accept his demands and to be baptized by him in the Jordan River.

III. It was here that Jesus enters the scene.

- A. Like others, Jesus also came to John to be baptized.
 - 1. But why? Why would Jesus be baptized?
 - 2. He was sinless, and certainly had no need to repent of anything.
- B. When Jesus first came to John to be baptized, John tried to prevent Him (dissuade Him) by saying, **Matthew 3:14-15** – *"I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?" But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he allowed Him.*
- C. So, why was Jesus baptized by John, and what did He mean when He said, *"it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness?"*
 - 1. Most commentators believe Jesus meant that He needed to fulfill all "divine institutions," and to comply in every way with the ordinances

of God – including those relating to ceremonial washings or baptisms.

- a. Just as circumcision was the act by which a Jewish male complied with and entered into the covenant God made with the descendants of Abraham – the Jews – so baptism would become the means by which men and women would enter into Christ.
 - b. **Galatians 3:26-28** – That’s why the apostle Paul later wrote, *“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*
2. And, in submitting to John’s baptism, Jesus was also putting His divine stamp of approval on John’s baptism – letting all people know that John’s ministry and baptism were divinely authorized.
- a. From this moment on, no one could say John the Baptist was just some renegade, wanna-be, prophet who was out to gather a following of his own.
 - b. John’s ministry and his baptism were ordained and approved by God.
 - c. This fact was further born out by the event that followed.

D. **Matthew 3:16-17** – The Scriptures go on to say, *“When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”*

Two very key truths were revealed at this moment.

1. First – God declared Jesus to be His *“beloved Son.”*
 - a. The phrase *“this is My beloved Son,”* is a reference to Psalm 2, a Messianic psalm, where the kings and rulers of the earth are portrayed as having set themselves against the Lord’s Anointed.
 - b. But God laughed at their futile attempts to thwart His eternal purpose, because He had already put His Anointed One (Jesus Christ) on His throne.
 - c. Furthermore, God will give His Anointed One the power to rule over the nations of the world with a rod of iron – to either bless or destroy.
 - d. And in borrowing from the language of Psalm 2, God was declaring that Jesus was not only God’s beloved Son, but also the Messiah of promise and prophecy, and the Savior of the world.

2. And second – since God’s beloved Son (the Messiah and Savior) willingly submitted to John’s baptism to fulfill all righteousness, so should everyone else.
 - a. Why? Because John’s baptism was God ordained and God approved.

IV. John’s work was now finished.

- A. He had been chosen to turn the hearts of the people back to God, and prepare the way for Jesus.
 1. Later, when John was asked if he were the Christ (the promised Messiah), he boldly proclaimed that he was simply the one who had been chosen to prepare the way.
 2. His purpose was not to draw men to himself, but rather to point men to Jesus.
 3. And this is just what he did.
 - a. **John 1:29-31** – We’re told, *“The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.’ I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water.” (John 1:29-31)*

- B. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus was then led by the Spirit into the wilderness where He would fast for 40 days and be tested by the Devil.
1. But as for John, he would continue preaching the need for repentance and baptism until the day he would be arrested by King Herod, thrown in prison, and eventually beheaded.
 2. When Jesus would later learn of John's death, He would tell His disciples, **Matthew 11:11** – *“Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”*

CONCLUSION:

- I. Think about that statement – those who are least in the kingdom of heaven are greater than John the Baptist, who is greater than any man prior to that time who was among those born of women.
 - A. What does this mean?
 1. It means that John was greater in **character** than all who had preceded Him.
 2. But those who are least in the kingdom of heaven (the Lord's church) are greater in **privilege** than John.
 - a. We enjoy privileges as a disciple of Christ, and as sons of God – as Christians – that John was never able to enjoy.

- b. We have greater opportunities, greater advantages, greater benefits and greater concessions that John received.
 - c. While John was the forerunner of Christ – the one whom God had chosen to prepare the way for Jesus – we are the followers of Christ; the light of the world that God uses to bring others to Christ.
- B. Is Jesus **your** Lord and Savior; are you a Christian; are you a disciple of Christ, a follower of Jesus?
- 1. Not just in the sense that you prefer Christianity over other religions, or simply give lip-service to Jesus and His teachings.
 - 2. But one who has truly made Jesus the Lord of your life – one who has completely surrendered your will to His, and live to serve Him in every area of your life.
- C. Perhaps you believe Jesus is the Son of God, but are you willing to repent of your sins and turn away from everything that stands between you and faithfully serving the Lord?
- 1. Are you willing to then go on to openly confess your faith in Jesus Christ – not only confessing your faith in Him with your words, but with your life?
 - 2. And are you then willing to be buried with Christ in baptism – fulfilling all the righteous requirements of the Word of God in

becoming a Christian – being baptized in Christ for the remission of your sins, and thereby being added by the Lord to His church?

- D. And if you've done all that, but you're not living as you should, are you willing to come to Him, confessing your sins, and seeking to be restored?