

JOHN^{THE} BAPTIST

Prophet of the Highest

KEN FLEMING



Developed as a study course by Emmaus Correspondence School, founded in 1942.

John the Baptist: Prophet of the Highest

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STUDENT INSTRUCTIONS

From the time of the prophet Malachi, 400 years before, there had been no direct word from God to His people. Then suddenly a man appeared on the stage of the New Testament era. We know him by the name of John the Baptist, and his main role was to prepare Israel for their Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. This he faithfully did.

In this study you will not only follow the course of John's short life and ministry but be challenged by the selfless principles he exemplified in his character, words, and actions. As a "burning and shining lamp," John is a great example to all of us who want to stand for Christ passionately and unreservedly.

Lessons You Will Study

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Course Components

This course has two parts: this study course and the exam booklet.

How To Study

This study has seven chapters, and each chapter has its own exam. Begin by asking God to help you understand the material. Read the chapter through at least twice, once to get a general idea of its contents and then again, slowly, looking up any Bible references given.

Begin studying immediately, or if you are in a group, as soon as the group begins. We suggest that you keep a regular schedule by trying to complete at least one chapter per week.

Exams

In the exam booklet there is one exam for each chapter (exam 1 covers chapter 1 of the course). Do not answer the questions by what you think or have always believed. The questions are designed to find out if you understand the material given in the course.

After you have completed each chapter, review the related exam and see how well you know the answers. If you find that you are having difficulty answering the questions, review the material until you think you can answer the questions. It is important that you read the Bible passages referenced as some questions may be based on the Bible text.

How Your Exams Are Graded

Your instructor will mark any incorrectly answered questions. You will be referred back to the place in the course where the correct answer is to be found. After finishing this course with a passing average, you will be awarded a certificate.

If you enrolled in a class, submit your exam papers to the leader or secretary of the class who will send them for the entire group to the Correspondence School.

See the back of the exam booklet for more information on returning the exams for grading.

1

BORN TO BE A MESSENGER

LUKE 1

Introduction

From the time of the prophet Malachi, four hundred years before, there had been no direct word from God to His people. Then suddenly a man appeared on the stage of the New Testament era with a welcome yet demanding message. We know him by the name of *John the Baptist*, and his main role was to announce the imminent arrival of the promised *Messiah* (meaning “Chosen, or Anointed, One”; equivalent to the term *Christ* in the New Testament). It was a welcome message in that Israel had been looking forward for hundreds of years to the coming of a God-ordained king who would reclaim David’s throne, destroy Israel’s enemies, and rule with His people on the earth. It was a demanding message in that Israel needed to be confronted to repent from its sinful ways and prepare, both as a nation and individually, for His righteous rule.

Within an intense six month period, John gained the attention of the whole land of Judea. The Jewish Sanhedrin (the governing religious body) investigated him, and the Gentile authorities of the land feared him. John did no miracles (John 10:41), possessed no wealth or social standing (Matt. 3:4; Luke 7:25), and was not gifted with eloquence like the prophet Isaiah. He was just a “voice” (Isa. 40:3; Matt. 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23). Yet the One he came to announce, the Lord Jesus Christ, said that John was “more than a prophet” and, in fact, the greatest of all the prophets (Luke 7:26, 28). Christ spoke more about John than about any other biblical character, a fact that conveys how significant John was in the history of the redemption of man.

Comparing John and Jesus

John and Jesus shared several things in common. They were of similar age, born only six months apart. Both of their names were fixed by God and not left for their parents to determine. Both of their childhoods were lived in obscurity; little is revealed in the Bible of those years. They each had a short but intense term of public ministry—about 6 months for John; between 3 and 3½ years for Jesus. Each started by enthusiastically announcing the kingdom of God, and both were soon met with hostility from the religious world around them. Each had a handful of disciples who mourned their respective masters' deaths while their enemies rejoiced.

There were, of course, differences between John and Jesus. Although John was a godly man, he was born a sinner in the same way all human beings are, while Jesus had no sin in Him—He was God incarnate (meaning “in human flesh”). John's death was a martyrdom; Jesus' death was a sacrifice. John was “a voice”; Jesus was “the Light.” The apostle John compared them this way: “He [John] was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light” (John 1:8).

The Times into Which John Was Born

The national life of Israel was in its dying agony after nearly 1,500 years since its formation as a nation at Mount Sinai. It ended forty years after John's death when the Romans conquered and destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70. In Palestine, Herod the Great (who was an Edomite, not an Israelite) ruled under Rome's watchful eye. He was a thoroughly evil man, both personally and politically. He killed off all the rivals to his throne, as well as thousands of the Jews, and impoverished the people with excessive taxes to pay for his extravagant building programs. It was Herod the Great who rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. It was a magnificent structure, but its external glory and the rituals celebrated there disguised the fact that the light of Judaism had gone out; the nation of Israel's religious life was dark and corrupt, just a sham.

Watchers for Messiah

Several factors gave some indication to the godly remnant of Israel that their King's coming might be near. The 463 years that Daniel the prophet had foretold had almost expired. Magi in the East were studying the heavens

for some sign of His coming. The magi were not the only “watchers” for the rising of the “Dayspring” (Luke 1:78). There were others, like Simeon and Anna, who were looking for “the Consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25), “the Lord’s Christ [Messiah]” (Luke 2:26), and “redemption in Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38). Many were ready to rebel against the power and injustice of the Roman government under the Herods. They were like those in the future time of tribulation, described in the book of Revelation, who will cry out, “How long, O Lord, holy and true . . .?” (Rev. 6:10). They were like those in Isaiah’s day who had lived and died anticipating Him whose right it is to sit on the throne of David and establish judgment and justice (Isa. 9:7). Isaiah had said, “Prepare the way for the people . . . build up the highway! . . . Surely your salvation is coming” (Isa. 62:10-11).

We too live in dark times. We are aware of corruption in courts, business, and government, and we long for the coming King of Righteousness. We look with expectation for the One who appeared once to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself, and who will appear a second time, not with respect to sin, but to redeem our bodies as well as our souls (Heb. 9:28). Paul wrote, “. . . we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body” (Phil. 3:20-21).

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**The story of Jesus
 really starts with
 the story of John.**
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The Parents of John, the Forerunner of the Christ

When Luke began his thorough research into the life of Jesus (Luke 1:1-3), he soon found that the story of Jesus really starts with the story of John. Many scholars have suggested that Luke learned the details of the births of John and Jesus, which are so closely entwined, from Mary the mother of Jesus. We know that Mary treasured the details of those remarkable events in her heart (Luke 2:51).

It is worth noting that we have more details in the Bible about John’s birth than about anyone else’s except Jesus. John’s parents were Zacharias and Elizabeth. They lived in a village of Judah’s hill country, possibly Juttah, a priestly city south of Hebron (Luke 1:39; Josh. 20:7, 21:16). Their names indicate they both came from God-fearing parents (“Zacharias” means *God’s remembrance*, and “Elizabeth” means *God’s oath*). Zacharias was a priest, one of many who lived in specified towns all over the land as

religious teachers. They were divided into twenty-four orders. Each order came once or twice a year to serve in the temple in Jerusalem for one week and two weekends. Zacharias's order was "the order of Abijah." Most of the priests were corrupt in New Testament times, but there were some, like Zacharias, who were "righteous before God" (Luke 1:5-6).

Zacharias and Elizabeth had one great sorrow: they had no children. Elizabeth was barren, and it was a reproach on her (vv. 7, 25).

Zacharias in the Temple (Luke 1:8-12)

The appointed time came for Zacharias and the rest of his priestly order to serve in the temple in Jerusalem. One of their priestly duties was to burn incense in the holy place of the temple at the time of the evening sacrifice. It was the most sacred duty a priest ever performed. The priest who did this was chosen by lot and could only do it once in his lifetime. His assistant would bring hot coals from the altar of sacrifice outside and put them on the altar of incense in the holy place. Then he returned to the courtyard. The chosen priest would sprinkle a special blend of powdered incense on the burning coals. The sweet smelling smoke would then fill the temple as the priest worshipped and prayed to God.

Outside in the courtyard, the smoke of the burnt offering was also ascending to God, while people looked on and silently prayed. They waited for the priest to come back outside and pronounce the great priestly blessing on them: "The Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace" (Num. 6:23-27). As the people waited and the incense burned, Zacharias was praying there at the altar. Suddenly an angel appeared, standing on the right side of the altar. The angel was Gabriel, who "stands in the presence of God" (v. 19). Gabriel was sent by God to bring good news, but Zacharias was terrified (v.12).

The Angel's Announcement (Luke 1:13-17)

Gabriel announced, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard" (literally, past tense, "has been heard"). It may indicate that Zacharias and Elizabeth had been praying for a child but had stopped doing so because they assumed they were now too old to have children. But God had chosen in His sovereign will to delay answering them so that John's birth would

coincide with the Messiah's (Gal. 4:4). God had a divine purpose for John, whereas Zacharias and Elizabeth's desire for a child more than likely reflected the natural human desire of married couples to have a family and to carry on the family line.

Gabriel had brought the message from God that they were to have a son. He made several prophetic statements concerning the coming child:

1. "Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son, and you shall call his name John." John means *Jehovah is gracious*.
2. "And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth." The joy was first for Zacharias and Elizabeth, and then for the godly who had been looking for the Messiah.
3. John would be great in the sight of the Lord. Later, Jesus said that among all the prophets there was none greater (Luke 7:28).
4. John would drink no wine or liquor. The Lord Jesus testified of him, "He came neither eating bread nor drinking wine" (Luke 7:33). Some scholars think John was a Nazarite in view of his ascetic lifestyle. Nazarites were those "set apart" for special service to God. They were marked by uncut hair and a vow to abstain from wine (Num. 6:1-6). Samson and Samuel in the Old Testament are examples of Nazarites (Judges 13:5; 1 Sam. 1:11).
5. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from His mother's womb. His mother Elizabeth also was filled with the Holy Spirit when she spoke to Mary (Luke 1:41).
6. He would turn many of the Jewish nation back to the Lord their God from their backslidden and worldly condition (compare with Malachi 4:6) and in so doing prepare them for the Lord (God the Son in human flesh, the Messiah-King). His message would be, "Repent!" This "turning" would prepare them for their King's coming so they would be in the right frame of spirit to receive Him.
7. He would go before the Messiah in the spirit and power of Elijah, not as Elijah himself, but like Elijah in his revival ministry (John 1:21). John is often called "the forerunner," although this title is not used of him in the Bible.

Zacharias's Unbelief and Discipline (Luke 1:18-22)

Zacharias then questioned the angel. “How shall I know this? I am old and my wife is well advanced in years.” He was skeptical, and he wanted proof, or a sign, that what he had been told would really happen. After all, Gideon had asked for a sign (Judges 6:36-40); so had Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:8), and God had favored each of them with signs. The fact is that Zacharias did not believe what the angel said (we know this from Gabriel’s response in verse 20). Zacharias’s unbelief was a crucial factor. If God could not restore fertility to the old couple, how could He restore man’s relationship with Himself which had been lost since man sinned in the Garden of Eden? Zacharias was like many of us. He could believe that Abraham and Sarah could have a child in old age, but he did not believe that it could happen to him and Elizabeth. We can believe in the God of the past and the God of the future, but we often don’t believe that God can do mighty things today.

The angel told him, “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God”—that is, at God’s side, always ready to do His bidding (Ps. 103:20). God had sent him to bring “these glad tidings.” Only two angelic messengers of God are named in the Bible: Gabriel is the “angel of mercy,” and Michael is the “angel of judgment” and the opponent of Satan. Gabriel said in effect, “I’ll give you proof. You will be unable to talk until the day that these prophecies are fulfilled.” Zacharias had used his tongue to doubt God’s prophetic word to him. Now his tongue was stopped, and he would not be able to speak until God’s prophetic words via Gabriel had all been fulfilled “in their own time.” From that moment, standing at the altar of incense, Zacharias was struck mute for nine or more months.

The people outside the temple were waiting and wondering about the delay in Zacharias coming out to speak to them and bless them. Then when he finally came out he could not say a word to them. He was under discipline because of his unbelief. As Zacharias didn’t believe God’s word from an angel, it was fitting that he did not speak to the people. All he could do was convey by making signs that God had struck him mute (and probably deaf, see verse 62). Zacharias returned to his home village in the hill country a humbler and a wiser man.

The Conception of John (Luke 1:23-25)

We suppose that Zacharias wrote out for his wife what the angel had said to him. What a wonderful day for Elizabeth when she realized that

she would become a mother! It confirmed everything the angel had told Zacharias. She would have a son who would introduce the Messiah to His people. Elizabeth went into seclusion for five months to be alone with God. In joyous thanksgiving she explained, “Thus the Lord has dealt with me . . . He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.” It was common in those days for people to think infertility was a discipline or punishment from God.

During this time, no doubt, Zacharias began to earnestly study the Scriptures, especially those alluded to by Gabriel. He would study the life of Elijah the prophet in whose spirit and power the forerunner of the Messiah would come. Then he would study Malachi 3 and 4 about the coming messenger of God who would clear the way before the Lord’s coming. He would study Isaiah and see that his son would be called a “voice crying in the wilderness,” preaching, “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isa. 40:3). He must have marveled that all this could happen to a simple, hill-country priest and his barren wife.

Summary of Gabriel’s Visit to Mary (vv. 26-38)

About six months later, the same angel, Gabriel, now visited another village called Nazareth sixty or seventy miles north of where Elizabeth and Zacharias lived. This time he appeared to a teenage girl named Mary who was engaged to a man named Joseph.

Gabriel announced to her that that she would conceive and give birth to a son. The conception would not be by natural means, but by the Holy Spirit. He told her that her son would be called the Son of God. Mary didn’t ask for a sign but simply believed him. Gabriel then told her about her cousin Elizabeth’s pregnancy. Although Elizabeth had been known to be “barren,” she had now conceived miraculously in her old age and was in her sixth month. Gabriel told Mary this to encourage her in her own miracle pregnancy. He reminded her that nothing is impossible with God. Mary’s reply was humble acceptance: “Let it be to me according to your word.”

The Visit of Mary to Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-56)

Mary immediately went to visit her cousin. When Elizabeth heard her greeting, the baby “leaped in her womb,” and the Spirit of God came upon her. Elizabeth immediately interpreted the “leaping” of her son inside her

to be a sign that Mary must be the mother of the coming Messiah. In the ecstasy of the moment and being filled with the Spirit, she literally shouted, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” These words begin the first of the hymns of the New Testament; it is a hymn of blessing termed a *beatitude*. Elizabeth exulted in the fact that the mother of “her Lord,” as she put it, had visited her. She finished her “song” by blessing the Lord that Mary had believed what the Lord had told her. Mary answered with her own song that is often termed *The Magnificat* (vv. 46-55). Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months and then returned to Nazareth.

Compare the doubt-filled reply of Zacharias with the faith-filled response of Mary. Zacharias was struck mute, but Mary was filled with the Spirit to proclaim God’s praise.

The Birth and Naming of John (Luke 1:57-66)

Elizabeth gave birth to a healthy son, and the news brought rejoicing among all the neighbors and relatives. On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise and name the boy, the relatives thought the baby would be named Zacharias after his father. Elizabeth objected, saying that he would be called John. The relatives did not fully understand, so Zacharias asked for a tablet and wrote on it, “His name is John.”

The relatives “marveled” at this breach of custom, but the real marvel was that at that moment Zacharias’s tongue was loosed, and he praised God. He evidently began his prophetic song immediately, but Luke stops the flow of the story to describe the effect

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**God was
specially directing
the life of John.**
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on the community: the neighbors and relatives were struck with fear, and soon everyone in the hill country was discussing the things that had happened—“What kind of child will this be?” (v. 66). Luke adds, “And the hand of the Lord was with him.” This means that God was specially directing the life of John as he grew up through boyhood into manhood to be the herald of His own Son.

It is worth noting that John is called by several titles in the Bible, all of which relate in some way to the coming Messiah.

- He was the man sent from God (John 1:6).
- He was the prophet of the Highest (Luke 1:76).

- He was God’s messenger, preparing the way for the Lord Himself (Mal. 3:1).
- He was the doorkeeper opening the door for the Shepherd of the sheep (Israel, John 10:3).
- He was the witness testifying to the identity of the Messiah (John 1:7, 15).
- He was the friend of the Bridegroom; Christ was coming to claim His bride (John 3:29).
- He was the Baptist, preparing the people for the Messiah by baptizing them in water (Matt. 3:1, 6). He was also the one who baptized Jesus at the inauguration of His public ministry.

Zacharias’s Prophecy (Luke 1:67-79)—The Benedictus

Luke resumes the narrative with Zacharias’s prophetic song. It has been called “The song before the sunrise” (“Dayspring” v. 78). It is in four parts:

1. Praise to God for keeping His promise to David by raising up “a horn of salvation.” The imagery is of an animal tossing its horns in a display of power (vv. 68-71; Ps. 18:2, 132:17). The Davidic “horn” (king) would be raised up in a display of power at the birth of Jesus—a miraculous birth physically through the virgin Mary and by lineage through Joseph in the line of David (Luke 3:23-31). His coming would bring salvation for His people.
2. Praise to God for keeping His oath to Abraham after Abraham’s unequalled example of obedience on Mt. Moriah, where he was willing to obey God and offer his son Isaac on the altar. It was there that God swore that Abraham’s descendants would form a nation who would defeat their enemies and rule over them (vv. 72-75; Gen. 22:16-18). Their King was coming.
3. Praise for John, the “prophet of the Highest” who was to prepare the way of the Lord to give His people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins (vv. 76-77).
4. Praise for the Rising Sun (the Dayspring, “the Sunrise from on high,” NASB) who would shine on those who dwelt in spiritual darkness and the shadow of death, and guide them into the way of peace (vv. 78-79; John 1:4-9; Heb. 2:14-15).

Application To Us Today

Throughout the Scriptures we see God making some promises through direct revelation, some through the prophets, and some through angels, like those that Zacharias received in the temple. That's the big picture in the realm of God's historical purpose.

The Bible contains many promises that are meant for us as individuals as well. He has promised you that He will save you when you recognize your need to be delivered from the penalty of sin and when you personally receive the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior. Have you believed that promise?

In addition to the promise that relates to eternity, God has made promises for Christian believers for our life here on earth which are ours to claim by faith every day. According to 2 Peter 1:4, Christians have been given “exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.”

Consider a few promises (some conditional, some unconditional) for us as believers:

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| Psalm 4:3 | “But know that the LORD has set apart for Himself him who is godly; the LORD will hear when I call to Him.” |
| Psalm 9:9 | “The LORD also will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble.” |
| Isaiah 26:3 | “You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.” |
| John 14:2-3 | Jesus said, “I go to prepare a place for you. . . . I will come again and receive you to Myself.” |
| 2 Thessalonians 3:3 | “But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one.” |
| Hebrews 13:5 | Jesus said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” |
| 1 John 1:9 | “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” |
| Revelation 22:20 | Jesus said, “Surely I am coming quickly.” |

JOHN ^{THE} BAPTIST

Prophet of the Highest

EXAM BOOKLET

AK '11 (1 UNIT) JB

STUDENT NAME (PLEASE PRINT)

ADDRESS

CITY, STATE, ZIP

COURSE GRADE: _____

INSTRUCTOR



Exam developed by Emmaus Correspondence School, founded in 1942.

A NOTE ON THE EXAMS

The exams are designed to check your knowledge of the course material and the Scriptures. After you have studied a chapter, review the exam questions for that lesson. If you have difficulty in answering the questions, re-read the material. If questions contain a Scripture reference, you may use your Bible to help you answer them. If your instructor has provided a single page Answer Sheet, record your answer on that sheet. This exam contains the following types of questions:

MULTIPLE CHOICE

You will be asked to write in the letter of the correct answer at the space on the right. Here is an example:

The color of grass is

- A. blue
- B. green
- C. orange

 B

WHAT DO YOU SAY?

Questions headed this way are designed to help you express your ideas and feelings. You may freely state your own opinions in answer to such questions.

RETURNING THE EXAM

See the back of this exam booklet for instructions on returning your exam for grading.

DO NOT PHOTOCOPY THESE EXAM PAGES

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CHAPTER 1 EXAM

BORN TO BE A MESSENGER

EXAM GRADE

Before starting this exam, write your name and address on the front of this Exam Booklet.

Directions: Read each question carefully and write the letter of the correct answer in the blank space on the right. Use the separate answer sheet if provided.

1. The main role of John the Baptist was
 - A. to bring joy to his parents in their old age
 - B. to announce the imminent arrival of the promised Messiah
 - C. to announce coming relief from Roman oppression _____

2. At the time John was born,
 - A. the Jews no longer believed God would send the promised Messiah
 - B. there were some who realized the coming of God's Messiah was near
 - C. the nation of Israel was closely following God's ways _____

3. Luke may have learned the details of the births of John and Jesus from
 - A. Elizabeth
 - B. Zacharias
 - C. Mary _____

4. _____ was the angel sent by God to bring good news to Zacharias.
 - A. Gabriel
 - B. Michael
 - C. Lucifer _____

5. The angel told Zacharias that his son, John, would
 - A. prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah
 - B. be a re-incarnation of Elijah
 - C. become the high priest _____

- 6. Because Zacharias did not believe the angel, he
 - A. forfeited the right to be the father of this special child
 - B. would not be able to speak until after the child was born
 - C. would be struck dead as soon as he left the temple_____

- 7. When Mary went to visit Elizabeth,
 - A. the baby in Elizabeth’s womb leapt for joy
 - B. Elizabeth went into seclusion
 - C. Mary was surprised to learn that she was pregnant_____

- 8. When Zacharias insisted that his son’s name was John, he was able to speak again, and he immediately
 - A. blamed God for making him temporarily dumb
 - B. praised God and prophesied about his son and the coming Messiah
 - C. welcomed everyone to the party_____

- 9. In sending the Messiah, God was keeping His promises to
 - A. Adam and Noah
 - B. Moses and Joshua
 - C. David and Abraham_____

- 10. The apostle Peter wrote that _____ are the recipients of God’s “exceeding great and precious promises.”
 - A. only the Jews
 - B. only the Gentiles
 - C. Christian believers_____

WHAT DO YOU SAY?

As you think about the promises God has made to His people, name one (other than those referenced in the course) that is particularly meaningful to you, and why.
