

John the Baptist

Passages: Mt 3:2, 4; 11:3, 11; 14:1–12; Mk 1:4–6; Lk 1; 3:4–14; 5:33; Jn 3:27–29

Memory Verse

“He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3:30)

Knowledge of God’s Will [God’s Word]	Knowledge of God [God’s Divine Nature]	Good Work [Behavior]
John’s baptism and his messages were both a call to repentance and to bear fruit worthy of repentance.	God is a living God who fulfills His plans according to His will.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Truly repent by confessing our sins and bearing fruit.2. Stand firm in our beliefs and our faith in God.

Overview

Events and Spiritual Teachings

- A. His Background
 1. Prophecy from an angel
 2. His birth
- B. His Life and Character
 1. A life of simplicity
 2. A life of boldness
 3. A life of humility
- C. His Role
 1. His work
 2. His baptism
- D. His Doubts
- E. His Beheading

Life Application

1. Repentance (Mt 3:2)
2. Bearing Fruits Worthy of Repentance (Lk 3:7–14)

Memory Verse

Conclusion: Be fearless in the face of persecution and death, as John the Baptist was. Be bold in saying, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21). Stand firm in our faith to the end!

Introduction

Throughout history, God moved many prophets to speak prophecies concerning the Messiah. Let us take a look at a few passages and see how the Bible describes John the Baptist.

- “As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the LORD; make His paths straight. Every valley shall be filled. And every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight. And the rough ways smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God”’” (Lk 3:4–6).
- “He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,’ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Lk 1:17).
- “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” (Mt 11:11).

A. His Background (Lk 1:6)

Let’s first review what we have learned about John’s parents, Zacharias and Elizabeth. Both were of the family of Aaron, and Zacharias served the Lord as a priest during the reign of Herod in Judea. We learned in lesson one that “Zacharias” means, “the Lord remembers,” and Elizabeth, “the oath of God.” They had been born and raised in homes of priestly families who served the temple in Jerusalem.

1. Prophecy from an angel (Lk 1:8–17)

While Zacharias was performing his priestly service before God, the angel Gabriel suddenly appeared to him, “standing on the right side of the altar of incense” (v. 11). Though frightening, it must have been amazing to be in the presence of an angel. Gabriel told Zacharias not to be afraid, assuring him that his petition had been heard. His wife would bear him a son, and he would name him John. Not only that, he would have joy and gladness, and many would rejoice at the birth of John. Clearly, Zacharias’ child would not simply be any child. He would be the forerunner of the Messiah, as predicted by the prophet Malachi (Mal 3:1; 4:5–6).

2. His birth (Lk 1:57–79)

John the Baptist’s birth was unlike most. Zacharias had been mute for the duration of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. But on the day of John’s circumcision, at the moment of John’s naming, Zacharias’ tongue loosened and he spoke, fulfilling the prophecy spoken by the angel (Lk 1:20)! This miracle made Zacharias and the people clearly aware that the Lord’s hand was with the child. The name “John” means, “God is gracious.” The meaning of this God-given name and the loosening of Zacharias’ tongue during John’s naming sent a powerful message to everyone. Through these miraculous events, God was already preparing the people’s hearts for the gospel.

B. His Life and Character

The angel told Zacharias that John would be “great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb” (Lk 1:15). True to the angel’s words, John lived a life dedicated entirely to God’s purpose. The Bible adds that “the hand of the Lord was with him,” and that as he grew, he “became strong in spirit” (Lk 1:66, 80). The angel’s proclamation that John would “drink neither wine nor strong drink” was one of the Nazirite vows. Like Samson, John was an unusual case in that he was a Nazirite for his entire life. This meant that he had been separated to serve the Lord.

1. A Life of Simplicity

John the Baptist lived in Judea, between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. He led a simple life, wearing clothing made from camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey (Mt 3:4; Mk 1:4–6). *(Note: Locusts, or akrides, are large grasshoppers still eaten in the East, not to be confused with the fruit of the "locust tree.")*

John the Baptist also led an upright life. He often fasted (Lk 5:33), and tax collectors and soldiers would seek him for advice on how to act correctly before God. Let us turn to Luke 3:12–14. John taught them to do their jobs in a righteous manner. This teaching is also important and relevant for us today—we should not engage in dishonest actions or deal with others immorally.

2. A Life of Boldness

When the multitudes came to John to receive his baptism, he spoke boldly about their hypocrisy, calling them a "brood of vipers" (Lk 3:7). John the Baptist also spoke fearlessly with courage when he rebuked King Herod in Mark 6:18, saying, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." He knew that by rebuking the king and telling the truth, his life would be at stake, but he refused to waver in his righteousness. As Christian soldiers, we all need this boldness when speaking the truth.

3. A Life of Humility

When people came to John the Baptist to receive baptism, he acknowledged that a mightier One would come to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Lk 3:15–16). He recognized that his role had been graciously given to him so that He could point people to Jesus. While John's ministry called people to repentance, Christ's ministry would sanctify and renew the life of believers. Therefore, Christ's ministry would be "mightier" than John's. Humility is really knowing who God is. The more we humble ourselves before God, the more we see how great and majestic His power and glory are.

C. His Role

John's mission was to declare God's message of repentance to prepare the hearts of the people for the coming of the Lord Jesus. Like Elijah, who turned the hearts of the Israelites back to God through his faithful perseverance and divine power, John also carried out a powerful ministry. He announced to the people the coming of the Savior who would deliver them from their sins.

1. His work

At that time, "the word of God came to John [and] he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins (Lk 3:2–3). Filled with the Spirit, John clearly understood his work: To "go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Lk 1:17). Much later, when his own disciples complained about the numbers flocking to Jesus Christ, John chided them gently saying, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). He understood that he himself was of no importance, but told his disciples, "I have been sent before Him" (Jn 3:28).

2. His baptism

John's baptism of repentance led people to Christ and prepared them for His coming. When

Jesus Christ came, though, the people had to put their trust in Him in order to receive atonement through His blood. Therefore, after Jesus Christ died on the cross and resurrected, those who had previously accepted John's message were also required to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.

D. His Doubts

When John the Baptist was thrown into prison, he began to have doubts. He sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" (Mt 11:3). Jesus replied, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me" (Mt 11:4–6).

Jesus plainly answered John's doubts by telling him of all the wonderful acts that were taking place, visual evidence proving that Jesus was indeed the prophesied Messiah and the only Savior. At times, when we doubt God or wonder whether or not we have truly been saved, we can read the promises recorded in the Bible and recall the grace of God in our lives. Don't shift your sight from Jesus, but rather, draw closer and fix your eyes on Him in the moments when you begin to doubt.

E. His Beheading

Let us study Matthew 14:1–12 to learn about the details surrounding John the Baptist's beheading.

To mark his birthday, Herod celebrated with a great feast in the palace. Herodias presented her daughter to dance before the guests. Her dance pleased Herod greatly, so he offered to grant any request that she asked him. At her mother's prompting, she asked for John the Baptist's head, which agitated King Herod. He did not want to put John to death for fear of the multitude (v. 5). Yet, he could not retract his oath nor deny the request. That night, John was beheaded in prison and his head brought on a platter for the young woman. Scripture does not record what happened to John's head, but his disciples came and buried the body. So, John the Baptist's life came to a tragic and abrupt ending.

We must understand in our hearts the reality that even someone as important as a forerunner for Jesus Christ was not guaranteed a smooth-sailing life. John the Baptist demonstrated great faith in his mission and in God, but in the end, he was imprisoned and beheaded by his thirties. Likewise, we have no guarantee of a long life or great accomplishments in the church ministry. However, we should continue to serve with joy if God is willing to use us to shine for Him and bring others to Christ.

Life Application

John lived a life of purpose: to introduce others to Jesus. Furthermore, he recognized the importance of repenting of one's sins in order to live for Christ.

1. Repentance (Mt 3:2)

John the Baptist preached a message of repentance: confess your sins, receive baptism, and bear fruit. He boldly proclaimed, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Mt 3:2). He also recognized when people came to receive baptism but did not have a heart of repentance: "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, 'Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance'" (Mt 3:7–8).

The Greek word for “repent” means “to change one’s mind.” The Jewish religious leaders believed that they were saved by their own righteousness, which came from their obedience to the law. When John told them to “bear fruits worthy of repentance,” he was telling them to change their minds and admit that they could not save themselves. Only a Savior could bring them salvation.

First, let us examine what it means to repent. Then, we will learn how we can restore our relationship with God when we have sinned.

a. Confess your sin

Nobody likes to admit when they are wrong. But the Bible tells us, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 Jn 1:8). Denying our sin does not help us. We may fool ourselves into thinking that we are pure and righteous, but we still stand guilty before God. Rather, we must come before Him, tell Him that we are sorry and determine not to return to sin. God’s love is so great that He will freely pardon us when we repent: “If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:9).

b. Let the truth be our guide

The Bible is our moral standard; it helps us see where we have gone wrong. Like a mirror, God’s word shows us our shortcomings so that we may correct ourselves (Jas 1:22–25). Like a double-edged sword, God’s word strengthens our faith but also exposes sins that we may not even be aware of (Heb 4:12). We need to examine ourselves constantly with the help of scriptural teachings. Then, we will not be led astray by sin’s deceitfulness.

c. Fast and pray

We can see from the Bible that sin and repentance often go hand in hand with fasting and prayer. When the people of Nineveh learned that God was going to destroy their great city in forty days, they immediately fasted and prayed. The king even issued a proclamation, “Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water” (Jon 3:7). For their complete repentance, the Bible tells us that “God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it” (Jon 3:10).

d. Walk in the light

True repentance involves not only confession, but also a change of heart and of actions (Isa 55:7). In our daily lives, we must shun evil and practice righteousness. “If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn 1:6–7) (*A New Life in Christ*, Week 9).¹

From these four steps, we can see that repentance is more than just regret. It requires a change in our lifestyle.

2. Bear Fruits Worthy of Repentance (Lk 3:7–14)

¹ TJC Department of Literary Ministry, “Week 9: Repentance”, *A New Life in Christ*, (Malaysia: True Jesus Church, 2018), <http://ia.tjc.org/elibrary/ContentDetail.aspx?ItemID=1034&langid=1>, “Walk in the Light”.

Genuine repentance will bring forth fruit worthy of repentance. Each “fruit” we bear is the outward expression of our deep inner conviction. Thus, if we do not bear fruit, then we have not truly repented. When we sincerely repent, or change our minds, we are willing to obey our Lord’s teachings.

Let us study Luke 3:7–14 to understand what it means to repent. Notice the three exhortations to the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers. John the Baptist was teaching them about the fruits that grow on the tree of repentance.

- a. **First**, to the multitude, “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’” (v. 11).
- b. **Second**, to the tax collectors, “Collect no more than what is appointed for you” (v. 13).
- c. **Third**, to the soldiers, “Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages” (v. 14).

In these three instances, John spoke in reference to their possessions and their money. Jesus said, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Lk 12:34). John asked the multitude to give of what they had. That means if we have clothing and food, we need to share them with those who lack them. John then instructed the tax collectors not to take more than their appointed share. Lastly, John taught the soldiers not to intimidate or bear false witness and to be content with what they had been given.

From these, we know that we bear fruit worthy of repentance when we:

- Give freely;
- Take only what is ours;
- Deal with others truthfully and peacefully; and
- Are content.

We need to trust that God will provide, and we must “be content with such things as [we] have. For [God] has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’” (Heb 13:5).

Discussion Questions

- In which areas do you need to bear fruits worthy of repentance?
- Which of your possessions can you give to those in need?
- The Bible teaches us to be content with what we have. In what ways can we truly live a lifestyle that reflects contentment?

Check for Understanding

1. **What was John the Baptist’s family background?** His parents Zacharias and Elizabeth were descended from the family of Aaron and described as a god-fearing couple.
2. **What message did John the Baptist preach?** John’s mission was to declare God’s message of repentance to prepare the hearts of the people for the coming of the Lord Jesus. He said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Mt 3:2).
3. **How do we know that John the Baptist was a humble worker?** He understood that he was only preparing the way for Jesus Christ, the mightier One (Mt 3:11). He also recognized that Jesus was the Christ and that he must decrease while Jesus must increase (Jn 3:28, 30).
4. **How did John the Baptist work boldly for God?** He courageously confronted the Pharisees about their sinful behavior (Mt 3:7–9). In addition, he boldly rebuked King Herod for his sins, even though this action could lead to death (Mt 14:1–4).

5. What does it mean to truly repent? We must “change our mind” and our lifestyle; simply regretting our past sins is not enough. When we truly repent, we will bear fruits worthy of repentance.

Memory Verse

“He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3:30)

Meaning

John the Baptist descended from a family of priests, the most respected order in Israel. The Scriptures tell us that he was filled with the Holy Spirit since birth, yet he referred to himself as only “the voice of one crying in the wilderness” (Jn 1:23). Can you see his humility? When John the Baptist preached repentance, multitudes came to the Jordan River to receive his baptism.

One day, John’s disciples came to tell him that Jesus was receiving much more attention than he was. But John replied, “You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ,’ but, ‘I have been sent before Him’” (Jn 3:28). Then, John the Baptist continued, saying, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (Jn 3:30). John the Baptist did not engage in a power struggle, nor did he bear ill will towards Jesus Christ. Rather, he demonstrated meekness and lowliness of heart. That was the greatness of John the Baptist.

We all need to have this mindset. Are we decreasing, while Christ is increasing? How much of God truly lives in us?

Conclusion

John lived his life entirely for God. Miraculously conceived, he was set apart for a purposeful life. His baptism of repentance taught the multitudes to repent of one’s sins in order to live a holy and godly life. Moreover, his life is an example of demonstrating humility within zealously for God’s work. John proclaimed Jesus as the coming Messiah fearlessly, his message bold, strong, and full of faith. He courageously confronted the Pharisees about their sinful behavior. And he died with conviction after correcting a king’s wrongdoing.

We are blessed to live in areas that exercise religious freedom; it is not often that we encounter persecution for our beliefs. Yet, John the Baptist’s death teaches us what it means to stand firm in our faith, regardless of the situation. As believers of Christ, our faith will be put to the test in some way, sooner or later. Will we be fearless in facing persecution and death like John the Baptist? Do we have the boldness to say, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21)? Can we stand firm in our faith to the end?

Lesson 3 Homework Assignment Answer Key

1. What kind of mindset is the memory verse teaching us to have?
It is teaching us to have a humble mindset, where Christ increases in our hearts while we ourselves decrease, so that God can truly live in us.
2. What characteristics can we see in John the Baptist's life?
Simple and upright; bold; humble.
3. Pick one of the above characteristics and briefly explain how we can see it in John's life.
Simple and upright: he wore clothing of camel's hair and ate only locusts and honey. He also fasted often, and many came to him for advice on how to live their lives before God.

Bold: He spoke boldly of the Pharisee's hypocrisy when the multitudes came to him for baptism, calling them a "brood of vipers" (Lk 3:7). He also rebuked King Herod despite the threat to his life.

Humble: He did not seek to exalt himself. Rather, he knew that Jesus was the promised Messiah and understood that his role was to point people towards Jesus, not himself. So, he told others that a mightier One than he would come to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.
4. What was the difference between John's baptism and the baptism Jesus' disciples performed?
John's baptism of repentance led people to Christ and prepared them for His coming. When Jesus Christ came, though, the people had to put their trust in Him in order to receive atonement through His blood. The baptism Jesus' disciples performed was for the remission of sins.
5. What are the steps to repentance? Briefly explain each.
 - a. *Confess your sin: We stand guilty before God regardless of our own feelings on the matter. We must come before Him and tell Him we are sorry and determine not to return to sin.*
 - b. *Let the truth be our guide: The Bible is our moral standard and helps us see where we have gone wrong. We need to examine ourselves constantly using its teachings so that we will not be led astray by sin's deceitfulness.*
 - c. *Fast and pray: Sin and repentance often go hand in hand with fasting and prayer, as seen in many biblical examples, such as with the people of Nineveh.*
 - d. *Walk in the light: True repentance is not simply confession, but also a change of heart and of actions. We must shun evil and practice righteousness in our daily lives.*
6. What action can you take this week to begin to bear fruit worthy of repentance?
Personal answers. (Try to encourage "actionable" responses, responses that can be checked off or measured, rather than vague replies.)