

Last time, we concluded John's Prologue. In the Prologue we saw the transition of the Son of God from His pre-incarnate person to His intended relationship to man as the Life / Light-giver. At this point in John's narrative we are not given the means for this accomplishment. However, in verses 6 through 14 we are given the wonderful news of how man is to be the recipient of this life-changing experience. John, the baptizer was to be the man who would announce the wonderful news of Jesus Christ's arrival on the miserable scene of humanity - the scene of man's utter depravity and hopelessness in a condition of sin.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. John 1:6.

There had been over 400 years of silence - the Silence - from Jehovah. Judah, the intended light, to the gentiles had fallen into a terrible state in more than one area. Malachi the prophet wrote of Judah's depravity just before the Silence. Temple worship had become an offence to Jehovah. They were offering sacrifices with blemish.¹ They had robbed Jehovah of His tithe.²

Marriage was under attack. Divorce had become as easy as a man merely getting a court letter of divorce - an exercise of relative ease for the man. This was a major sin in the eyes of Jehovah because they had secularized marriage leaving Jehovah out of the "contract."³ Marriage has been clearly defined as a union made in heaven by the Lord. It was, in essence a three-way union. So binding was this union that the term "they shall become one flesh" was used by the Lord. Perhaps referring to the most intimate physical act of marriage, but I rather think it refers more to the person-bond that is to happen where the man and woman is so connected that they are one - please refer to the creative act of the Lord making woman from the rib of her husband. This divorce problem had dramatically affected the children as it does today.

Such was the deplorable condition of Judah when Jesus Christ, incarnate - God in flesh appeared on the scene. I'm not through with Malachi yet. Note the last two verses in Malachi:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: [6] And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse. Malachi 4:5-6.

Interesting verse. This is a reference to John's ministry. Turn with me to Matthew 11:13-15:

For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. [14] And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. [15] He who has ears, let him hear. NIV.

Here Jesus applies Malachi's reference of Elijah to John the baptizer. A look at the national need to which John was going to minister. There was not only a complete breakdown of the Jewish religion but right down to the family unit itself. We think mostly of

¹ Malachi, Chapter 1.

² Malachi 3:8, 9.

³ Malachi 2:13 - 16.

John's ministry of being the witness to the Light, Jesus Christ. But according to Malachi other matters needed to be attended to before men could be drawn to the Lord. We've already seen reference to the total decay of temple worship. But this decay was broader than temple worship. As we have already noted, the family was under attack - the fathers were turned away from their children and the children from their fathers. Divorce was rampant.

The word "turn" in our passage is also used in Malachi 3:7 where it has the sense of reconciliation. Literally the heart, in this passage, is turned back, in the case of the sinning Jew, to Jehovah. In the case of Jehovah, His heart is always loving and concerned for His people but upon the return of the Jewish heart, He is now disposed to bless His people rather than discipline them.

So, again, not only was Judah living in apostasy, but the family unit was under attack. The end of Judah as a nation would have been premature had it not been for divine intervention and that intervention was in the person of John the baptizer.

Please note that during the first part of John's ministry was that of baptizing the repentant.

Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, [6] And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins. Matthew 3:5-6.

What a sad commentary on the sacrificial rituals of the day - they had become completely ineffective in dealing with matters of the sinful heart.⁴ Jehovah was fulfilling His promise that the hearts of His people would be brought in right relationship with each other and Himself. We know little of this part of John's ministry because it was not the thrust of the Gospels to develop it. Rather, we are turned to John's other - main ministry that of being a witness of the Light.

Let's take a look at what an angel of the Lord said of John to his father-to-be:

And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. [12] And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. [13] But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. [14] And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. [15] For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. [16] And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. [17] And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, 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. Luke 1:11-17.

So we see that John had a two-fold ministry. First, he was to oversee a great revival in Judah (vs. 16). Within that ministry - the revival of Jewish believers in Judah was the ministry of family renewal (vs. 17a). Part of this revival was to prepare the Jews for the coming of Jesus Christ. Malachi makes reference to these Old Testament believers:

⁴ Read Malachi 1:10.

Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name. [17] And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him. Malachi 3:16-17.

The Lord had not forgotten these believers. These were the lost sheep of Israel.⁵ He certainly was not referring the apostate Jew who would eventually reject Jesus Christ as Messiah. Jehovah had told Elijah that He always had kept a remnant who trusted in Him⁶ but apostate Judaism of Jesus' and John's day was so oppressive that a work had to be done to prepare these believers. Nathaniel was a good example of such a believer - his spiritual condition had not been tainted by apostate Judaism.⁷

Second, John was to be a witness of the Light. For that we must look at a couple of passages:

The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. [8] He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. John 1:7-8.

The Jewish leaders were not unmindful of Old Testament prophesy. John had gained some notoriety in his ministry. People were getting in right relationship with the Lord - this must have been witnessed by the leaders. John had made quite an impact on Judah by this time so it was time for the leaders to find out who this man was.

And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No. [22] Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? [23] He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias. John 1:21-23

They had conjectured that John could have been a couple of possibilities: Elijah, the prophet or *the* prophet of Deuteronomy 18:15, 18, 19.⁸ John could have taken upon himself fulfillment of Malachi's prophesy but humility would not allow it.⁹ Rather, he quoted Isaiah 40:3.

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

This was to be his main thrust, although Judah's revival certainly was not insignificant.

⁵ Matthew 10:6; Matthew 15:24.

⁶ 1 Kings 19:18.

⁷ John 1:45 - 51. Jesus, Himself, said that Nathanael was a man who was without guile - a man who had been cleansed by Jehovah and had a regenerate heart.

⁸ Actually, the prophet of Deuteronomy was Jesus Christ, Himself.

⁹ See ch. 1:27.

He immediately turned the leaders attention to the main reason for preparing the hearts of Jewish believers *and unbelievers* - that of receiving Jesus as the Christ.

The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. [8] He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. [9] That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. John 1:7-9.

Note the double reference to John's witness (vs. 8 and vs. 9). This lends great emphasis to John's mission - that of declaring the Christ. The problem was that the religious, and for that matter, the populous had a view of the coming Christ that just was not correct. Most looked for a political leader who would, through miraculous means - not unlike Moses - deliver them from the oppressive Roman rule. Jesus' sign played up to this misconception to those who were superficial in their following of Jesus. Although the signs were to validate His person as the God-man - they were using them to establish Jesus as the panacea for the woes of Judah - both political and personal well-being. Even the disciples echoed the political misconception when they were vying for a high position in Jesus' coming kingdom.¹⁰

So it was John's ministry to point to Jesus the Light, the Lamb, the baptizer of the Holy Spirit (and fire), the coming Judge of Judah. He was not the Light, but the herald of the Light. Jesus was the true Light - it was He that had come into the world - a reference to His incarnation and initiation in His work of reconciliation. That Light was given to every man in the world but as we will see next time not every man will receive it.

Comparison: John's time and ours.

- Believers of John's day needed revival - Christianity today has wandered from the Lord and needs to be turned back to Him.
- Marriage of John's day was suffering from a high divorce rate - the divorce rate among Christians has equaled that of unbelievers.
- The hearts of parents and children were turned away from each other - the same condition exists today - even within families of faith.
- There was a false concept of who the Christ was to be - today's pop-Christ view does not represent who the Lord is.

John was the prophet / minister to the faltering faith and families of his day. Where are our ministers? Please read this: **"Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."** Matthew 11:11. Jesus is saying that you and I are these "least in the kingdom of heaven." We have an important mission to perform: be a witness to the Light of the world - both to the unbeliever and to the believer.

¹⁰ Mark 10:37 - 44.