

Preparing the Way

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Date: 10 January 2021

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[0 : 0 0] I don't know about you, but I love a good quiz show. And my favorite of all time is Sale of the Century. I don't know if you remember that.

It used to be called Sale of the Century. I'm going to ask you a question, a Sale of the Century type question, straight from Sunday school. So here it is. Who am I?

I was born 2,000 years ago in a town of Judea. My birth was prophesied. In the Old Testament, later announced by angels, people everywhere in Israel flocked to hear my teaching, but I was ultimately put to death by the Roman authorities.

It was said of me that among those born of women, there is no one greater. It sounds like Jesus, doesn't it? And I probably tricked you by saying it was Sunday school.

But actually, all of that is the Bible's description for John the Baptist. Have a look at verse 1. I think Eileen did a fantastic job with this.

[1 : 0 3] I'll have a go myself. In the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod, Tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip, Tetrarch of Ituria and Trachonitus, and Lysianus, Tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John.

Luke mentions Caesar's governors, the local bigwigs, just to get to John. If we were trying to guess who the greatest regular person ever is, we might say Mother Teresa or Nelson Mandela.

But Jesus himself comes in over the top and says, among those born of women, there is no one greater than John. You see, God used to speak all the time in the Old Testament.

But then for 400 years, there was silence. Imagine 400 years of silence. Imagine it was the year 1620, God speaking, and then suddenly...

Is that awkward now? Imagine 400 years of that sort of silence. And then all of a sudden, verse 2, the word of God came to John.

[2 : 1 5] We call John the Baptist, but the Old Testament calls him the voice. Verse 4, as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, a voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.

And the way to think about John is like a siren. Sirens are loud, they get your attention, and so is John. Because he is preparing people to meet the Lord when he arrives.

According to the voice, the preparation that we all need is verse 3. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

You see, that is what people need to do when Jesus arrives. When John's birth was announced, the angel said that John will grow up and turn the hearts of people back to God.

That is literally what repentance means. It's doing a 180 on your old life, turning back to God, trying to live for him. Water baptism, which John provided, that is just a way to symbolize repentance.

[3 : 26] It's a way to express to God how sorry you are, and that you want to be washed clean from your old life, and now to live for him. And actually, in our passage, it's more than just the people who are preparing themselves.

In fact, the whole earth does a 180. Have a look at verse 5. The valleys stand up out of respect.

The mountains, they do the polite thing. They bow down. They lower themselves. Crooked ways, they become straight. The rough ways become smooth. You see, that is how a good creation responds when its creator comes by.

Verse 6, all people will see the salvation of God. Jesus is coming. Jesus is coming.