

John the Baptist

I told you before about the real Christmas story, about when Jesus was born, didn't I? But at that time I didn't have the time to tell you another story that is very closely connected with the birth of Jesus. It is about the birth of the cousin of Jesus, of John the Baptist. So I today let's talk about when John the Baptist was born and also other things that the Bible tells us about John when he grew up. Would you like that? Okay.

But where in the Bible do we find the story of John the Baptist? Well, we find it in the first four books of the New Testament, in the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. (The book of John was written by another man named John, the apostle John, not by John the Baptist.) These 4 books are called the 4 Gospels. "Gospel" means "good news", and these 4 books (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) tell the good news about how Jesus made a way for us to be right with God and then be able to go be with Him someday. And the story of John the Baptist is connected with the story of Jesus. So let's look at it now.

All right. The story of John the Baptist really starts before he was born. And only the Gospel of Luke tells us this part. The story starts with his parents. So let's start there. His parents were Zacharias and Elizabeth. They lived up in the hill country of Judea, which is in the southern part of Israel. They were very godly people who followed what the Lord said to do. But they had no children at all, which, of course, was an unhappy thing. And they got older and older and still had no children. Finally they got too old to have children at all.

Now, Zacharias was a priest. That means that his great-great-great-great-grandfather was Aaron. You remember Aaron, don't you? Aaron was the brother of Moses and was a great-grandson of Jacob's son Levi. Moses and Aaron were the ones that the Lord had take the children of Israel out of Egypt. Aaron was the first priest of the Jews and was their first high priest as well. And all Jewish priests were descended from him. But let's get back to Zacharias, one of the descendants of Aaron!

Well, as I just said, Zacharias was a priest. But there were so many Jewish priests, that they had to take turns serving in God's temple in Jerusalem. And it was at the time when it was Zacharias' turn to be able to serve in the temple that our story begins. Now, one day it was Zacharias' turn to do something very special there. It was his turn to go inside the temple and burn incense on the beautiful golden altar of incense, to burn the incense there before the Lord. Of course, he couldn't see the Lord, but it was the Lord's temple, and hundreds of years before then the Lord had said that incense was to be burned inside there twice a day at the same time that a sacrifice was made outside. Now, the temple building had a big courtyard in front of it, and lots of people would come and pray there in the courtyard at this special time. And the incense smoke going up in the air inside of the temple was a sort of picture of the prayers being given outside of the temple, a picture of these prayers going up to God in heaven. (The Lord God likes it when we pray to Him. In fact, the Bible says our prayers are like sweet smelling incense to Him.)

Anyway, that day Zacharias went into the temple to burn the incense. But what do you think

happened while he was there? Why, suddenly there was an angel of the Lord standing right there beside the altar of incense! And when Zacharias saw the angel, he got all scared! An angel!!

But the angel said to him, "Don't be afraid, Zacharias. Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will have a son for you, and you will name him John."

Wow! Imagine that!

Then the angel went on talking to Zacharias, "You will have great happiness, and many others will be very glad that he is born. And your son will be great in the sight of the Lord. And he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he's born. And he will have many of the children of Israel turn to the Lord their God."

(The children of Israel are the Jews, aren't they? God's special people. Zacharias and Elizabeth were Jews, of course.)

And the angel said, "And your son shall go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to get the people ready for the Lord."

(Now, what does that mean?! Well, I'll tell you in just a little while!)

Well, Zacharias had been listening to the angel, but now he said, "How can I know this will really happen. After all, I am an old man, and my wife is old, too."

And then the angel answered Zacharias and said to him, "I am Gabriel. And I stand before God. And I've been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news."

And the angel said, "Look here; you won't be able to speak until this happens, because you didn't believe what I told you. But what I told you will happen when it's supposed to happen."

Well, Zacharias hadn't believed the angel Gabriel who had come to him and had told him this. And Zacharias had then asked Gabriel how he could know this would really happen. So now he has a sign, doesn't he?! A sign that he won't be able to talk until it does happen!

Well, the people had been outside the temple praying, but now they were wondering why Zacharias was taking so long in burning the incense. But then Zacharias finally came out of the temple -- and he couldn't talk! But he made motions to the people, and some way they understood that he had had some sort of vision.

Then when Zacharias' turn was over for serving in various ways at the temple, he went back to his own home. And guess what?! After a while old Elizabeth realized she was going to have a baby! Yes! Just like the angel had said! That was a miracle, wasn't it?! And she was so happy, and she said, "The Lord has remembered me!"

Well, before Elizabeth's baby was born, the angel Gabriel went and talked to a young woman named Mary. And Gabriel told Mary that she would be the mother of Jesus and that someday He would be a great King forever. And Mary believed Gabriel, even though she didn't have a husband. Gabriel told her the Lord would just make Jesus grow inside of her.

Then Gabriel told Mary, "And your old cousin Elizabeth is going to have a baby, too!"

Well! Mary went to visit Elizabeth, and when Mary had gotten there and greeted her, Elizabeth's baby jumped inside of her and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And then Elizabeth some way knew that Mary was going to be the mother of the Christ.

"You are blessed!" Elizabeth shouted out. "And your baby is blessed! Why, my baby jumped for joy when he heard your voice." (Remember that Gabriel had told Zacharias that his baby would be filled with the Holy Spirit before he was born? Now this had happened!)

Then Mary began praising the Lord.

And Mary stayed there with Elizabeth and Zacharias for 3 months and then went back to her own home. (About Mary and her baby are what we call the Christmas story, isn't it? But we're just going to talk about John the Baptist today.)

Well, Elizabeth's miracle baby was born, and all of her neighbors and relatives rejoiced with her. This was a happy miracle, wasn't it?! And when the baby was 8 days old, they had a special ceremony for him and that was when he was to get his name. And the people there wanted to name the baby Zacharias after his father.

But Elizabeth said, "No. He's to be named John."

Then the people said to her, "But none of your relatives are named John."

And now we find out that evidently Gabriel had not only given Zacharias the sign of not being able to talk, but Zacharias evidently couldn't hear either. Because the people made signs to Zacharias to ask him what the baby was to be named.

Zacharias wanted something to write on, and they gave it to him, and he wrote, "His name is John." And the people were all surprised at this.

And right away Zacharias was able to speak again! That was another miracle, wasn't it?! And Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he opened his mouth and began praising God and prophesying.

Part of Zacharias' prophecy was about his baby son John. He said, "And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Lord, because you will go before the Lord to get a way ready for Him."

Now this is like what the angel Gabriel had told him, wasn't it? And the angel had also said that John would come in the spirit and power of Elijah, hadn't he? We'll talk about this in just a minute.

And Zacharias said more about baby John. He said, "You will tell the people about how to be saved by having their sins forgiven. God is merciful!"

And everyone who lived around there got sort of scared, and they began talking about this and telling everyone what had happened. And all over the hill country of Judea people heard about these miracles. And people said, "What kind of a child is this?!"

Well, John grew up, and he also became very godly. And he went and lived in the desert until it was time for him to do what he had been born to do.

And what had John been born to do? Why, to prepare the way for the Lord. So now let's talk about what that means. It may be a little confusing, so try to listen carefully.

You see, 400 years before this, in the very last 2 verses of the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi had said that the Lord was going to send Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord. (Remember, Elijah had been a very great prophet of the Lord.) Well, the angel Gabriel had not said that John would be Elijah, but that John would come in the spirit and power of Elijah. And what did this mean? Well, when they had grown up to be men, John was going to start telling people about Jesus before Jesus came preaching and teaching and performing miracles. Jesus is God as well as a man, isn't He? And God loves us so much that Jesus, the Son of God, had come to make a way for us to be able to go to heaven and be with Him when we die by dying on the cross for our sins and then being made alive again. But before Jesus would do this, John would tell people that Jesus was coming and that they should turn away from their sins, and get ready for the Lord. This was what it meant by John's coming in the spirit and power of Elijah and getting people ready for the Lord. So now let's go on and see how John got people ready for Jesus.

Now, I'd said that John had gone to live in the desert, hadn't I? Well, hundreds of years before this, the prophet Isaiah had said, "The voice of him calls in the desert, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'" And now that prophecy was going to be fulfilled. Because some way God told John what he was to do. So John began preaching in the desert.

John told people, "Repent!"

("Repent" means to stop doing something we shouldn't be doing. To turn away from those sins.)

John said, "Repent! Turn from your sins, because the kingdom of heaven is near." He was talking about Jesus when he talked about the kingdom of heaven.

And John preached all around the Jordan River and the deserts there. He was really a voice

calling out in the desert, as the prophet Isaiah had said, wasn't he?! And many people came to hear John, and many of them realized they were sinners and wanted to stop being such big sinners, that is, to repent and turn to the Lord. So John was really preparing the way for the Lord, getting people ready to hear Jesus, wasn't he?

And John would baptize the people who wanted to turn from their sins. He baptized them in the Jordan river. This was a way that they showed that they had really repented of their sins. And because John baptized people who had repented, he was called John the Baptist, that is, John the one who baptizes people.

Well, John preached in the desert, and he wore just plain, rough clothes. They were made from camel's hair. And he had a leather belt around his waist. He didn't have fancy food, either. He ate locusts and wild honey. Now what is a locust? It is sort of like a grasshopper! I wouldn't like to eat grasshoppers, would you?! But I've read that lots of people in the world do, and that they are very good for you.

And lots and lots of people went out into the desert to hear John the Baptist preaching. Some of the Jewish leaders came out, too. John told these leaders, "You need to repent, too. Start showing you repent by the way you act. Don't think that just because you are Jews that you will be saved! This is a warning to you!"

A lot of different people came to John to hear him. There were tax collectors and soldiers, and others. And John told people to show they had repented of their sins by acting like it.

And the crowd of people asked John, "What should we do then?"

John said to them, "Share with others. Be honest in everything. Be content with what you have."

Just doing these good things wouldn't save people, would it? But it would show that they had repented and turned from their sins to the Lord. John was getting them ready to see and hear Jesus.

Now, from what the prophet Daniel had written hundreds of years earlier, the Jews knew that their Messiah would be coming right around that time.

So the people asked John, "Are you the Messiah, the Christ?" (Remember, Messiah and Christ are the same word in two different languages.)

John the Baptist told the people, "No. But after me will come someone who is more powerful than I. I'm not even good enough to bend down and undo his sandals."

John said, "I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

And John said, "He comes after me, but He was before me."

Now what does all of that mean?! Well, I'll tell you. You see, John was talking about Jesus. And John knew that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, and that He was God. And God has always been, hasn't He? God made everything, but no one made God! But God the Son had let Himself become a human, Jesus. And in just a little while Jesus would be coming and preaching and finally dying for our sins but then rise from the dead. So, though Jesus would be coming and preaching after John was preaching, Jesus had been God before John the Baptist was even born, hadn't He? So Jesus was really both before and after John, wasn't He?

And though we aren't told much about this in the Bible, some way John had been told to go baptize people. And John had been told that the person that he saw the Spirit come down on and stay on would be the One who would give the Holy Spirit to people. And John called that giving of the Holy Spirit, the "baptizing" with the Holy Spirit.

But back to the story!

John the Baptist was preaching and baptizing people. And the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem heard about him, and they sent priests and Levites (men who worked at the temple) out to John the Baptist. And they asked John, "Who are you?"

And John said, "I'm not the Christ."

They said, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

(Remember what we said about the prophet Elijah who would come back before the day of the Lord?)

And John said, "No."

They asked him, "Are you the Prophet that was to come that Moses told about?"

John answered, "No."

Finally they asked him, "Then who are you? We need to go back and tell the ones who sent us out here. What do you have to say about yourself?"

Then John told them what the prophet Isaiah had said hundreds of years before. John said, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert to make straight the way for the Lord."

Then some of them said, "Then why are you baptizing if you're not the Christ or Elijah or that Prophet?"

John told them, "I baptize with water, but there is one standing among you that you don't

know. He is coming after me, but He is better than I am. I not good enough to undo His sandals." (Of course, John was talking about Jesus, wasn't he?)

Well, John and Jesus were the same age, so Jesus was a big man by then, too. They were both about 30 years old by now. And one day Jesus went over to the Jordan river and asked John to baptize Him. Of course, Jesus never did any sins, so He didn't need to repent of any sins, did He?

Well, John realized who Jesus was, and he said, "Why, I need to be baptized by you! Why are you coming to me?!"

But Jesus said, "You go ahead and baptize me. It is the right thing for us to do."

So John went ahead and baptized Jesus in the Jordan river. And as Jesus was coming up out of the water, guess what John saw? Why, John saw heaven open up and the Holy Spirit come down from heaven in the shape of a dove and settling down on Jesus! (Remember what John had been told about the Spirit coming down onto someone?!) And then a voice also came from heaven! This voice said, "You are my Son whom I love. I am well pleased with you."

But who was talking? Yes, it was God the Father! And He was talking to Jesus, who is God the Son. And God the Holy Spirit was there at the same time in the shape of a dove!! All 3 parts of the Godhead were there at once!!

Well, another day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and John said to the people around him, "Look there! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is the One I was talking about when I had told you that a man was coming after me who had been before me and who was way better than I am!"

Then John said, "I wouldn't have known He was the One, but the reason I came baptizing you with water was so that this One might be shown to Israel."

And John told them, "Yes, I wouldn't have known who He was except that the one who sent me to baptize told me about Him. I was told that the man that I saw the Spirit come down and settle on would be the One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. I saw this." (Remember when John had baptized Jesus and the Holy Spirit in the shape of a dove had come down onto Jesus? This seems to be how John the Baptist was certain that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah.)

John said, "I saw this, and I can tell you that this man is the Son of God."

And the next day again, John was there with 2 of his followers. These followers were called disciples, which means someone who learns from someone else. And they had been learning about the kingdom of heaven from John. And again John saw Jesus going by, and John said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"

And when those two disciples heard what John had said, they followed Jesus. And they

became disciples of Jesus then. One of these two disciples was Andrew, the brother of Peter.

Well, John kept on preaching, but he also talked to Herod, a big ruler there. This Herod was the son of the bad Herod, Herod the Great, who had tried to kill Jesus when Jesus was a baby. This Herod now, though, was named Herod Antipas. And this Herod now had done something very much against the law. He had gotten his brother's wife to leave the brother and come marry him! Imagine that!! Her name was Herodias, and she brought her daughter Salome with her. And John the Baptist told Herod that in doing this, he had done a bad thing, something against the law. Well, Herod didn't like being scolded by John and wanted to kill John. And Herod's new wife, Herodias, didn't like John and wanted him killed, too. But Herod knew that the people considered John to be a prophet of God (which, of course, he was!), so Herod was afraid to actually kill John. Instead, Herod had John arrested and tied up and put in prison. But it seems, though, that Herod thought of John as a righteous, holy man and liked to hear John talk. But we aren't really told much about that in the Bible.

Well, in the meantime, by now Jesus was going around preaching and doing miracles, and lots of people were beginning to follow Jesus. And even though John was in prison, he heard all that Jesus was doing. So John sent his own disciples to Jesus.

They came and said to Jesus, "John the Baptist sent us to ask you something. Are you the One who was to come?"

(They meant was Jesus the Messiah, the Christ. Which, of course, He was. I don't know why John asked this now, but when bad things happen, sometimes people get sad and confused, and remember, John was now in prison.)

So they asked Jesus, "Are you the One who was to come? Or are you someone else?"

Well, Jesus was doing a lot of miracles then. He was curing lots of sick people and making it so lots of blind people could see. So Jesus just answered John's disciples, "Go back and tell John what you've seen and heard. Tell him that the blind can now see, and the crippled can now walk, the deaf can hear, people are cured of diseases, dead people are being made alive, and the good news of God is being preached."

Now, that may not sound like an answer to you, but it was! You see, though Jesus didn't come right out and say "Yes, I'm the Christ, the One who was to come", He did a lot of miracles which showed He was from God. Also, Jesus was quoting a prophesy that had been made over 700 years earlier by the prophet Isaiah. And Isaiah had said that these things, the healing of blind and deaf and crippled and sick and dead people, these things would all be done by the Messiah when He came. And Jesus was doing them! So Jesus was actually answering them by showing them that He was the Messiah, the Christ, wasn't He?

So John the Baptist's disciples left to go back and report to John, and then Jesus began telling the crowd about John.

Jesus said to the crowd, "When you went out to the desert to hear John, what did you go out to see? Some man dressed up in fine clothes? No! Those in fine clothes would be in the palace! But did you go out to see a prophet? Yes! And he was more than just a prophet. He was the one that had been prophesied about. The prophet Malachi had written about John 400 years ago. Malachi had said, `I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will get ready your way before you.'"

And that's what John had been doing, wasn't it? John had been getting the people ready to hear and believe in Jesus when He made Himself known. And now Jesus was there. So John had finished what he'd been born to do, hadn't he?

And then Jesus went on to say that John was a very great man and that he had come like the prophet Malachi had said Elijah was to come before the day of the Lord.

All right, now. John the Baptist was in prison. And one day it was Herod's birthday, and he had a party, a feast for his high officers and the big leaders. And as part of the entertainment for the party Herodias' daughter Salome did a dance for them. We aren't told how old Salome was, but the Bible calls her a girl, so she probably wasn't a full grown woman yet.

Well, Herod and his guests all liked Salome's dance so much that Herod said, "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you."

And Herod made a big promise. He said, "I'll give you whatever you ask for -- even up to half of my kingdom."

Now, that was a foolish thing for him to say, wasn't it? After all, she might ask for something he didn't want to give her! (And we're going to see that she did just that!)

So Salome went to her mother Herodias and said, "What should I ask for?"

And guess what Herodias told her?!

Herodias told her daughter, "Go ask for the head of John the Baptist!" In other words, she wanted John killed!

Oh, dear!!

So Salome hurried back to Herod and said to him, "Give me the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

Well, Herod was very upset about that! He didn't want to kill John the Baptist. But he had promised -- and all of his very important dinner guests had heard him make the promise! So right away he sent someone to do what Salome had asked of him. (He should have said no. After all, we should do what is right even if it's embarrassing, shouldn't we? Also, we should be very careful

what we promise!)

So the man went to the prison, and he chopped off John the Baptist's head, and brought it out on a platter. And it was given to Salome. And Salome took it and gave it to her mother. This was all very wicked to do, wasn't it?!

Well, John the Baptist's disciples heard about this, so they went and got John's body and buried it in a tomb. And then they went and told Jesus what had happened.

Well, Jesus went on preaching and doing many miracles and healing people. And Herod heard about all the things Jesus was doing. And Herod didn't know what to think, because some of the people were saying that Jesus was John the Baptist. Others were saying that Jesus was the great prophet Elijah, and still others were saying that Jesus was one of the other prophets that had come back to life. And Herod said to the people around him, "This is John the Baptist, and he has risen from the dead! That's why this man can do miracles!"

And Herod said, "But I had John's head chopped off, so who can this really be that I am hearing such things about?" Herod didn't realize that it was the One that John the Baptist had been preaching about and getting people ready to hear, that it was Jesus the Christ. He should have listened to John the Baptist, shouldn't he?!

And that is all the Bible tells us about John the Baptist. He was a very great man who had been born miraculously to his very old parents. And he had done his job of preparing the way for the Lord Jesus Christ.

And what is so important about Jesus? That's right. Jesus, the Son of God, came to earth as a human to make a way for us sinners to be saved, to be the children of God, and to be able to be with God someday, didn't He? And how did He do that? Yes, by dying on the cross for our sins, taking our sins for us. And then 3 days later He was alive again, was resurrected. And He promises that anyone who believes in Him, trusts Him to save them from their sins, He will save. So, we need to remember what John the Baptist told the people, don't we? We need to look to the Lamb of God, to Jesus, to trust in Him to save us. And the Bible says that then we'll be God's children. And then someday we can be with God forever. Because we know that God always keeps His promises, doesn't He?