

## John: The Forerunner

*Luke 1:13-17*

**H**ave you ever wondered why you are here? Have you ever wondered what your purpose is for being alive? I once visited with a 93-year-old Christian lady whose health had been failing for quite some time. Her mind was sharp and clear, yet she was unable to care for herself. In fact, she was close to death even then. She wondered aloud why God kept her here. What was His purpose in allowing her to live on in this life, when all of her friends and most of her family had already passed away?

I didn't know the answer to that one, so I said that I certainly didn't know, but that since God never makes a mistake, He knew what He was doing.

Before I left her room, this Christian lady told me of how she would witness to the nurses and the doctors who came into her hospital room. She would tell them of how Jesus had saved her and given her peace in her heart, even as she faced imminent death. Suddenly, it came to me: this was her answer. God allowed her to stay alive long enough to cross the paths of these who needed her witness to the power of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What is your purpose? What is the purpose of our church?

John the Baptist was sent from God to be the forerunner of the Messiah, the Christ. He was to be the one who would go before Him and announce that He was coming. There was a definite purpose in this plan, just as the angel told John's father Zechariah. But John was to be more than just a forerunner, more than just a "front man." He was to carry the message of repentance to a people who had not heard directly from God since the time of Malachi, four hundred years earlier.

If we will look at the angel's message here in the first chapter of Luke's gospel, we will discover that God had a definite purpose for John's life. Well, He does for us, too! And if we open ourselves up to the Spirit of God, we discover much about our own lives and ministry today.

### **1 We discover the Source of our ministry, v. 15**

From the very beginning of his life, while he was still in his mother's womb, John was to be filled with the Holy Spirit of God. His was a life of self-denial in order that the people of Israel should not be distracted from the

message God had given him to deliver. The message was that all men everywhere should repent and return to God. But along the way, John had some very bold things to say. We see an example of that in Luke 3:7-8—“*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.*” He could stand up to the Pharisees and Sadducees and proclaim the Word of God because he was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Because he was filled with the Spirit of God, John’s life was one of obedience. Mark implies in the first chapter of his gospel that the crowds went out into the wilderness to hear John preach because he was filled with the Holy Spirit, and because they saw something in his life they could not see in the so-called religious leaders of the day. Even Herod recognized that John was different, that he was a holy and righteous man.

From what the angel Gabriel had told Zechariah, we understand that John was to be a Nazarite, that he was to be holy and set apart from the world for God’s service, much like Samson had been set apart many years before. A person did not become a Nazarite for just a certain period of time. There was no such thing as a “temporary Nazarite.” If a man or woman was a Nazarite, the original intention was that they should be Nazarites for all their lives. They were set apart for life.

There is no such thing as a temporary Christian, though some seem to think there is. We seem to think that we can do what we please with our lives. “Sure, I’m a Christian,” we might say when we are asked, but the actual fact is that *we* are the ones in control of our lives. But listen, friend: if Christ is not the Lord of your life, then you are none of His! If you belong to God, you belong to Him for life! If you serve God, you serve Him for life!

John was to be a prophet—not one who necessarily told the future, even though that may be involved. A prophet is one who speaks for God. If you and I are to speak for God, the only way to do that effectively is for us to be filled with the Holy Spirit of God!

The angel also said that John was to drink no strong drink. Do you know why? It was because John would be filled with the Holy Spirit. He would not need the stimulation that wine gives. He was to be borne upwards and continuously exhilarated by the Spirit of God. You and I, if we are filled with the Holy Spirit of God, will not need the artificial stimulation of wine or beer or other strong drink, nor of any other temporary pleasure. Why settle for an artificial high when you can have a permanent high with God’s Holy Spirit?

That was the source of John's ministry: God's Holy Spirit. Can you say that John's ministry was a successful one? He never served a large church. He had no big budgets. He never had a building program. He didn't even have a newsletter or a website! He simply went to the desert and preached a simple message to the people. And yet, Jesus Himself said of John the Baptizer, "*Among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist.*"

Let's take an honest look at our ministry. What is its source? There may be a lot of tradition here, and there may be many fond memories here, and your entire life may be wrapped up here. But what is the source of our ministry?

What supplies our motivation? What keeps us going? If it is anything other than the Holy Spirit of God, you and I are wasting our time, and God's money. If it is anything but the Holy Spirit, you and I are living a lie. If we are to have what can be known as a "Christian ministry" then our very lives must have their source in the Holy Spirit of God, and nowhere else.

## **2 We discover the Purpose of our ministry, v. 16**

God had a purpose in sending John as the forerunner of Christ. The purpose of John's ministry was to lead the people of Israel back to God. Verse 16 does not say that John would turn the hearts of the *sinner*s back to God, though certainly that is the idea. But when most of us hear the word "sinner" we do not think of ourselves—no indeed! We think of someone else, the other guy.

So the angel avoided that kind of misunderstanding or misinterpretation. The words he used in describing the purpose of John's ministry were these: "*Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God.*" That's comparable to saying that John would turn many of the *church members* back to God, which if you think about it, would not be a bad idea.

John's purpose was to seek out *any* who had strayed from God's will and plan, to seek out *any* who lived a life of disobedience and rebellion—no matter *who* they were—and bring them back to God.

That's the great design of the gospel, as Matthew Henry said it—to bring people nearer to God. God has reached down, has intervened in history to bring men back to Him and His way. *He* has taken the initiative.

Your personal ministry, my personal ministry, and our ministry together is to be that of calling men and women and boys and girls back to God, calling them to forsake their sinful ways and follow Christ. When Gabriel was speaking to Zechariah, he made it clear and plain that Zechariah's son was not to be the Messiah, but that he would point all people to the Messiah when He came. You and I are to be like John in that *we* are not the Christ—we are not the answer for sin—but we are to point to the One who is coming again with all might and power and majesty—the Lord Jesus Christ!

The purpose of our ministry is not to call attention to ourselves—not to build monuments of brick and mortar, not to be a social club only for those who are like us. Our church is to be a beacon shining from the shore, guiding the lost people of this community back to God, to stand at the door of the Kingdom of Heaven and say, “Here it is! This is the way to eternal life!”

That is what the people of this world need! What do we wait for? Are we waiting for a convenient time? Are we waiting for the time to be ripe? Jesus said, *“Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months and then comes the harvest’? I tell you, lift up your eyes! See how the fields are already white unto harvest.”*

Our purpose in even being here is to call the people of our area back to God, and unless we are being true to that purpose, unless we are engaged in doing just that, we are not fulfilling the purpose God has for us here, whatever excuses we may come up with.

### **3 We discover the Product of our ministry, v. 17**

Okay, suppose that John did fulfill his purpose: what was to happen when the people were turned back to God? What was all of this for? The Scriptures here tell us that John's ministry was to produce a people—God's people—prepared to receive the Christ when He came. In order to prepare them, John went about preaching repentance as the way to the Kingdom of God because if they were to recognize the Kingdom when it came, they had to start walking in its ways. Perhaps that is why so many do not recognize God at work in their lives today, because they are walking opposite to God's teachings and commandments.

John was to tell everyone that God was taking the initiative and would soon send His Son to secure forgiveness for our sins. In fact, the name “John” means “God is gracious,” and would be a continual reminder to everyone that God had not forgotten His people.

But John's ministry was to produce something else. Not only were the people to be prepared for the Messiah by repenting but also by being reconciled to one another. The phrase "to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children" is a very expressive figure of speech. The "fathers" is the expression often used when someone meant Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the other patriarchs. They are represented here as being alienated from the "children," or their descendants, because the children were unbelieving and disobedient. John's ministry would produce a people who had repented, and as a result, they would be people whom their "fathers" would delight to call their own.

The product of our ministry is to prepare the people of our day, not for the first coming of the Messiah, not for His birth—but to prepare them for His Second Coming when He will return to claim His own. We are to prepare them by calling them to repentance and by working to reconcile families and neighbors, and yes, even enemies. We are to be ever-prepared to receive Christ when He comes again. Our ministry together is to produce born-again believers who are prepared for the Day of His Coming!

*Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the marriage feast, so that they may open to him at once when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes; truly, I say to you, he will gird himself and serve them. If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those servants! But know this, that if the householder had known at what hour the thief was coming he would have been awake and would not have left his house to be broken into. You also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. (Luke 12:35-40)*

The source of John's ministry was the Holy Spirit. Our very relationship to God and to each other must have its source in the Holy Spirit.

The purpose of John's ministry was to lead the sons of Israel back to God. Our purpose should be to call all men and women back to God.

The product of John's ministry was a people prepared to receive Christ when He came. The product of our ministry should be a people watching for His glorious return, even if we don't know exactly when that will be.

You may not be 93, but you may be very much like the woman I told you about at the beginning of this message. You wonder why God has put you here. You wonder why He has left you here. And you are bewildered as to what you are supposed to be doing. You've reached a place in your life where you really don't know what's next, or what God has in mind for your life. But when we look at the Scriptures we find these wonderful treasures from John's life that speak to us and apply to us all these long years later.

John has received a special place in history because of his willingness to surrender to God's will for his life. Won't you follow this example—surrender to the Holy Spirit, and work to prepare all people for Christ's return, calling them to repentance? Won't you carry the message of Christ to the world around you?