

THE “STRANGE” FORERUNNER

Matthew 1 gives background detail on the genealogy of Jesus Christ, emphasizing that He is the Son of David, which was necessary to be the Messiah. He was to be named “Jesus” which literally means “God-Savior”. They would call His name Immanuel which literally means “God with us”. Thus, as the divine/human Messiah He was born King of the Jews in fulfillment of prophecy as seen in chapter 2.

And then in the sovereignty of God as a young Child the family of Jesus moved to Nazareth in Galilee fulfilling the prophecy depicting that He would be a despised person. Nazareth had a bad reputation and people called Nazarene (that is people from Nazareth) were looked down upon with contempt. This was the experience of Jesus in fulfillment of OT prophecy.

Matthew 3:1 (NKJV)

1 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,

“In those days” evidently referring to the days in which Jesus was still living in Nazareth. Prior to the start of Christ’s public ministry, this man by the name of John the Baptist burst onto the scene. There had been 400 silent years with no prophetic voice on the scene. Between the prophet Malachi (the last book in the OT) and John the Baptist was a period of 400 years.

Yes, surrounding the birth of Christ, there had been some personal and individualized revelation from angels in relation to Mary and Joseph, in relation to the shepherds and the Magi. But as far as a prophetic ministry, John the Baptist was the first such prophet in 400 years.

John came preaching in the wilderness of Judea.

John soon became known as “***John the Baptist***” because baptism was so prominent in his ministry. This is true in the Biblical record, and even nonbiblical resources such as Josephus referred to John in this way. It is the idea of “***John the Baptizer***”. But his baptism was not merely an outward ritual as our study will show. His baptism stood for something – namely it symbolized REPENTANCE. It made the statement “***I am a repent***”.

John had a very unique ministry. He did not enter onto the religious scene. He did not minister in synagogues or at the temple. Rather, he “came preaching in the wilderness”. Now, if you hear someone hollering at the top

of their lungs in the wilderness, you might think they are crazy. But in John's case, it drew an audience.

By the way, John the Baptist is the only preacher in Scripture that does this which sets him completely apart. And this is EXACTLY the way Isaiah prophesied the forerunner to the Messiah would come when he predicted this 700 years in advance as seen in Isaiah 40:3.

Isaiah 40:3 (NKJV)

3 The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord; Make straight in the desert A highway for our God.

Who does this? Well, one uniquely called of God who came fulfilling prophecy, which in effect serves to affirm the Messiahship of Jesus. The true Messiah must have a forerunner who comes crying in the wilderness. This fits Jesus perfectly. He had just such a forerunner as seen in the person of John the Baptist.

And everything about the ministry of John served as a convicting rebuke to the religious establishment that had become very wealthy, self-righteous, and elitist. The dress, demeanor, message, and place of ministry were all part of the prophetic ministry of John the Baptist.

In fact, the whole scene surrounding the story of Jesus makes a statement. The shepherds associated with His birth were societal cast-offs. The Magi who came from the East were Gentiles. God's ways are not man's ways.

God clearly was not operating according to the status quo of the religious system. He uses the humble. Isaiah 57:15 says He dwells with the humble. Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 says that God mainly uses those who in the eyes of the world are foolish, weak, base, despised, nothings. God consistently works contrary to the religious establishment! People are always looking for a success formula, and yet God so often does His thing completely outside the box of human thinking.

I mean, if you are going to write a book on how to start a movement, you would never write your first chapter on the model of John the Baptist. It just doesn't work this way. That would never work! And yet it did!

One day, someone heard this LOUD voice crying in the wilderness – the word spread, and crowds started coming.

The wilderness of Judea was the barren wasteland area immediately west of the Dead Sea. John probably came preaching along the northern end of the Dead Sea near where the Jordan River flows into the Dead Sea.

“John appeared in the wilderness of Judea, an uninhabitable region running the entire length of the Dead Sea. We would have thought that such a place was an unlikely area in which to conduct an evangelistic campaign.”

– ***John Phillips***

No kidding! If you send me out there to preach, I am really going to wonder what you think about my preaching! This is not the way people do things! This was totally unconventional! But it was a total God-thing. And again, this was perfectly in keeping with the prophecy in Isaiah 40:3 given 700 years before it happened. Only God could do this!