

JOHN THE BAPTIST

For many, many years before the birth of Jesus, the only comments that were heard from the rabbis were cautious and predictable. Israel was a conquered country, after all, and one could be beaten or thrown into jail by the Romans if he was too outspoken. But then, according to the first eight verses of the first chapter of Mark, came a lone voice, crying out in the wilderness. Isaiah 40:3 says "A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" One voice disturbed the wide, silent desert and answered ancient prophecy. Everything about the forerunner challenged the religious norm: what he wore, what he ate, where he ministered, and, especially, what he said. In a day when it was popular to ostracize sinners, here was a voice saying "Repent, God wants to forgive you." And there was more good news. The LORD was coming. Get prepared, for this great one "will baptize with the Holy Spirit."

I have never felt that John the Baptist has received a fair deal. (Okay, John did dress weirdly and eat bugs, but we have to move past that!) John is always portrayed as a hell fire and brimstone-throwing preacher. That is not fair! He really had a very loving message. He preached a baptism of repentance for the FORGIVENESS of sins, not for the condemnation of sins. There is something inconsistent with our preconditioned notion of John that does not square with the facts. Anyone who really believes all his bad press must be intrigued by the verse "Then went out to John Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan." (Matthew 3:5) People flocked to hear John! Would you flock to hear someone execute you with condemnation, bury you in guilt, and sentence you to hell? And then would you run to tell all your neighbors how great it was so they could go too? Let's be serious! Jesus said that the tax collectors and harlots heard John and repented. Further, John was not the only one who preached repentance. We are told in the Gospel according to Matthew that BOTH John and Jesus say "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matthew 3:2; 4:17) Jesus preached repentance just as much as John.

I think John probably worked from concepts something like this: Yes, there is such a thing as right and wrong. Sin is wrong. It offends God. It hurts our private worlds and the world at large. And sin is also self-destructive. The Gospel is a message of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. God loves us. Anything and everything can be forgiven by God. Now this is the type of message that all

Jerusalem and Judea would go out to hear! This is something a publican or harlot would welcome with tears of joy. This is something that the world, now more than ever, desperately needs to hear.

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