

Prophets And Prophecy (Part 2)

Elijah and John the Baptist

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To begin, we are going to go back to Deuteronomy 18:15-18. I want to use this scripture as a launching pad for this sermon because it is going to follow somewhat on the same line as Part 1 of this series. We are going to focus on one particular aspect, and this will also serve as a way of review.

Deuteronomy 18:15-18 The LOORD your God will raise up unto you a Prophet from the midst of you, of your brethren, like unto me: unto him you shall hearken: According to all that you desired of the LOORD your God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the LOORD my God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not. And the LOORD said unto me, They have well spoken that which they have spoken. I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto you, and will put my words in his mouth: and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him.

All of us have the desire to know the future in order to be prepared for it. We want to be in control of as much of our destiny as possible, and not be merely at the mercy of events. However, some have this desire so strongly that they somehow maneuver themselves into the position of being the channel through which the future is given, and these people have misled many.

Deuteronomy 18, along with Deuteronomy 13, is a warning against such people. Whether these people are called diviners, charmers, spiritists, or channelers, using such methods as tealeaf reading, casting of lots, or séances, they are to be seriously and carefully avoided. This is because there is no absolute reality to their prognostications. Those seeking to know are being misguided, putting themselves at the mercy of lying demons, or at the very least, of imaginative men and women.

I think it is important for us to understand that prophets were not merely a temporary expedient God turned to on occasions. They played a vital and continuing role, especially in those times before the word of God was widely distributed. That is why provision is made for them right within the law.

God shows in many places that those He appoints to the prophetic office will always

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have the preaching of the keeping of the commandments of God as evidence of the source of their guidance. They will teach the conserving of truth that is past truth, even as they break new ground in terms of doctrine.

Isaiah 8:19-20 is an expansion on Deuteronomy 18:15-18.

Isaiah 8:19-20 And when they shall say unto you, Seek unto them that have familiar spirits, and unto wizards that peep, and that mutter: should not a people seek unto their God? For the living to the dead? **To the law and to the testimony:** if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.

One of the outstanding characteristics of all of the prophets of God is related to us in Hebrews 3. Moses is used as an example, and Jesus Christ, who was also a Prophet, is **the** example. They were **faithful** in what they said, both as to their present message (be it something regarding the future), but they were always faithful to what had already been given in the past.

Prophets both **forth tell** (that is, they bring a message out truthfully, clearly, and authoritatively to those to whom it is intended), and they will on occasion, but not always, **foretell**; that is, they will give a message of events to occur before those events occur. In other words, a man can be a prophet without ever foretelling anything, but he will faithfully carry the message God gave him, and he will always stick to the line that God gave, beginning with Moses: "...like unto Moses, who was faithful in all of his house."

In Deuteronomy 18:15 there are some identifiers given in a series of verses, which are as follows:

(1) The foundational pattern for the office was established through Moses. It says in verse 18: "Like unto me."

(2) The prophet will be raised up from among the Israelitish people. He says, "of your brethren." However, we find that a prophet might be drawn and appointed from *any* of the tribes, and from any occupation. In other words, a prophet did not have to be a Levite. A prophet did not have to be a priest. A New Testament parallel to this might be that if a prophet is raised up, he will be raised up from **within** the "Israel of God," which is the church.

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(3) A prophet will perform the function of a mediator between God and men. That is in verses 16 and 18.

(4) Because of this, a prophet will stand apart from the system that is already installed. This means he will not be antagonistic to the system, because that is old truth, and he will conserve old truth, but he may very well be antagonistic to the sins of those *within* the system. We will see more of that a little bit later.

(5) A prophet is directly appointed and separated for his office by God, and therefore the thrust of his service as God's representative is direct and authoritative.

By way of contract, the priest's function was from man to God by means of sacrifice. It was far less direct and more appealing and pleading rather than demanding, as the prophet may do. The New Testament ministry combines both elements, but it tends to be somewhat more parallel to the prophet's direction than the priest's.

In simple broad definition, a prophet is one who is given a message by another of greater authority, and speaks to those for whom the message is intended *in place* of the original giver of the message. A good example is Moses, who was God's prophet, but Aaron was Moses' prophet. Both Moses and Aaron spoke for somebody else. Aaron spoke for Moses, and Moses spoke for God.

We are going to back into the New Testament to Matthew 11, because here is where a change of direction in the sermon begins. We are going to begin focusing on a very important personage who was a prophet.

Matthew 11:7-11 And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John. What went you out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went you out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what went you out for to see? A prophet? Yes, I say unto you, and *more* than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, which shall prepare your way before you. Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there has not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

As the last message ended we had reached the point of time of John the Baptist. As we begin here with John the Baptist, John is an Old Covenant prophet whose work is reported in the New Testament, but he is the last of the Old Covenant prophets.

Despite the greatness of the other Old Testament prophets that filters through the record of their deeds, Jesus declared that not a one of them was greater than His cousin John. In fact, several commentaries stated that Jesus' statement in verse 11 literally means that John was the greatest of all men who ever lived. Let that rattle around in your brain for awhile! He was not merely the greatest prophet, but of all men born of women, he was **the** greatest.

When one considers people like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and David, one must marvel at how great this man John the Baptist was, and yet we know so little of him.

The Greek in verse 9 where Jesus said, "and more than a prophet," it literally says, "**much** more than a prophet." Jesus then goes on to say, in the larger context, that the reason for this is that John was the fulfillment of a prophecy. No other prophet was ever the fulfillment of a distinct prophecy, and what an important prophecy that was!

My specific purpose here is I want us to get a closer picture of John the Baptist. Not just closer, but also clearer as well. We are going to be using quite a number of scriptures. In fact there will be a number of times that I will use a scripture more than 3 or 4 times. I will flip back to it because I might want to emphasize one part of the scripture one time, and another part of the scripture another time. They all apply almost invariably to either what John said or did, or what Jesus said about John so that we can understand what a great man we are dealing with here.

We will first go to the book of Luke. Luke gives the most detailed record of the conception and birth of John the Baptist. We will read verses 5 and 7 this time, and then verses 13 through 17.

Luke 1:5-6 There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

They had no child, because Elisabeth was barren, and they were now both advanced in

age.

Luke 1:11-17 And there appeared unto him [Zachariah] an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elisabeth shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you shall have joy and gladness: and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink: and he shall be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

We might question what Zechariah was praying about because the immediate context gives the sense that he was praying about having a son. Now maybe he was doing that, but we have to remember he was performing his job, and so there is another way we can go with this.

What do you think Zechariah, who was a righteous man and a faithful servant of God, might have been praying about in the carrying out of his job? Was he praying that time about having a son? It is a possibility, but I think not. What he was praying about, brethren, are the kind of things we are praying about when we get on our knees and see what is going on in our nation, about how unrighteous and immoral it is.

As Zechariah was carrying out his responsibility, he was praying for the salvation of Israel, that somehow or another the nation would get turned around. And so when the angel came to him, the angel said, "Your prayer has been heard." It is very possible that he meant, "Your prayer about the salvation of Israel is going to be answered, and besides that you are going to have that son which you prayed about before."

Now remember, they were well advanced in years. They were beyond the time that Elisabeth could have a child. It was very likely Zechariah had not prayed about having a child since the time that she was 45 or 50 years old. She was **way** beyond having a child. It was impossible. But they had prayed about it before, and who knows how long they had to wait. This is so encouraging. God did not forget!

Zechariah is going to have both prayers answered. God is going to take steps to work

out the salvation of Israel. He is going to answer Zechariah's and Elisabeth's prayer for a child, and it is going to begin with that child that Israel is going to be saved. What an honor to be given to these two!

John's birth, like Isaac's and Jesus', was miraculously produced by God. The exception though is that Jesus' was achieved through a virgin with no involvement of a human male. Isaac's and John's were normally produced, except that Sarah and Elisabeth were beyond the childbearing age, but miraculous nonetheless!

John the Baptist appears in each of the four gospels, but in each case his story is subordinated to that of Jesus, and that is as it should be. But we are going to see that John was quite effective in what he did in preparing the way before Christ.

Josephus pays a bit of attention to John. Though Josephus devotes only a vague reference to Christ, he devotes an intriguing fairly long paragraph to John. When what Josephus wrote is put together with brief interjections from the Bible, we can then get a picture of a very vigorous man of God who was turning that small nation of Judea on its spiritual ear.

They had no radio and no television to broadcast "Come out to see John!" sort of thing, but the knowledge of him spread quickly by word-of-mouth, because his ministry appears to have been short. We might guess it was about the same length of three and one-half years allotted to Jesus; however, virtually all of that time was utilized *prior* to the beginning of Christ's ministry. There are a number of commentaries I read in the preparation of this sermon, and the writers of those commentaries feel perhaps John's ministry was just one year long. But boy, I will tell you, was he effective!

Mark 1:1-8 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, which shall prepare the way before you. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare you the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins. And John was clothed with camel's hair, and with a girdle of a skin about his loins, and he did eat locusts and wild honey; and preached, saying, There comes one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose. I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

Mark 2:18 And the disciples of John and of the Pharisees used to fast: and they come and say unto him, Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples fast not?

From Mark 1:1-8 and Mark 2:18 we learn that John the Baptist was apparently distinctive from what was normal for the time in both his dress and his diet. His dress was durable and serviceable, and it was something that would normally be associated with the very poor people as to the kind of thing they would wear.

The same is true for his diet. Most of us would cringe about eating grasshoppers; but nonetheless a lot of his diet was made up of grasshoppers. He looked distinctive, and his diet was distinctive. We have to remember that somehow or another God sustained him, because he was a man of great energy.

We are going to look at the scripture in Luke 1:80 just to confirm this.

Luke 1:80 And the child [John the Baptist] grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel.

I wanted to touch on this because this fits right in with the description in Mark 1:1-8, but it indicates an additional thing, and that is, despite his greatness—for even before his birth the angel reported "**He shall be great!**"—Jesus said he was "**the greatest!**"!

God kept him a poor man. He was not wealthy like Abraham, or David, or Solomon, and many of the others. This man, who was possibly the greatest of all men who have ever lived (other than Jesus Christ) was kept **poor** by God. People who live their entire lives in the desert do not become rich. His home, though undoubtedly not a hovel, was certainly nowhere near what we are accustomed to in rich Israel.

God does not owe us what our emotions tell us we would like to have, but He will always provide us with what we need to serve **His** purpose for us. There is a big difference between the two. Sometimes, brethren, we have to repent and adjust our expectations, and try to understand what it is that God is working out in us, and through us. John's diet would be unusual for us, but it was fairly common for the poor of his time.

I think we can be assured that since he had God's spirit from birth, as Luke 1:15 states—"He shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink, and he shall be **filled** with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's

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womb."—he was in **no way** the wild man you see him depicted as in movies, running around, ranting and raving, hair askew all over the place, and generally seeming like a fool that nobody would pay any attention to. When he spoke, people listened and considered deeply and carefully what this man said. You do not do this with wild men and fools. I am going to add a scripture here just to prove this point to you.

II Timothy 1:7 For God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a *sound mind*.

We also noted in Luke 1:5 that from both parents (Zechariah his father, and Elizabeth his mother) he was a Levite. He was from Aaron's line. Both his father and his mother were from Aaron's line, and yet not one acknowledgement is made regarding John having any tie at all with the already-installed system of Temple worship.

Mark 1:1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

I think it is interesting that the Bible positions John's ministry as "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ." Apparently it does this because of the preparatory work for when Jesus came.

Mark 1:5 And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins.

This confirms the impact of his ministry in that all Judea, including the Jerusalem folk, went out to hear and to be baptized of him, believing he was a prophet. The word "all" does not mean every last person, but it does indicate a very high percentage. A majority of the people went out to hear him.

We will turn now to Mark 11:32. The "they" in this verse are the chief priests, the Scribes, and the elders. Jesus asked them a question that really put them into a corner, and so they were in a perplexity as to how in the world they were going to answer. The question involved, "Who was John?" And so they said:

Mark 11:32 But if we shall say, Of men; they feared the people: for all men counted John, that he was a prophet indeed.

If they counted John as a prophet like everybody else did, then they were condemned. "Why did you not repent?" Jesus would have said. So they were between a rock and a hard place. They had no answer for that kind of a question. What I want you to see is that John was held in very high regard by the people. The common people especially regarded him as a prophet, and indeed he was.

Something else we can pick up from this verse is that the very highest Jewish authorities—the chief priests, the Scribes, and the elders—were fully aware of John's reputation as a prophet, and they feared it. I do not think that these men who were accustomed to the use of power and authority within a nation would fear something they did not respect, and they would not respect a wild, crazy man. When John talked, people listened. They had something to lose by yielding to his preaching, and so they would not repent.

I think what we are beginning to see here is that in many respects John's work was of a magnitude very similar to Jesus'.

Mark 1:9-11 And it came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan. And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him. And there came a voice from heaven, saying, You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.

This may be the series of verses with which we are most familiar in relation to John, because we know that he baptized Jesus. What I want to point out to you is that "the *all*" which appears in verse 9 included Jesus, both as believing his message and being baptized of him. It was at this time God fully revealed to John who the Messiah was. Mark 1:7-8 makes this clear, where John said, "There comes one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose. I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

So at this time God fully revealed to John who the Messiah was, but it is clear, from verses 7 and 8, that he *already* knew before baptizing Jesus that he was preceding someone—that he was preparing the way for someone. How would he know this? Mom and dad told him, because mom and dad were told before he was even born that he was going to precede the Messiah.

Despite the fact that he was no wild man, he was what we would call today "radically alienated" from those who were part of the system God had installed during the time of

David one thousand years earlier, and then re-established when it fell apart. It was re-established under Hezekiah. Then it fell apart again and was re-established under Josiah. It then fell apart again when the Jews went into captivity. When they came out of captivity, it was re-established once again under Zerubbabel and Nehemiah.

We find at the time of Christ that some very disgusting attitudes and sin had infiltrated the system. John was not against the system. He was against the conduct and the attitude of those who were **within** the system.

This is common practice for a prophet. I mentioned to you in my previous sermon, and also earlier in this sermon, that the prophets are often shown as not being against the system, but being separated **from** it, leaving them free to be against those who are **part** of the system. Jeremiah and Amos were some of the best known in this position. We are going to take a look at Jeremiah 15:10-17.

Jeremiah 15:10 Woe is me, my mother, that you have borne me a man of strife and a man of contention to the whole earth!

Notice the position in which he puts himself. Life for a prophet of God was not easy. Life for Jeremiah was exceedingly difficult, and he was feeling very sorry for himself.

Jeremiah 15:10-17 I have neither lent on usury, nor men have lent to me on usury; yet every one of them does curse me. The LORD said, Verily it shall be well with your remnant; verily I will cause the enemy to entreat you well in the time of evil and in the time of affliction, Shall iron break the northern iron and the steel? Your substance and your treasures will I give to the spoil without price, and that for all your sins, even in all your borders. And I will make you to pass with your enemies into a land which you know not: for a fire is kindled in my anger, which shall burn upon you. O LORD, you know: remember me, and visit me, and revenge me of my persecutors; take me not away in your longsuffering: know that for your sake I have suffered rebuke. Your words were found, and I did eat them; and your word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of my heart: for I am called by your name, O LORD God of hosts. I sat not in the assembly of the mockers, nor rejoiced; I sat **alone** because of your hand: . . .

That is the way John the Baptist was too. He sat alone. I am sure that when push came to shove, Isaiah sat alone, and Hosea sat alone.

Jeremiah 15:17-18 . . . for you have filled me with indignation. Why is my pain perpetual, and my wound incurable, which refuses to be healed? [His wound was in his heart.] Will you be altogether unto me as a liar, and as waters that fail?

Amos 7:14-15 Then answered Amos, and said to Amaziah, I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; but I was an herdman, and a gatherer of sycamore fruit: And the LOORD took me as I followed the flock, and the LOORD said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel.

So what did Amos get for doing this? Persecution. From that time on, Amos was separated away, and he was no longer part of the people.

Let us take a look now at John the Baptist. Here is a recipe for unpopularity:

Matthew 3:4-11 And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey. Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan. And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which brings not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that comes after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and with fire.

These words were a scathing attack against both the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees were those who had public power because they tended to be fairly successful people in private life, but they also had the admiration of the people. The Sadducees were largely drawn from the priesthood, and thus controlled the Temple; consequently they pretty much controlled the religious life of the people. But because they also tended to be wealthy, but haughty in disposition, this prejudiced the feelings of the people against them. So John was sent from God to confront the leadership of the

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establishment. That was one of his jobs, and his was an unpopular message of judgment against them, aimed directly at the powerful.

Luke 7:28-30 For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist: but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. And all the people that heard him, and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of him.

These (the Pharisees and the lawyers) were the powerful men in the community. They rejected what John said.

Matthew 21:23 And when he [Jesus] was come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him as he was teaching, and said, By what authority do you these things? And who gave you this authority?

I read this just so we could see who the people were that He was addressing.

Matthew 21:32 For John came unto you in the way of righteousness and you believed him not; but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and you, when you had seen it, repented not afterward, that you might believe him.

The powerful knew that Jesus was speaking about John the Baptist, and so in disdainful anger they rejected him, while the publicans and the harlots accepted his teaching.

Now John the Baptist had a foe who was more powerful than the scribes and the Pharisees, and that was Herod Antipas who was tetrarch of Galilee. Herod and John had an interesting relationship. Herod respected John, and yet at the same time he **feared** him because of what he perceived to be John's growing political power and because of John's popularity with the people. In other words, in Herod's mind's eye he could see this man (John the Baptist) as the point of a rebellion, and that John was going to be the one the people would proclaim to be their leader.

Josephus gives us a bit of background that the Bible does not contain. Herod was

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married to the daughter of Aretas, who was king of Petra. However, sometime before John became quite popular, or became a "celebrity," as we would say today, Herod divorced the daughter of King Aretas and married his sister-in-law Herodias. This part about Herodias is in the Bible. This caused a problem because Herodias was already married to Herod's brother Philip.

It was right here that a convergence takes place between the fact of John's rising influence with the people and Herod's and Herodias' adulterous and incestuous marriage, which clearly violated the sexual laws of Leviticus 18. You may not be aware that Herod was part Israelite. He was half Israelite and half Edomite, and so there was kind of an attachment to Israel and to the law of God in him.

We will now go to Mark 6 where there is a bit of fill in.

Mark 6:14 And king Herod heard of him; [The "him" here is Jesus.] (for his name was spread abroad:) and he said that John the Baptist was risen from the dead, and therefore mighty works do show forth themselves in him.

John the Baptist was already dead by this time, but Herod was wrongly thinking that Jesus was John the Baptist resurrected. Others, besides Herod, said that Jesus was Elijah.

Mark 6:15-17 Others said, That it is Elijah, And others said, That it is a prophet, or as one of the prophets. But when Herod heard thereof, he said, It is John whom I beheaded: he is risen from the dead. For Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife: for he had married her.

It is interesting that the Bible still calls Herodias "his brother Philip's wife," even though Herod was married to Herodias too. But it was not a legal marriage in God's eyes. God tells us exactly what she was. She was still Philip's wife regardless of her living with King Herod.

Mark 6:19-20 Therefore Herodias had a quarrel against him [John the Baptist], and would have killed him: but she could not: For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him: and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly.

Like I said, they had a strange relationship, for there was a great deal of respect in Herod for John the Baptist.

Apparently it was during the period of time that Herod took John the Baptist and put him in prison that John made clear to Herod that he was involved in an adulterous relationship with Herodias. I guess Herod spilled the beans to Herodias, and she was boiling with anger.

Mark 6:21-27 And when a convenient day was come, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, high captains, and chief estates of Galilee: And when the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever you will, and I will give it you. And he sware unto her, Whatsoever you shall ask of me, I will give it you, unto the half of my kingdom. [The guy was daffy!] And she went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist. And she came in straightway with haste unto the king [You can tell who was running things around there! Herodias was running things!], and asked, saying, I will that you give me by and by in a charger the head of John the Baptist. And the king was exceeding sorry; yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her. And immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought: and he went and beheaded him in the prison.

Well, the convenient occasion turned out to be this birthday dance.

Now an interesting thing happened. King Aretas was not out of the picture, and he was upset with Herod because Herod had dumped his daughter in favor of Herodias, and so King Aretas declared war against Herod. Herod had to assemble an army, and he did. His army and the army of King Aretas met on the field of battle, and Aretas just wiped out Herod's army.

The people who liked John reached a conclusion on their own, and that was that God had avenged John's spilled blood by causing Herod to have his army wiped out. It was a judgment, according to them. That appears in Josephus.

It is Luke that gives the most distinctive account of John's birth, and the verses in Luke 1:5-25 are devoted to the announcement of John's birth to his father Zachariah. Verses 57 through 80 is Zachariah's hymn of praise to God for John. Beginning in verse 76,

these verses are devoted, without qualification, to John.

Luke 1:76-80 And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Highest; [See, one who speaks for another.] for you shall go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high has visited us, To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel.

John was a great man, and as we shall see, Jesus had very high regard for him, and so did the apostles who wrote the gospels. But at the same time, the gospels make clear that John is to be subordinated to Jesus. John and Jesus were allied together in the salvation scheme from the very beginning; however, the Bible shows in interesting ways how it subordinates John to Jesus.

Luke 1:36 And behold, your cousin Elisabeth, she has also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.

(1) Verses 40 and 41 show that when Mary and Elisabeth, who were related and were probably cousins, meet one another, it is John who leaps in Elisabeth's womb at the presence of Mary.

(2) It also shows that even though both women conceive in a miraculous way, Mary's is by far a greater more miraculous conception.

(3) Verse 76 shows that John is to be "only"—I do not really like to use that word "only"—a prophet. But if we would read chapter 1, verses 32 through 35, it shows that Jesus is the Son of God and King over the house of David.

(4) I will read this one in John 1:6-9:

John 1:6-9 There was a man sent from God whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light which lights every man that comes into the

world.

I think the best way to appreciate these four things that I have given you is to look at them in their context there in Luke 1 and in John 1, and try to put it back into the times these things were written, because the people held John in such high regard. Something had to be written in the gospels in order to show people who would read this that John was to be subordinated to Jesus. I just bring this to your attention because I want you to see John was held to be a very, very great man.

We have a tendency to think that John's ministry was little more than a blip on a radar screen. In terms of impact, and in terms of importance, my personal belief is that I do not believe there was ever a ministry greater than John's, except for Jesus', in terms of fulfilling the responsibility of his office. But because of our wrong perception, it sets up the possibility of not thinking very much of him.

John fulfilled Isaiah 40:3, and Malachi 3:1 as the messenger who prepared the way for the Messiah. In Luke 1:15-17, by God's own estimation, John would be great right off the bat. No other prophet that I know of was given that accolade from the highest source in the entire universe.

1. John's greatness lay in the office that he filled.
2. His greatness lay in the subject that he dealt with: repentance and preparing the way for Christ.
3. His greatness lay in the manner in which he did it; that is, in humility, calling no attention to himself, and voluntarily receding into the background when the Messiah appeared. Just like that—he turned himself away. You will see that in John 3:30.
4. He performed this function with great zeal.
5. His greatness lay in his personal attributes of character as being above reproach in terms of sin, of self-denial, and in terms of manner of life. He was courageous in the face of opposition.
6. He did his service for his entire life. I do not mean that he was preaching the whole time, but his entire life, from the womb, was devoted to God. John was "the crown" of the Old Testament prophets.
7. His greatness lay in the number and the greatness of his sacrifices, including his life in martyrdom.

Luke 1:17 And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

John the Baptist resembled Elijah, as he did the work of Elijah. What was the work of Elijah? Elijah revealed the true God through a ministry devoted to preaching repentance, and the certainty of things contained in the scriptures regarding Christ. And brethren, John did it without miracles! It plainly says in John 10:41 "John did no miracle."

It is obvious that God does not measure a man's greatness by the miracles that he does. The public looks to wealth, celebrity, or in this case miracles—doing great things; but the public's ideas of great things are not the same as God's.

We are going to look at two separate occasions. We will look first at Matthew 11. Jesus is the speaker here.

Matthew 11:13-14 For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you will receive it, ***this IS Elijah***, which was for to come.

We just read Luke 1:17 when the angel told Zechariah that John would *resemble* Elijah. Here Jesus says **John WAS Elijah!** And then Jesus said:

Matthew 11:15 He that has ears to hear, let him hear.

Jesus used that phrase whenever He was saying something He wanted people to *especially* listen to, to have regard for. Jesus is saying that John fulfilled Malachi 4:5-6. ***John was Elijah!***

Malachi 4:5-6 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.

John the Baptist fulfilled Malachi 4:5-6. John was Elijah. He was not Elijah risen from the dead. He *resembled* Elijah in the message that he brought, and he resembled Elijah in the disposition and the mannerisms in which he did what he did; but John still did no miracles. Jesus is saying that John the Baptist was Elijah in what he preached about, in the way he preached, and in the fulfillment of that prophecy.

We are going to go to Matthew 17:10-12. This occurred right after the Transfiguration, when they were coming down from the mountain.

Matthew 17:10-12 And his disciples asked him, saying, Why then say the scribes that Elijah must first come? And Jesus answered and said unto them, Elijah truly **shall** first come, and restore all things. But I say unto you that Elijah is come **already**, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed [wanted to]. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them.

In verses 11 and 12 Jesus is giving no indication that anybody is going to follow John the Baptist in that office, and I will show you this as we go along.

Part of the reason for the mention of Elijah is a reference to the prophecy given to Zechariah (John's father) in Luke 1:17 before John was even conceived in Elizabeth. Matthew 17:10-12 is Jesus' commentary on Malachi 4:5-6. This verse 12, I think, is one of the most commonly misunderstood scriptures in all the time we were in the Worldwide Church of God.

First of all Jesus is **not** contradicting what He said earlier, even though His statement seems to be that way when it says "*but*." The word "but" here introduces what appears to be a contradiction. His statement in verse 11 is the key to this. In verse 11 He is saying that the scribes correctly interpreted Malachi 4:5-6. In other words, the scribes were teaching that before the Messiah would come, Elijah had to come first. And so the disciples come along and they say, "Why did the scribes say this?" Jesus answered them by saying, "Elijah truly **shall** come first, **but I say unto you HE HAS ALREADY COME!**"

Now why would Jesus say that? It is because even though the scribes correctly interpreted Malachi 4:5-6, **they were still looking for Elijah, and he had already come!** Do you understand that? That scripture has already been fulfilled. Jesus is **not** saying one is going to come later on. He has already done it. Malachi 4:5-6 was fulfilled by John the Baptist; and so what is Malachi 4:5-6 about? It is about the arrival of the Messiah. The scribes had it correctly interpreted, but they did not recognize it when they heard it. They rejected it. Let me put this another way. Jesus is saying that Malachi 4:5-6 had been fulfilled by the greatest Old Testament prophet who ever lived.

Now what about "restoring all things" given in verse 11? Verse 11 says, "Elijah truly shall first come, and restore all things." Is it referring to doctrine? It can, but not

specifically. This is a very general statement. The Greek word that is translated "restore all things" literally means "put back again." It can mean "re-organize." It can mean "set up again." In regard to health it can, and is used, when somebody's health is restored and put back the way it should be. It can be used in the sense of authority; that is, "put back the authority again," or "to reinstall a government." It means "to straighten out." It means to re-organize so that things are straightened out.

What did John the Baptist do when he restored all things? What was he preaching about? He was preaching about the coming of the Messiah. The scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and all of those other peoples' ideas and conceptions and notions about the Messiah were all screwed up. So John did put things back in the right order so they would be able to see the Messiah when He came. He destroyed all of their false ideas. And you know from what God says about John the Baptist, that **he did it**, because He was very pleased with what this man did.

Let us reflect back. What did **Elijah** do? "How long halt you between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." (1 Kings 18:21) Elijah restored to people the knowledge of the true God. He enabled people to see God, and differentiate Him from all of the false Baals they were worshipping at the time. John the Baptist did the same thing, but he did it in reference to our God the Messiah. When He came, it was not a figment of peoples' imagination. John said, "This is the One. Follow Him." John enabled people to see God.

It was interesting the way one of those descriptions was worded, where it said, "They would not repent, that they might see God." They had to repent first, and God would have opened up their eyes; but they would not repent. John the Baptist did the work of Elijah by enabling people to see God.

Just remember that John the Baptist' ministry was to straighten out—that is, to restore all things concerning who was the true God, just like the original Elijah did in a little bit different setting.

Malachi 4:5-6 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.

As for John the Baptist turning the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to the fathers, logic demands that this refers to his preaching as having a

positive impact on family life. First of all, this interpretation fits into the historical background of times in which Malachi was written.

Are you aware that in Malachi 2 God says He hates divorce? Are you aware that He said He instituted marriage so that He could have "holy seed"? What was happening when Malachi was written? It was all that trouble you see written in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah about the family problems, and especially those which Nehemiah had to confront.

And so Malachi prophesied in those times, and at the very end of the book we are told that the way that is going to be prepared for the coming of the Messiah is going to be through a knowledge of right family life. "Turning the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to the fathers" is something I know this nation very sorely needs, because what are we being prepared for? **To live in a family!** We are not going to be in that family unless we know how to relate to one another, and to relate to the Father of that family.

The precursor of Jesus Christ taught about marriage and about divorce. Is it **not** interesting that his preaching about divorce cost him his life? There is a tie between "restoring all things." It is knowledge of family life that needs to be restored in order to enable us to be able to really see God. **God IS a family!** We are to begin practicing these things in our life, and to turn our hearts to one another in our own families, and within the church family of God as well.

Family problems were extant in both occasions in the time of Malachi and in the time of John the Baptist. I think we have to be very careful that we do not take this statement "restore all things" beyond the scope that it was prophesied to be part of his ministry and get into all kinds of fanciful interpretations of what is to be restored. We already know. The book of Malachi tells us what it is. It is about family, and loving one another.

It also says in Malachi 4:5 that He is going to send Elijah "before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD."

In biblical reckoning, when the Apostle John wrote I John (which we feel was in 90 AD), in verse 17 he said the world was already passing away, and in the very next verse he said:

I John 2:18 Little children, it is the **last time** [the margin says *the last hour*]: and as you have heard that antichrist shall come, even **now** are there many antichrists: whereby we know that it is the last time.

The time of anti-christ had already begun. You can also read another telling scripture in I Peter 4:7 in regard to this.

I Peter 4:7 But the end of all things is at hand: be you therefore sober, and watch unto prayer.

The "last days" began with the arrival of Jesus Christ and John the Baptist. The prophesied Elijah appeared just *before* the "last days" began, and so he was the last and greatest of the Old Testament prophets, and his preaching turned the hearts of the fathers to the children as he prepared the way for the Messiah.

There was only one commentary that I looked into that delved into the possibility of a **second** Elijah to come just before Christ's second coming. Even as it did so, it claimed that the concept was weak, seeing that Jesus so clearly made His case that John the Baptist was the Elijah, and that no more were to come. I want us to take a look at a scripture that is used to support that concept.

Matthew 16:18 And I say also unto you, That you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church: and the gates of hell [the grave] shall not prevail against it.

Now does it not say that the church will never die out? Yes it does. However, the way chosen to translate one word in this statement clearly alters the focus of what Jesus said. It is the word "prevail." It also means, "stand"—to stand. By choosing to translate the word as "prevail," it changes the church from being on the **offensive** against the kingdom of Satan, as represented by Hades, to being on the **defensive**, because it is continually under attack.

Jesus is promising that He would enable His church to be triumphant against Satan and death. Is the church constantly under attack? Yes it is. There have been several times, as far as we know, that it seemingly almost died out, but always it has emerged triumphant, and continues on. How was this accomplished when it almost died out? Well, Jesus Christ raised up a man to go forth and once again preach the gospel. One of the people we are most aware of is Peter Waldo. He was one of these clear examples. In the process he became the one God used to call others into His truth, and around him a continuation of the Church of God formed.

Prophets and Prophecy (Part 2) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

What this commentary said, was that using this interpretation, even the First Century apostles, as they took the gospel into new areas, became a *weak* type of Elijah, and so did all those men used down through the ages, like Peter Waldo, **also** become *weak* types of Elijah. Each one of them had to re-establish things and preach repentance as preparation for the receiving of the gospel and the Messiah, but not a single one of them was "**the** Elijah to come," because by Jesus' own words, that office and that prophecy has already been filled, and there is no higher authority. John the Baptist was *the Elijah*. That is one of the major reasons why he was so great.