

January 31- Feb. 4, 2022 Edition

# Following The Year Of ^Jesus Part 5

## John The Baptizer: His Origin Story

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

\* \* \* These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;). These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

\* \* \* Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside](https://www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside)). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you 'like' the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

**Monday Reflection:** This week (and probably the next 2 as well) we'll be diving into John The Baptizer (see what I did there? Diving in?) and talking about who he was, what he did, where he came from and what his story can teach us about Jesus' story and our own story as well. John The Baptizer is so important that all four gospel writers include his story in their accounts. That's a big deal. There's only one of Jesus' miracles that is recorded in all 4 gospels (other than the resurrection- that one is obviously in all 4 gospel accounts)- the feeding of the 5,000 with just a few fish and a couple of pieces of bread. Each gospel writer knew they had a limited amount of space so they included what they each considered to be the most important things. John The Baptizer makes the cut in all 4 of them. We'll be moving around and looking at all 4 accounts of John's story this week but let's start with something John (the apostle not the Baptizer) said about him:

God sent a man, John the Baptist, to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light. The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. John 1:6-9 (NLT)

One thing I hope you'll keep at the forefront of your mind is how every single one of the gospels beats with the same drumbeat- John The Baptizer is NOT the messiah- he's only a messenger. I hate using the word "only" because Jesus Himself says that John was the greatest human who had ever lived:

I tell you the truth, of all who have ever lived, none is greater than John the Baptist.  
Matthew 11:11 (NLT)

So it's pretty obvious that Jesus considers John The Baptizer's story to be pretty important (wondering why I keep calling him John The Baptizer instead of John The Baptist? Patience, we'll get to that in a couple of days). So if Jesus thinks John's story is important than we're going to try to give it the attention I think it deserves.

Tomorrow we'll start digging in to the man who Jesus says was up until that point in time, the greatest human who had ever lived. Maybe for today spend some time thinking about your own ideas of who John The Baptizer was, what he looked like, what he was tasked with doing and how that intersects with your own faith. I'll share with you how John's story intersects my own faith by saying that I think my own ministry is very similar to John's- not that I wear camel skin clothing or eat locusts and wild honey (the honey I eat comes from extremely civilized bees living right here in Eagle River, Alaska). I believe that God has given me (and Riverside Community Church) the unique task of "preparing the way" for him in a certain kind of modern human. I'll talk more about that when we get to Isaiah 40 but maybe that will give you something to think about for today.

**Tuesday Reflection:** One thing we know about John The Baptizer is that he was a cousin of Jesus'. Well, he was a relative. We're not sure exactly how close a relative because the Greek language didn't have a word that correlates perfectly to "cousin". Here's what we know about the connection between John and Jesus- when the angel Gabriel comes to Mary and invites her into God's plan to save the world he tells Mary this:

What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible for God! Luke 1:36-37 (NLT)

We know Elizabeth was Mary's relative but we don't know exactly how they were related. Elizabeth could have been a great aunt or a cousin. We just don't know for sure. What would that make John and Jesus? Probably cousins but how close is anyone's guess. I get so confused by how to describe family connections- second cousin once removed is something I'll hear people say but I'm not sure exactly what that means other than to say it's a cousin but not a first cousin. One time when I was visiting my mom's side of the family in Rogersville Missouri my uncle and aunt were trying to coach me up on how to navigate the deep weeds of familial connections. By the time they were done all I could remember was Ray Steven's song, I'm My Own Grandpa.

All that to say, we don't know for sure how close a relative John The Baptizer was to Jesus but we know their moms were pretty close. Does that mean John knew Jesus well? Maybe. Maybe not. I'm sure John had heard the stories surrounding his own birth to Zechariah and Elizabeth when they were REALLY old. John would have known Jesus' story as well and those stories make it pretty plain who is who in their relationship. John does seem to recognize his second cousin thrice removed when Jesus comes to be baptized by John when they're both 30 years old but other than that we just don't know. Like I said yesterday, the writers of the gospels were trying to pack in the most important stuff so they must not have felt like you and I needed that info.

We do know this- John The Baptizer's parents were REALLY old when they had John. We also know that John didn't grow up in Hebron (where his parents were from):

John grew up and became strong in spirit. And he lived in the wilderness until he began his public ministry to Israel. Luke 1:80 (NLT)

Why did he live in the wilderness? Oh so many possible reasons. I love this story because it has so many layers to it. There's a lot we don't know but there is a lot that I find fascinating that we can guess at and we'll do a lot of that in coming days. For today maybe spend some time thinking about what Jesus and John The Baptizer's relationship might have been like.

**Wednesday Reflection:** Ok so we know that John The Baptizer was a relative to Jesus but what else do we need to know about him? Well one thing I think is pretty important to point out is that John The Baptizer was not a Baptist (as in the Baptist denomination that has existed in this world for about 300-400 years). John was not a "Baptist" and Jesus didn't have other cousins named Ralph the Methodist or Bubba the Episcopalian. That's why I'm so committed to calling him John The Baptizer instead of John The Baptist- it just clears up a lot of possible confusion. He was called John The Baptizer because he baptized people. Which is kind of funny because baptizing people wasn't his most important job- if he was known for his most important job he would have been John The Messenger or John The Way Preparer.

In those days John the Baptizer came to the Judean wilderness and began preaching. Matthew 3:1 (NLT)

Notice how it's pointed out again that John came out of the wilderness (we'll get to why I'm hung up on that in a minute). And what did he come to do?

The prophet Isaiah was speaking about John when he said, "He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord's coming! Clear the road for him!' Matthew 3:3 (NLT)

That prophecy from Isaiah chapter 40 is an important one and we'll be spending quite a bit of time over the next couple of weeks doing a deep dive into that chapter but you get the gist from this small portion of the prophecy, don't you? John is the one who will announce the coming of the Messiah and prepare the way for Him. And you better believe the people were watching for the coming of the Messenger every bit as much as they were watching for the coming of the Messiah. Every Jew knew how God's Anointed One would be made known and they were waiting for the Messenger because they knew he had to come first.

And they were not disappointed. John cast a pretty impressive shadow. I'm guessing nobody that met him ever forgot him:

John's clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts and wild honey. People from Jerusalem and from all of Judea and all over the Jordan Valley went out to see and hear John. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. Matthew 3:4-6 (NLT)

What must he have looked like? I'm guessing pretty frightening. In lots of ways John fit the imagery of what first century Jews were looking for in the coming Messiah much more than Jesus did. John- as strange as he might have been- made sense to the people of Israel. Jesus rarely did.

So John was not a Baptist. Ok, then what was he? Oh I'm glad you asked that question because I love this. John dressed in a specific way and ate specific things and lived in a specific place that I believe immediately identified him to any first century Jew as a part of a very strange, very exclusive and very reclusive group of people- the Essenes. Who were the Essenes? They were a religious sect of Judaism that had abandoned Jewish society and culture to go live in the wilderness along the shores of the Dead Sea in a community called Qumran. If that place rings some bells for you it's because the ruins of Qumran is where the single greatest archaeological discovery of the 20th century was found- the Dead Sea Scrolls.

In the first century Israel was deeply divided (sound familiar?). There wasn't just one Jewish religion- there were many denominations that were deeply divided over how to go about loving God. You had the priests of Jerusalem (the Sadducees) who believed collaborating with Rome was the only way to keep the Jewish faith from being stamped out. You had the Pharisees who were disgusted by the Sadducees betrayal and so they withdrew from Temple worship because they felt the Temple had been profaned by the secular priests. The Pharisees (which means "the separate ones") believed that the only way to usher in the coming of the Messiah was to be so pious and so completely devoted to the Law of Moses that God would see their work and send the Messiah.

The Essenes were most closely aligned with the Pharisees but they felt like the Temple had been so thoroughly desecrated by the Sadducees that the only hope for Israel was for a small remnant of faithful Jews to completely remove themselves from Jewish society and life and move to a monastery far out in the wilderness and live such pious and pure lives that God would notice and send His Messiah. One of the main differences between the Essenes and the Pharisees was that the Pharisees were evangelistic (they tried to convert people to their cause through any means necessary) while the Essenes were not.

At all.

When the Dead Sea Scrolls were found 1900 years after the Essenes had hidden them in caves surrounding the Dead Sea to protect them from the Romans it was a Biblical gold mine. But among the Old Testament scrolls found so well preserved was a sort of handbook for being a good Essene. It contained instructions on what a good Essene should wear (camel skin clothing and leather belts), what an Essene should eat (locusts and wild honey were a staple for the community located about 25 miles from Jerusalem). Sound like anyone we've been talking about today? Oh yeah, and one more thing- the Essenes were baptizing fanatics. They baptized themselves (an important distinction that we'll see completely revolutionized by John and Jesus) multiple times a day. They felt like they had to make themselves pure by constantly washing themselves in one of the dozens of mikvehs (ritual purity cleansing pools) that was sprinkled around Qumran.

So why would John have grown up in Qumran? Well, remember his parents were REALLY old when they had him. If they were worried about living long enough to raise him they would have looked for a place for John to grow up in. The things the angel Gabriel told Zechariah about who John would be sound an awful lot like what the Essenes were about in Qumran:

But the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. Luke 1:13-17 (NLT)

It's my belief that John was taken to Qumran by his parents at an early age and that he was raised by the Essenes. It just fits with what we know about John The Baptizer's story.

But John takes what the Essenes are about and does one thing very differently than they do- John becomes evangelistic in his efforts to prepare the way for the Messiah. All the sects of Judaism in the first century thought they were preparing the way for the Messiah but only John really knew what that would look like. What it would mean.

And prepare the way is exactly what he did. We'll talk more about John The Baptizer tomorrow but for today maybe spend some time thinking about John's message and how much we need a similar message today- prepare the way for the LORD. Make His paths straight. It's still God's plan for each one of us. How do you see it playing out in your own life?

**Thursday Reflection:** One more thought on John's origin story for this week- John The Baptizer didn't know everything. There was a ton (as it turned out) that John wasn't informed of by God. We know that he did know that he himself was NOT the Messiah:

Everyone was expecting the Messiah to come soon, and they were eager to know whether John might be the Messiah. John announced: "Someone is coming soon who is greater than I am- so much greater that I'm not even worthy to stoop down like a slave and untie the straps of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!" Mark 1:6-8 (NLT)

He was constantly telling people, "I'm not the One you're waiting for- I'm only the messenger preparing the way for Him." He knew that much. He knew he was to preach a message of repentance and integrity. But there was a lot he didn't know. Including who the Messiah would be:

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! He is the one I was talking about when I said, 'A man is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.' I did not recognize him as the Messiah, but I have been baptizing with water so that he might be revealed to Israel." John 1:29-31 (NLT)

John almost certainly knew Jesus while he was growing up. He almost certainly knew the story of the angel who came to his own father, Zechariah and who also went to Mary. He almost certainly knew that Jesus was VERY special and that Jesus was a bigger deal than John was but it's pretty obvious that John didn't know Jesus was the Messiah he was preparing the way for. He says it a couple of times in the gospels. He learned that Jesus was the One at Jesus' baptism.

But even after he knows Jesus is the Messiah John still struggles with questions and doubts just like you and me:

John the Baptist, who was in prison, heard about all the things the Messiah was doing. So he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the Messiah we've been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?" Matthew 11:2-3 (NLT)

Why does John need to ask if he found out at Jesus' baptism that Jesus was the Messiah they were expecting? Because Jesus confused everyone- including John and His own mother. In most ways John The Baptizer was much more what the Jews of the first century were expecting in a Messiah than Jesus was. John was strange but John made sense to the people of Israel. Jesus just confused the heck out of them. Why is He doing what He's doing? Why isn't He doing what we thought the Messiah was supposed to do? Mary had that question at least once during Jesus' ministry. John has the same question. What's going on? Why aren't you doing things the way I thought/think you should be doing them?

We'll dive into that story much more deeply in a few months but let me just point out today that in this one thing we have more in common with John than we know. I don't know about you but I've spent many an hour questioning why God is doing what He's doing and why He isn't doing what I think He should be doing. But like John the Baptizer- God doesn't give us all the info we think we need. Knowledge of the ways of God is given on a need-to-know basis and much of it we don't need to know. But that's hard for me. Maybe it's hard for you too. I know it was difficult for John.

But John didn't let the things he didn't know stop him from doing the job God gave him to do. And that's an important lesson I think we should all learn from John. Don't let what we don't know stop us from doing the job God has given to each one of us. And what is that job, you ask? To shine. To live a life that radiates the goodness of God. How do we do that? Well, according to the book of Proverbs it's by choosing the path of "right-living":

The ways of right-living people glow with light; the longer they live, the brighter they shine. But the road of wrongdoing gets darker and darker- travelers can't see a thing; they fall flat on their faces. Proverbs 4:18-19 (MES)

What exactly is "right living"? It's choosing the path that John chose. It's living lives of repentance and integrity and love. And that's what changes the world- not knowledge. Knowledge is great as far as it goes but it's not what changes the world unless it's accompanied by repentance, integrity and love.

This is how individual lives are changed- one step at a time in the direction of either light or darkness. It's also how the world is changed. One individual choice won't make much difference usually in how much light or darkness is in our lives. But over the course of a lifetime our trajectories matter and will either bathe us and everything around us in God's light or it will lead us further and further into darkness until we can't take a step without fear of tripping up and falling hard.

So let's learn a lesson from John and ask ourselves if we're on the path of right-living where Jesus' light shines all around us and gives us confidence to strike out following in the footsteps of Jesus. And if we're not, then maybe today is a good day to start doing that.

**Friday Reflection:** The following is from Max Lucado's book, In The Grip Of Grace, that I share in these reflections about once a year. Especially in light of our discussion of how many different factions of Judaism existed in the first century. The same could be said of modern American Christianity. So many flavors. Who's right? Who's wrong? What does Jesus think of all of this? Max Lucado helped me see things in a much different way than I was told growing up.

### **Life Aboard The Fellow-Ship:**

God has enlisted us in his navy and placed us on his ship. The boat has one purpose—to carry us safely to the other shore.

This is no cruise ship; it's a battleship. We aren't called to a life of leisure; we are called to a life of service. Each of us has a different task. Some, concerned with those who are drowning, are snatching people from the water. Others are occupied with the enemy, so they man the cannons of prayer and worship. Still others devote themselves to the crew, feeding and training the crew members.

Though different, we are the same. Each can tell of a personal encounter with the captain, for each has received a personal call. He found us among the shanties of the seaport and invited us to follow him. Our faith was born at the sight of his fondness, and so we went.

We each followed him across the gangplank of his grace onto the same boat. There is one captain and one destination. Though the battle is fierce, the boat is safe, for our captain is God. The ship will not sink. For that, there is no concern.

There is concern, however, regarding the disharmony of the crew. When we first boarded we assumed the crew was made up of others like us. But as we've wandered these decks, we've encountered curious converts with curious appearances. Some wear uniforms we've never seen, sporting styles we've never witnessed. "Why do you look the way you do?" we ask them.

"Funny," they reply. "We were about to ask the same of you."

The variety of dress is not nearly as disturbing as the plethora of opinions. There is a group, for example, who clusters every morning for serious study. They promote rigid discipline and somber expressions. "Serving the captain is serious business," they explain. It's no coincidence that they tend to congregate around the stern.

There is another regiment deeply devoted to prayer. Not only do they believe in prayer, they believe in prayer by kneeling. For that reason you always know where to locate them; they are at the bow of the ship.

And then there are a few who staunchly believe real wine should be used in the Lord's Supper. You'll find them on the port side.

Still another group has positioned themselves near the engine. They spend hours examining the nuts and bolts of the boat. They've been known to go below deck and not come up for days. They are occasionally criticized by those who linger on the top deck, feeling the wind in their hair and the sun on their face. "It's not what you learn," those topside argue. "It's what you feel that matters."

And, oh, how we tend to cluster.

Some think once you're on the boat, you can't get off. Others say you'd be foolish to go overboard, but the choice is yours.

Some believe you volunteer for service; others believe you were destined for the service before the ship was even built.

Some predict a storm of great tribulation will strike before we dock; others say it won't hit until we are safely ashore.

There are those who speak to the captain in a personal language. There are those who think such languages are extinct.

There are those who think the officers should wear robes, there are those who think there should be no officers at all, and there are those who think we are all officers and should all wear robes.

And, oh, how we tend to cluster.

And then there is the issue of the weekly meeting at which the captain is thanked and his words are read. All agree on its importance, but few agree on its nature. Some want it loud, others quiet. Some want ritual, others spontaneity. Some want to celebrate so they can meditate; others meditate so they can celebrate. Some want a meeting for those who've gone overboard. Others want to reach those overboard but without going overboard and neglecting those on board.

And, oh, how we tend to cluster.

The consequence is a rocky boat. There is trouble on deck. Fights have broken out. Sailors have refused to speak to each other. There have even been times when one group refused to acknowledge the presence of others on the ship. Most tragically, some adrift at sea have chosen not to board the boat because of the quarreling of the sailors.

"What do we do?" we'd like to ask the captain. "How can there be harmony on the ship?" We don't have to go far to find the answer.

On the last night of his life Jesus prayed a prayer that stands as a citadel for all Christians:

I pray for these followers, but I am also praying for all those who will believe in me because of their teaching. Father, I pray that they can be one. As you are in me and I am in you, I pray that they can also be one in us. Then the world will believe that you sent me. (John 17:20)

How precious are these words. Jesus, knowing the end is near, prays one final time for his followers. Striking, isn't it, that he prayed not for their success, their safety, or their happiness. He prayed for their unity. He prayed that they would love each other.

As he prayed for them, he also prayed for "those who will believe because of their teaching." That means us! In his last prayer Jesus prayed that you and I (and every other believer on the planet) be one.

**Prayer:** Father, forgive me for the times I've clustered with those who are like me while being suspicious of those who aren't. Show me how to live in unity with others who follow You. In Jesus' Name, amen.