

Joke: Once, in the 1820's, a little boy called Sam was playing in the yard behind his house. During his pretend fighting game, he knocked over the outhouse. Now Sam was upset and worried that he would get into trouble so he ran into the woods and didn't come out until after got dark. When he arrived back home, his pappy was waiting for him. He asked suspiciously, "Son, did you knock over the outhouse this afternoon?" "No, pappy," Sam lied. "Well, let me tell you a story," said the father. "Once, not that long ago, Mr Lincoln received a shiny new axe from his father. Excited, he tried it out on a tree, swiftly cutting it down. But as he looked at the tree, with dismay he realized it was his mother's favorite tree," his pappy paused." just like you, he ran into the woods. When he returned, his pappy asked, 'Abraham, did you cut down the old tree?' Abraham answered with, 'Father, I cannot tell a lie. I did indeed chop down the tree.' That's why they called him honest Abe. Then his father said, 'Well, since you were honest with me, you are spared from punishment. I hope you have learned your lesson, though.' So, Sam's father asked again," did you knock down the outhouse?" "Pappy, I cannot tell a lie any more." said the little boy. "I did indeed knock down the outhouse." Then his father spanked Sam. The boy whimpered, "Pappy, I told you the truth! Why did you spank me?" Pappy answered, "Because Abraham Lincoln's father wasn't in the tree when he chopped it down!"

Happy Independence Day!

Before I begin today check out this video and let this be our prayer as well today.

Within the history of our nation, there have always been men or woman that have inspired us with their courage in times of change or crisis.

- Men like Patrick Henry, who said, “Give me liberty, or give me death.”
- Or Abraham Lincoln, who reminded us that our nation was “Conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”
- Who could forget the likes of Martin Luther King, who dreamt of the day when his children would be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.
- And of course, we have Rosa Parks the civil rights activist who said, “The only tired I was, was the tired of giving in.”

And I believe in biblical history, we have men and woman that have inspired us as well. Inspired us to live better, do better, be better.

Think of Joshua standing before the people saying, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

Or Ester who said, “If I perish, I perish.”

We have the Apostle Paul who said, “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.”

Or Jesus, saying, “Greater love has no man than this: that he lay down his life for his friends.”

Today I’m starting a series on someone else that has influenced a culture.

Before Jesus, there was a man who came before him named John. It was John who said,

- “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”
- “I have seen and testify that this is the Son of God.”

It was John who said,

- “After me comes one whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”
- And of course the quote many of us have heard and I hope want to live by “He must increase, I must decrease.”

In the world we live in, we need the inspiration of men and women like these. Why? Because. . .

- They encourage us.
- They give us hope.
- They help us to see how we might live our lives better,
- At a higher level, with greater intentionality, and purpose, and usefulness to the Lord.

So, for the next several weeks, we are going to be looking into the life of John, the son of Zechariah, who people call “John the Baptist.” The one who was the forerunner of Jesus.

The definition of a forerunner is: one that precedes and indicates the approach of another.

This was John.

John was born six months before Jesus, spent less than 2 years doing public ministry, yet listen to how Jesus describes him,

Matthew 11:11 (NIV) - ¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

I think John is one of the least-taught-on lives in the entire Bible, and yet he appears in over 23 chapters of Scripture, the Biblical record covers 2,000 years of history. And John is spoken of in 750 years of that history.

Today as I start this series on John let me share five facts concerning him.

1. John was the Forerunner of Jesus.

When the angel comes to Zechariah and tells him that his son will be the forerunner of the Messiah, Gabriel says,

Luke 1:17 (NIV) - ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

The Forerunner is the “one who goes before.”

2. John was a relative of Jesus.

His mother, Elizabeth, was related to Jesus’ mother. When the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she was going to conceive, he said:

Luke 1:36 (NIV) - ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month.

Most agree he was a cousin to Jesus.

3. As I mentioned a few moments ago John was a greatest. Remember Jesus said of him, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist;

Look what else Jesus says about him in the Gospel of Matthew:

Matthew 11:14 (NIV) - ¹⁴And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.

Elijah was arguably the greatest prophet in the Old Testament. The final words of the Old Testament are:

Malachi 4:5 (NIV) - ⁵“See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.

Jesus also said in the Gospel according to Luke:

Luke 7:26 (NIV) - ²⁶But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

And then, two verses later, Jesus says reiterating what Matthews Gospel told us. . .

Luke 7:28 (NIV) - ²⁸I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”

Mohammed Ali may have proclaimed himself to be The Greatest, but Jesus gave that title to John.

4. John was a Rabbi.

According to Ray Vaanderlan, rabbis were rare in 1st century Israel. There were less than a dozen who lived within 50 years either side of Jesus. To become a rabbi, one had to memorize and master of the entire Jewish Scriptures (which we now call “the Old Testament” and they called “Tanakh”). More importantly, to become a rabbi, you had to receive authority directly from God.

Now, today, we have thousands of rabbis. They go through Jewish seminaries and get their authority by being ordained.

In Jesus' day, rabbis didn't get ordained, they got "smicha." They got authority directly from God and then given recognition of that divine authority by two other rabbis who would lay their hands on them and confer smicha.

So that when they interpreted Scripture, they weren't just explaining Scripture, they were giving God's insights into the Scriptures.

John had smicha. How can I be so sure? Two reasons. One comes in John 3:25 where it says...

John 3:25 (NIV) - ²⁵ An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing.

John had disciples. Teachers of the law did not have disciples. Only Rabbis had disciples. The second comes in next verse, where it says...

John 3:26 (NIV) - ²⁶ They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him."

Simply put His disciples called him "Rabbi."

This whole idea we find in the book of Exodus, Moses, the first Jewish rabbi, and his brother Aaron, put their hands on 70 men, and gave them a measure of God's authority. They became judges for the nation of Israel. The Jews believed that those judges would find others who had skills and knowledge and they would put their hands on them. And slowly over time, this authority was passed from teacher to student, generation after generation.

In the time of Jesus, there were a few, maybe a dozen within a 100-year time span of Him, and the Jews believed their authority was passed down from Moses. John was one of these rare and magnificent men of God in the tradition and line of Moses.

I said all that because this is going to be important a few weeks from now when we look at the anointing of Jesus.

5. John came to prepare people to receive Jesus.

In John 1:7, John the Apostle says this about John the Baptist...

John 1:7 (NIV) - ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe.

So, John's purpose was to prepare people to believe.

In John 1:31, John the Baptist says this about himself...

John 1:31 (NIV) - ³¹I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

The reason he baptized people was so that they might be ready to receive Jesus when He came.

And in John 3:30, the Baptist says...

He must increase, but I must decrease. John 3:30

So, he's clear on his mission: it's not to draw attention to himself, but to draw attention to Jesus.

John appears in 23 chapters of Scripture, over 750 years.

John's story, and very first message came 700 years before his birth.

It was a message of comfort and encouragement and hope.

How many of you could use some of that today?

The message was delivered, not literally by John, but vicariously, by God, through the pen of the Prophet Isaiah.

Let me close today by sharing that with you. . .

To fully appreciate this message, you have to understand a little about what was going on in people's lives in that day.

During this time, the people of Israel were divided into two kingdoms. The kingdom of the north was called "Israel," and the kingdom of the south was called "Judah."

At that time, the nation of Iran, which was then called "Assyria," was strong and aggressive and on the march. They were conquering and gobbling up the nations around them...

It was a frightening time if you lived in the vicinity.

So, God does what He always does when His people are in peril: He sends them a prophet, a spokesman, to speak to them on His behalf.

God sends Isaiah the prophet to speak to the kingdom of the south. For 36 chapters, Isaiah warns them that Assyria is coming. They're coming as a judgement because of the sins of the people.

Then, in chapter 37, Judah's king, Hezekiah, seeks Isaiah's counsel, and prays. He asks God to forgive the people and prolong their days in the land. And God does. God says to

Hezekiah, “Because you asked, I will postpone my judgment on Judah. Their punishment will not come by the hands of the Assyrians, but by the hands of the Babylonians, years in the future.”

Assyria is modern day Iran.

Babylonia is modern day Iraq.

Interesting isn't that look at Iran and Iraq today, things haven't changed much over the last 2,700 years have they?

Isaiah 39 ends with the prophecy that Judah is going to be overrun one day by the nation of Babylon.

Isaiah 39:5–7 (NIV) - ⁵ Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, “Hear the word of the LORD Almighty: ⁶ The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD. ⁷ And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.”

Isaiah spoke these words in 703 B.C.

Imagine how you'd feel if you learned that your children and grandchildren would one day be carried off into a foreign land, and many of them would become eunuchs in the palace of a foreign oppressor?

The people were devastated. They mourned. And God heard their mourning, as He always does. And God responded, as He always does.

And we pick up the story in the next chapter.

We get to turn the page from the bad news of Isaiah 39 to God's good news of Isaiah 40.

Isaiah 40:1–2 (NIV) - Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

I love that . . . her sin has been paid for. Aren't you glad our sins have been paid for as well.

Then we keep reading and these next couple verses introduces us to the coming of this Forerunner we have been looking at.

Isaiah 40:3–4 (NIV) - ³A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

How do we know these words are the words about John the Baptist?

Matthew 3, Mark 1, Luke 3 and John 1 all quote Isaiah 40:3 and attribute "the voice" to John.

Here's the message God gives the discouraged people of 700 B.C. – and I might add for all the discouraged people today as well:

Isaiah 40:5 (NIV) - ⁵And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

One day the Forerunner will come and declare that the glory of the Lord will appear, and all humanity will see it. It's a

message of hope and encouragement and community together.

Isaiah 40:6–8 (NIV) - ⁶A voice says, “Cry out.” And I said, “What shall I cry?” “All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. ⁷The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. ⁸The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.”

He’s saying, “Here’s a little perspective: we’re not very big and we don’t last very long.” BUT – God is big, and his words and promises last forever!

Verse 9. . .

Isaiah 40:9 (NIV) - ⁹You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, “Here is your God!”

This verse tells us as the song says, Go tell it on the mountain. Shout the good news. And church we need to shout the good news. We need to show those that don’t know Him who he is. We too need to point out “behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

So, the first several verses are about John. Then in verse 10 we start to see what John’s mission to reveal the one who is coming is all about.

Isaiah 40:10–11 (NIV) - ¹⁰See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. ¹¹He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

Isn't that good?

This is How God Prepares the World for His son.

This is the message of the Forerunner.

If you're discouraged. If you're afraid. If you're worried about what's happening to you, listen to what God tells us through the message of the Forerunner:

1. When I am discouraged, God is not silent.

God says. . .

That he speaks tenderly according to Isaiah 40 verses 1 verse 2.

I like that word, "tenderly." When we're discouraged, God speaks tenderly.

Two chapters after this, Isaiah describes the tenderness of the Messiah this way:

Isaiah 42:2–3 (NIV) - ²He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. ³A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;

How softly do you have to walk to keep from breaking a bruised reed?

How softly do you have to speak to avoid blowing out a smoldering wick?

When the prophet Elijah was discouraged because Jezebel was seeking his life, the Bible says God spoke to him in a gentle whisper.

When the Israelites were discouraged because the Babylonians were coming, God sent a prophet to speak tenderly to them.

When the Israelites were discouraged because they were oppressed by the Romans, God sent Rabbi John the Baptist, to speak to them about what God was about to do.

The Forerunner's message to you is, when you are discouraged, God will speak with His tenderness to be your help in time of need.

God is speaking to you and I. He's always speaking. Sometimes we don't hear Him, because the TV is on, or we're on YouTube, or Facebook or Instagram, or we're playing our music so loud it drowns out the voice of God.

Listen and you will hear the Lord. He is there and He is not silent!

The second thing the Forerunner says is...

2. God always has a plan for His people. (Even when you and I can't see it.)

Verses 3 and 4 once again says:

Isaiah 40:3–4 (NIV) - ³A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

When a king is coming into the court, they roll out a royal carpet for him.

But the Forerunner is announcing the coming of the king of kings. When he comes, forget the carpet, "We're going to

pave a highway for Him. We're going to fill in the low spots and knock down the high spots, so that he can come to us.

When Martin Luther King wanted to encourage himself, he preached "Every valley will be lifted up and every mountain and hill will be leveled." It reminded him that God was going to make everything right one day.

What the Forerunner is saying is "God has a plan, and His plan is to smooth it all over."

I'm reminded of what Jeremiah told us as well. . .

Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV): For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

The third thing the Forerunner says is. . .

3. God always has words of hope for His people.

Listen to this:

Isaiah 40:5 (NIV) - ⁵And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

And the fourth Forerunner principle is related to number two, not only does God have plans, but. . .

4. God plans are thought out, He not only planned for Jesus, but He also planned for the Forerunner John. And He planned out something for us as well.

Isaiah 40:9–11 (NIV) - ⁹You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰See,

the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. ¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

So, John comes and here is his words about the Messiah.

John is saying, “You may be scared. You may feel small. Your circumstances may seem overwhelming. But Messiah is coming, and He has strength you cannot fathom. Strength to overcome. So that when trials come your way, you can stand. You can have hope. You can believe that this is not the end for you.

For Immanuel, the God who is with us, will be with you and in you”

To a discouraged people, who were worried they were going to be conquered in the future, God delivered this message, 100 years before the conquest came.

At the same time, God was delivering this message to a people who would come later – to the people of John and Jesus’ day. People who had been conquered by the Romans.

And at the same time, God delivered this message to us. To a people who are tempted to feel conquered by cancer, and by addictions, by debt and by feelings of loneliness and discouragement.

Let me read this to you again:

Isaiah 40:11 (NIV) - ¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

If you're a child of God. – Don't fear. Don't be afraid. God will protect you, like a shepherd protects his sheep. Even now, this moment, He is wrapping His arms around you and carrying you next to His heart.

I love his last phrase:

He gently leads those that have young, another translation says those who are nursing.

God says to us, through John, through Isaiah, "I'm leading you. I'm gently leading you. You are in My arms."

Isn't that good?

The last thing I would want you to glean from the Forerunner is that the Forerunner was not the Messiah.

He was a man, a human, a person, like you and me. God used his voice, his words, to encourage people. And God can use you and your voice to encourage people as well.

If you're discouraged, God will speak tenderly to you.

- A bruised reed He will not break.
- A smoldering wick He will not put out.

But God will also provide human voices and hearts and hands and prayers to help you.

God uses people to encourage discouraged people.

I hope this week you'll get to be a tender voice for someone who needs encouragement.

After being introduced to the world by the Forerunner, Jesus said...

Matthew 11:28–30 (NIV) - ²⁸“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Prayer

Join us next week as we learn how God prepared a family to receive this one called John.