

# WHAT WE LEARN FROM A PROPHET!

## Steps to a New Life:

Matthew 3:1-17

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Bethany Church

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Diane and I have had the privilege of watching each of our four children learn to walk. That is a lot of fun. Some of them learned faster than others. I remember with one I thought, “When is she going to walk?” I couldn’t wait. It couldn’t be soon enough.” Then after that one was walking and another one came along, I thought, “Oh boy! Wait ‘til she walks! We’re in for it then.” Despite the increase of parent skills demanded by mobile youngsters, it is exciting. Each teetering, tottering step is exciting. It moves babies closer to the time when they will more fully enjoy the adventurous life God has given them.

For the past two months we have discussed steps that can be just as awkward, and even more profound. We’ve looked at steps to the new life God offers every human being. God has a new life for every person on this globe. It’s a life for which they were designed. It’s a life that satisfies their deepest longings and fulfills their very purpose for living. We’ve considered what steps lead to new life. We looked at those steps in view of the experience of a thief and a mother, the call of a king, the meaning of a cross and a tomb, the lesson of a pearl, and the teaching of a rabbi. Today, we’ll complete this discussion by looking at the person God sent to prepare a nation for the presence of Jesus.

Jesus didn't just come to the world and minister. God sent someone ahead of him to prepare people to receive what he offered. This preparation phase was critical. It is critical in many things. For example, right by my mouth is a special microphone. I use to wear a remote mike attached to my shirt, but every time I turned my head a number of people could not hear what I said. This microphone is part of the preparation so some can hear and receive my ministry. Hanging on the walls are acoustic tiles. Some were up last week and as a result, one person commented that he heard everything I said for the very first time. In a couple weeks, there will be a congregational vote on a building plan that includes air conditioning the sanctuary. For some folks because of health or for other reasons, we will have to deal with the heat before they can hear the gospel from us and receive our ministry. That's preparation.

Preparation for Jesus came in the ministry of John the Baptist. The gospel writer Luke reveals how pivotal John's ministry was. He writes:

***When they heard this (Jesus' teaching), all the people, including the unjust tax collectors, agreed that God's plan was right, for they had been baptized by John. But the Pharisees and experts in religious law had rejected God's plan for them, for they had refused John's baptism.*** (Luke 7:29-30, NLT)

This statement is crucial because it points to how pivotal John the Baptist was. Those who refused John's baptism rejected God's plan for their lives. They consequently missed out on Jesus and could not celebrate or embrace what Jesus taught. Those who received John's ministry embraced Jesus and the new life he brought.

People received John's ministry in three ways. First, they listened to him. They stopped whatever they were doing, went to where he was and took the time to listen. These were not people with an abundance of free time. They were not people with money looking for a good time. For many, their existence was hand to mouth. If they stopped working, they'd stop eating.

They could not follow every curiosity. For them to leave their work, they had to consider the event important. Jesus once asked a crowd about John the Baptist:

***Who is this man in the wilderness that you went out to see? Did you find him weak as a reed, moved by every breath of wind? Or were you expecting to see a man dressed in expensive clothes? No, people who wear beautiful clothes and live in luxury are found in palaces, not in the wilderness. Were you looking for a prophet? Yes, and he is more than a prophet. John is the man to whom the Scriptures refer when they say, "Look, I am sending my messenger before you, and he will prepare your way before you."*** (Luke 7:24-27, NLT)

To receive John's ministry, people had to decide to go, see and listen to him. Is it possible God has sent someone to you to prepare you to receive what Christ offers? Listen!

Second, people received John's ministry by agreeing with him. They agreed that the rule of God was coming and they would be judged. Interestingly, both the gospel writer Matthew and Jesus himself, according to Luke, made a point about John's appearance. God was speaking to the people not only through the mouth of John the Baptist but also through his life. He wore a garment woven from camel's hair, not silk or cotton. He lived in the wilderness, not in houses or apartments. He ate wild honey and locusts. Talk about dieting! My reaction is how do you find that every day? Moreover, I'm not sure I want to. Who wants to mess with bees everyday? And the locusts? Crunch, crunch! I'm not inspired... even with ketchup or hot sauce.

People seeing John had to notice the contrast between their clothes, homes and food and John's. They must have wondered if their lives were misdirected or wrongly focused. They spent their days concerned with whatever directly offers food, provides clothes, and brings shelter, even compromising here and shaving corners, whatever was demanded. Those who received John's ministry agreed with John that they were caught in a web of unbelief and sinfulness. They agreed that they needed to turn from their destructive and damning sins. They agreed that they were far away and they needed to turn to God.

In my experience with churches, I've seen people take two different paths with Christ. Some worshipers become convinced that they are caught in destructive and damning sins. They are conscious-stricken. When they finally receive forgiveness from Christ, their hearts are humble, tender, and full of gratitude and devotion. Do you remember the story of the sinful woman who wept and wept and then used her own tears to wash Jesus' feet? Jesus said,

***I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven-for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.*** (Luke 7:47, NIV)

Other worshipers may start out that way, but after a time they begin to measure their life by the belief that they have followed Jesus' words. They become defensive, self-righteous and critical of others. They have little patience or mercy in their hearts. They soon walk the same path as people who have never been convinced that their sins are damning and destructive, who have never been convinced they need deliverance from their grip and guilt. For these worshipers their belief in Christ is just another merit badge, and John the Baptist? He is an oddity and irritation. Thankfully he is gone, and now anyone who ministers in that spirit is unwelcome.

The third way people embraced John' ministry was by submitting to it. They embraced his directives, publicly confessed their need for forgiveness and renounced their sins as they in hope were immersed in the waters of the Jordan River. They didn't just listen. They didn't just agree. They submitted to God's work through him.

One day Jesus arrived at the Jordan where John was. Jesus wanted to receive John's ministry, to be baptized. John protested. His ministry was one where people recognized their sinfulness, renounced them and sought forgiveness. Why would Jesus come, submit to John and be baptized? John asked Jesus. Jesus said, "***It must be done, because we must do everything that is right***" (Matthew 3:15, NLT). Literally, Jesus said, "***We must fulfill all righteousness.***" What does that mean? It means "I'm here because my heavenly father says so." Jesus probably

didn't know the reason why he was being baptized. He just knew to do his father's will he needed to receive John's ministry. You see Jesus' father and your father are one and the same. Your father not only sent Jesus to save you, he sent him to show you the way to receive that salvation. When Jesus in obedience came out of the waters of baptism, he received the affirmation of his father and the anointing of the Holy Spirit. He was empowered for the life and work he would do in this world. Similarly, when you face your destructive and damning sins, when you confess, renounce and seek the forgiveness and life that Jesus offers you in the cross, you receive the affirmation and anointing that brings you the power you need to live now and forever.

Jesus submitted to John in faith that his father would work. People submitted in hope that God would work. They listened, they agreed and they submitted. Consequently, they were ready for the new life and power Jesus brought them. They received from Jesus because they were prepared by the ministry of John. Others could not receive. They were still defensive about their sins. Their hearts were hard. They were self-righteous. How about you?

Are you listening to the messenger God sent you? Have you faced how damning and destructive your sins are? Have you seen its poison in the people you've hurt? Do you realize that God will soon hold you accountable? Your excuses may not cut it. Are you ready for help? Then listen to the messenger, agree with the assessment and submit to the ministry. Renounce your sin, not just your sinfulness. Be specific; deal with your individual sins. Renounce what you know is damning. Call for Jesus to forgive and receive his mercy. With that forgiveness a taste of divine love will come and it will never let you go.