

John the Baptist

A first Person Portrayal

by Forrest C. Gilmore

Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand! Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance! Turn from your wicked ways! Put your faith in God, and He will save your souls from hell!"

Good morning, my Friends! I hope you were not startled by that bombastic entrance!

I was just repeating some words I said quite some time ago. Those words were laid upon my heart, I felt, by God Himself.

My name is John. Some refer to me as John the Baptist, because I often baptize in the Jordan river those who respond to my messages and feel the need for this symbolic cleansing. At that time, some even felt that my ministry was prophesied by Isaiah the prophet when he said, "THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT!'"

My message of repentance, however, is an important one. All of us have sinned, you know, and therefore God requires that each of us turn from that old lifestyle if we are to live for God and be with Him in eternity. I trust that each of you has made that important decision. If not, I want to share some things with you that will encourage you to do so.

But first, let me tell you something about myself, for, in a way, I am a miracle.

My father's name is Zacharias; my mother's name is Elizabeth. My father was a Jewish priest, but both my parents are devout practitioners of their faith. Unfortunately, my mother was barren until quite late in life, even though they prayed often to God for a son or daughter.

Now it happened that while my father was performing his priestly service before God in the appointed order of his division, according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

10 And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.

11 And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense.

12 Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear gripped him.

13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.

14 "You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.

15 "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb.

16 "And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God.

17 "It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

18 My father said to the angel, "How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years."

19 The angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.

20 "And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time."

21 The people were waiting for Zacharias, and were wondering at his delay in the temple.

22 But when he came out, he was unable to speak to them; and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple; and he kept making signs to them, and remained mute.

When the days of his priestly service were ended, he went back home, and my mother later became pregnant, but she kept herself in seclusion for five months.

Six months into her pregnancy, my mother's relative Mary came to visit her. When Mary arrived, mother felt the baby in her womb began to move about as if it were joyous. Somehow, my mother knew that something was special about Mary's baby.

Luke 1:57-66 (NASB)

When I was born, my mother's neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her; and they were rejoicing with her.

When I was eight days old, they brought me to be circumcised, and they were going to call me Zacharias, after my father. But Mother answered and said, "No indeed; he shall be called John."

61 And they said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who is called by that name."

So they asked my father about this.

63 And he asked for a tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they were all astonished.

Then suddenly, my father was able to speak again, and he began to praise God.

65 Fear came on all those living around them; and all these matters were being talked about in all the hill country of Judea.

66 All who heard them kept these things in mind, saying, "What then will this child turn out to be?" For the hand of the Lord was certainly with him.

So my birth was special, and my name was given to my father by an angel of God. But there is more to this story, for my relative Mary's pregnancy was even more amazing. My parents informed me that Mary became pregnant while she was still a virgin, before she and Joseph, her husband, were married. I could not believe what they were telling me! My cousin Jesus was actually the Son of God, and that He was the Messiah, the Anointed One, spoken of in our Scriptures. This was hard to believe. Of course, I didn't go around sharing all of this. My parents warned me to just keep this to myself, out of fear as to what might happen if this story got out.

As Jesus and I played together as children, and as He got older, I could tell that there was something special about Him. He never got into trouble like the rest of us. He kept to Himself a lot, and it seemed like He was always praying. Of course, I had a little understanding of why that was. As we became older, he told me about how God was so real to Him, and He began to share with me some of the things that would happen when he became an adult. When Jesus was in His twenties, His father Joseph died, and Jesus had to run the family carpentry business and help His mother take care of His brothers and sisters. But He knew that in the next few years, God's plan for His life would take a different turn.

Well, God had plans for me, too, and so after many years I embarked upon my own ministry. I left the regions of Galilee and went south, to the regions around Jerusalem. My faith was very important to me, so I went to learn from the Scribes and priests near the

temple. I decided to take the vow of a Nazrite, which meant that I had to not cut my hair and beard, avoid wine and strong drink, and eat only vegetables. At times, I even ate locusts and wild honey. Since a Nazrite can not go near the dead, I could not attend the funeral of my older relatives when they died. As you can see, I dress in simple, coarse clothing and depend upon the goodness of others for my meager sustenance. I began to devote myself to the study of our Scriptures.

I also began to associate with a group of other men very zealous about our Scriptures. They lived in the Qumran area, along the Northwestern shores of the Salt Sea. They were often called the Essenes, and some of them advocated the overthrow of what they called "the wicked priests of Jerusalem." They had a significant collection of scrolls, and we spent many months reading them and discussing what they meant. The passages in the Psalms and in Isaiah about the Suffering Servant were especially intriguing to me. These verses seemed on the surface to be referring to our nation, Israel, but some believed that these could also be about the coming Messiah, and I thought to myself, "How could these be about my cousin Jesus? Surely He would not have to suffer as this Servant did!" Of course, I had to keep these thoughts to myself.

The words of the Prophets, however, struck home with me. They told of how our forefathers had departed from the ways of God. Some worshipped idols, the poor and downtrodden were oppressed, and the widows were neglected, even as they brought their tithes and offerings, the grain from the fields, animals from their flocks, gold and silver, to the temple each Sabbath. The blatant hypocrisy became such a burden for me.

I decided that I was not doing any good just studying our scrolls, so I began to preach, and my primary message was that the people needed to repent and turn back to God. My message was right out of the Prophets, so some say that I am the last of the Jewish prophets. As Jews, we used the rite of baptism for converts to our faith. For us, water was a means of cleansing the convert from their former life and a sign that they had embarked on the Jewish way of life. Of course, the men also had to undergo circumcision, so for them, the decision was particularly difficult. But I began to insist that everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, should be baptized as a public demonstration of their repentance, of their decision to follow God's direction in their life. The Jewish leaders protested that I was baptizing people, saying that I had no official authority to do this.

Matthew 3:7-12 (NASB)

However, some Pharisees and Sadducees came to me for baptism. I said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham.

"The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. "

Of course, they wondered what I was talking about, but I could not tell them everything I knew. The kingdom of heaven was in our midst! Judgement will be coming sooner than we think! You know, you, too, need to be prepared for the judgement. I hope that you have a faith that will save you. If not, today is the day to make that decision.

One day, I was astonished as I was baptizing people in the Jordan. There, directly in front of me was Jesus, and He stepped into the water, indicating that He wished to be baptized. "What?" I exclaimed. "You want ME to baptize YOU? You need to be the one who baptizes me!"

"Permit it at this time," Jesus said quietly. "For in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Matthew 3:15 (NASB)

I didn't understand exactly what He meant, but I went ahead and immersed Him in the muddy water. Then, the most amazing thing happened! As Jesus came up out of the water, we saw what looked like the heavens opening, and it seemed like the Holy Spirit came rushing down upon Him, like a dove landing upon His shoulder. I don't know if others saw it, but I know that Jesus and I did. We also heard the voice of God.

"You are My beloved Son; in You I am well-pleased." Mark 1:10-11 (NASB) It sounded like thunder. I will never forget that moment! Both of us were dripping wet, but Jesus hugged me. Then he said, "John, difficult days lie ahead for both of us. My public ministry has begun, and neither of us will survive. Just keep up your good work, knowing that the Father is with us, and that victory will eventually be ours!"

Then He slowly walked up out of the water and went toward the wilderness area. I stood there dumbfounded. He told me later what happened over the next 40 days -- He had a vivid encounter with The Adversary, who tempted Him in several ways. Jesus knew that He had a difficult journey ahead of Him.

I, too, am concerned about the future. As Jesus began His active ministry, I knew that my ministry was drawing to a close. "I must decrease, and He must increase," I said to those around me. For some time, I have felt that I need to speak to Herod Antipas, the ruler over Galilee and Perea, because he is living a sinful life. He divorced his first wife and married Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. I am pretty sure that if I confront him about this that he will have me arrested. I feel strongly, however, that I must do this thing.

Before I go, I want to urge you to commit your life to Jesus. He is God's only Son, and He was placed on this earth to demonstrate God's love for each and every person. That means that God loves you. Jesus needs devoted followers to help Him spread God's love everywhere. There is a place for you in His ministry. I hope that you will do your part.