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JOHN THE BAPTIZER'S WORK: ITS NEED AND THE NEED FOR US TO THINK ABOUT IT

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Have you ever wondered why John the Baptizer (I prefer this description to "John the Baptist" because "Baptist" communicates something entirely different today than it did in the first century) was sent to prepare the way for Jesus? As prophesied by Isaiah and Malachi and quoted by Mark, John was to prepare the way for Jesus' ministry, and "make His paths straight" (Mark 1:2-3). Why couldn't someone like Jesus simply call attention to Himself by virtue of His greatness? Further, wasn't the Jewish community ready to receive Jesus?

The Jews had every reason to be ready for Jesus. From the very beginning of human history, God promised to bring about a virgin birth that would defeat Satan (Genesis 3:15). When He called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees to form the Jewish nation through him, He promised him, "And in you all families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:3). This blessing was narrowed through Isaac (17:19), Judah (49:10), and later David (2 Samuel 7:13-14). Christ can be found in almost if not every book of the Old Testament; either in promise, prophecy, or type, and often through all three.

So why weren't the Jews ready? What some people don't realize in reading the Bible is that even though the book of Matthew follows the book of Malachi, there isn't just a few years between the two books. Using conservative estimates, Malachi's message (the last inspired prophet of the Old Testament) was given to the Jews roughly 400 years before the birth of Jesus. In the words recorded in the Babylonian Talmud, a 3rd to 5th century A.D. compilation of older Jewish commentaries on the Old Testament, "When Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi died, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel" (Tractate Sotah, Folio 48a).

Evidently, as the years wore on from the close of Old Testament inspiration, Jews became complacent and divisive. Some Jews began to deny the spiritual elements of their faith, denying the existence of the soul and an afterlife; they formed the Sadducee denomination. Some Jews began to focus on the forms and functions of their faith rather than faith itself, and held themselves to such a much stricter pattern of life than required by the Law of Moses; they formed the Pharisee denomination. Some Jews began to combine their faith with the teachings of the Greek speaking world around them; these were the Hellenized Jews.

Some Jews began to focus more on the government than their faith; they formed the Herodian (pro-Gentile government) and Zealot (anti-Gentile government) denominations. Other Jewish denominations and philosophies existed than the above (which all are mentioned in Scripture), but the long and short of it was that most people lost sight of the word of God and put the traditions of men in its place (Mark 7:1-13).

John's work was not just needed as a divine response to the Jews who joined denominations; in fact, most of the denominationalized Jews appear to have rejected John's message (Mark 11:27-33). John's work was needed because faithful Jews were few and far between. Many Jews were steeped in sin (Mark 1:3-4); they were not ready to hear Jesus. When Isaiah prophesied of the coming of Christ, he said that He would spring up as "a root out of dry ground" (Isaiah 53:2). The dry ground is Judea – it was a spiritual wasteland.

As you consider what happened in the 400 years prior to Christ's birth that necessitated John the Baptizer's work, does anything sound familiar? As God did when He brought the Old Testament to a close, so God has done now – the Holy Spirit has departed from mankind (not relationally, but inspirationally – no one today receives inspired messages from God through the Spirit apart from what is revealed in the Bible). As people did then, so people have done now – people have lost sight of the word of God and formed denominations. And sadly, sin is winning victory after victory over many of us who have turned our backs on denominationalism.

What should be even more sobering than the obvious comparisons between then and now is this: The New Testament does not promise a "John the Baptizer" for the Second Coming of Jesus. No one will be commissioned directly by God to make Jesus' way straight prior to His return to this earth by calling us back to repentance. There will not even be any signs of Jesus' coming; He will come as a thief in the night, and at that point the world will end (Matthew 24:36-51; 2 Peter 3:8-10; 1 Corinthians 15:23-24).

Christians, all that was written before in the Bible was written for our learning and warning (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11). Let us learn from the history of the Jews prior to the coming of Christ what can happen and what is happening among us today. History doesn't have to continue to repeat itself! When the Lord returns, may He find souls who are prepared. "Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching" (Luke 12:37).