

JOHN THE BAPTIST

"John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Mark 1:4).

John the Baptist plays a crucial role in the history of salvation. Chosen before his birth to be the herald and forerunner of the Messiah (Luke 1:13-17), he knew his Lord from the beginning. Luke writes of John's miraculous conception (Luke 1:24). He then records that when the Virgin Mary visited Elizabeth, who was then six months pregnant with John the Baptist, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped at the sound of Mary's voice (Luke 1:4).

Jesus taught that John fulfilled the prophecy of the return of Elijah (Matthew 11:14), who was to precede the Messiah as the "voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD' " (Matthew 3:3, Mark 1:3, Luke 3:4, John 1:23).

Shortly before Jesus began His public ministry, John went out to the wilderness of Jordan to prepare the way for the Messiah. He carried out his prophetic role with a brotherhood of disciples characterized by repentance in expectation of the Kingdom, baptism for forgiveness of sins, bearing the fruit of righteousness, and spiritual discipline. John himself lived by an ascetic rule of poverty and fasting; in fact, he may have been a lifelong Nazirite (see Luke 1:15; Numbers 6). His eyes were set not on the body and its desires, but on Christ the Lord, and his influence was widespread (see Mark 11:32, Luke 7:29, Acts 18:25, 19:1-7).

John prophesied Messiah was coming, One immeasurably greater than himself, "whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose." (Mark 1:7). This One would baptize not only with water but with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8). When Jesus appeared before him to be baptized, John was humbled, realizing he was in need of being baptized by Jesus (Matthew 3:14). But Jesus knew what was fitting "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15), and John obeyed. Thus, came about the event so familiar in Orthodox icons: Christ in the Jordan being baptized by John as the Holy Spirit descends on Him in the form of a dove. The Father's voice from heaven declares, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

John's work was crucial to Jesus' ministry. Jesus considered John's testimony important - not because Jesus, the Son of God, needed to be validated by any human witness, but because the people's acceptance of John as a godly man prepared them to accept Jesus as well (John 5:33-35). Jesus' first disciples came from John's

brotherhood (John 1:35-39), and the vacancy in the apostolic college left by Judas' betrayal was filled by one who had been John's follower (Acts 1:22).

John the Baptist died a martyr for Christ (Mark 6:24-29). The Orthodox Church commemorates him in special hymns every Tuesday, as well as on designated feast days throughout the year.