

Week 4: The Spirit And John the Baptist

The Holy Spirit is a person:

- **Intellect:** The Spirit "searches all things" and knows the thoughts of God (1 Corinthians 2:10).
- **Emotions:** The Spirit can be "grieved" (Ephesians 4:30), showing a capacity for feeling and relational response.
- **Will:** The Spirit distributes spiritual gifts to individuals "as he determines" (1 Corinthians 12:11), indicating a capacity for decision-making.

The Holy Spirit is God, the third member of the Trinity:

- **At Work in Creation** (Genesis 1:2)
- **Shares in the divine attributes:** Infinite, Self-sufficient, Omniscient, Omnipotent, Omnipresent, Immutable, Holy, Just, Merciful, Loving

Feature	Old Testament Role	New Testament Role
Availability	Selective: Specific individuals (kings, prophets, leaders, judges).	Universal: Available to all believers regardless of status.
Duration	Temporary: Could "come upon" and later depart	Permanent: Described as a "seal" or "earnest" that remains.

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	(e.g., Samson, King Saul).	
Primary Work	National/Task: Empowering leaders to preserve or lead Israel.	Personal/Missionary: Sanctification and spreading the Gospel.

Old Testament Prophecy	New Testament Fulfillment
<p>Isaiah 40:3 A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”</p>	<p>Matthew 3:1-3 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”</p> <p>For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’”</p>
<p>Malachi 3:1 “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.</p>	<p>Matthew 11:10 This is he of whom it is written, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’</p>
<p>Malachi 4:5-6 “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day</p>	<p>Matthew 17:10-13 And the disciples asked him, “Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?”</p>

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<p>of the LORD comes.</p> <p>And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”</p>	<p>He answered, “Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.”</p> <p>Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.</p>
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John the Baptist is essential to Christianity as the prophet who bridged the Old and New Testaments, acting as the forerunner who prepared the way for Jesus Christ. He is crucial for preaching repentance, identifying Jesus as the Messiah, and baptizing him, marking the official start of Jesus’ public ministry.

The "400 years of silence" (c. 400 BC–AD 1) refers to the intertestamental period between Malachi and John the Baptist, often viewed as a time without new scripture or prophecy.

Key events and developments during this period included:

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- **Foreign Rule:** Judea shifted from Persian control to Greek rule under Alexander the Great in 331 BC, then to Egyptian (Ptolemies) and Syrian (Seleucids) control.
- **Hellenization:** Greek language, culture, and customs (Hellenism) were forced upon the region, challenging traditional Jewish life.
- **The Maccabean Revolt:** Due to harsh persecution and the desecration of the temple by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (171 BC), Judas Maccabeus led a successful revolt, cleansing the temple in 165 BC (celebrated as Hanukkah).
- **Rise of Religious Factions:** Major religious and political parties such as the Pharisees (conservative guardians of the law) and Sadducees (liberal aristocracy) emerged during this time, alongside the development of the Synagogue and the Sanhedrin.
- **Roman Domination:** In 63 BC, Roman leader Pompey seized Jerusalem, placing Judea under Roman control, which became the setting of the New Testament.
- **This era closed** with the arrival of John the Baptist, ending the "famine of hearing the words of the Lord."

The miraculous birth of John the Baptist

In the Gospel of Luke, the early narrative highlights the figures of Elizabeth and the priest Zechariah. Despite being described as blameless and righteous in their adherence to all the commandments, they remained childless because Elizabeth was barren. While performing his duties in the temple sanctuary after being selected by lot, Zechariah receives a divine visitation.

Luke 1:13-17

¹³ But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

- The Holy Spirit's involvement in John's ministry began before his birth. Unlike many Old Testament figures who experienced temporary or task-oriented empowerment, John was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb.
- The circumstances of John's conception and birth strongly echo those surrounding the births of other individuals whom God used to advance his purposes. Zacharias and Elizabeth are childless because Elizabeth is barren and the couple is advanced in years (Luke 1:7).
- The echoes of Isaac's (Genesis 17:15-16), Samson's (Judges 13:2) and Samuel's (Samuel 1:1-2) births are unmistakable.

Luke 1:39-42

³⁹ In those days, Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, ⁴⁰and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴² and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!”

The ministry of John the Baptist

Connections between Elijah and John the Baptist are drawn throughout the Synoptic Gospels:

- John’s clothing, consisting of a leather belt and a garment made of camel hair (Matthew 3:4), serves as a reminder of Elijah’s appearance (2 Kings 1:8) and of the traditional "hairy robe" worn by prophets (Zechariah 13:4).
- When “the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias,” at the beginning of his public ministry (Luke 3:2), it provides the final confirmation of John’s prophetic role.
- His choice to preach in the wilderness (Matthew 3:1) reflects the prophesied forerunner (Isaiah 40:3), Elijah’s period of flight (1 Kings 19), and the historical testing of Israel (Numbers 10–25).
- By utilizing prophetic language that mirrors Jeremiah and Isaiah (Matthew 3:10, 12; Isaiah 10:33–34; Jer. 7:20, 15:5–9), John is established as the first authentic prophet to address Israel on behalf of God in 400 years, thereby extending the Old Testament lineage.

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- John is no ordinary prophet; he is “the prophet of the Most High” (Luke 1:76). Not only does he speak for the Lord, but he also goes before the Lord who will soon follow. His task is to “clear the way” for the Messiah (Isaiah 40:3) and to “restore the hearts” of the people (Malachi 4:6) by calling them to repentance.
 - John places the people on notice that the next major figure to appear will be the Messiah himself.
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Matthew 3:1-2

¹In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Luke 3:7-9

⁷He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ⁹Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

John’s Testimony About Jesus

The Spirit returns to prominence in John’s testimony to Jesus.

John 1:19-21, 25-27, 29, 34

¹⁹ And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” ²⁰ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” ²¹ And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.”

²⁵ They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” ²⁶ John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, ²⁷ even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

³⁴ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

Matthew 3:11-12

¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

John 3:28-30

²⁸ You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' ²⁹ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease."

John 3:34

³⁴ For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.

Jesus' Testimony About John

Jesus' ministry often defied popular expectations, raising questions even for John. Despite his early testimony, John shared these common hopes. When his disciples asked whether Jesus was the "Expected One," Jesus highlighted the messianic signs he had just performed.

Matthew 11:2-6

² Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" ⁴ And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. ⁶ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

Matthew 11:7-15

⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is he of whom it is written, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’ ¹¹ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ¹⁴ and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵ He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Matthew 17:9-13

⁹ And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” ¹⁰ And the disciples asked him, “Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” ¹¹ He answered, “Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. ¹² But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.” ¹³ Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

Summary

- John represented a pivot point in salvation history as the final prophet whose ministry concluded the Old Testament witness to Jesus.
- His role transitioned to preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, as affirmed by Jesus in Luke 16:16.
- He embodied the prophetic tradition through his dress, his ministry in the wilderness, his message of repentance and judgment, and his empowerment by the Holy Spirit.
- Jesus identified John as "more than a prophet," recognizing him as the messianic forerunner and the promised Elijah.
- Uniquely, John was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb, a distinction shared only with Jesus.
- While focused on repentance and the coming kingdom, the Spirit's activity was present from his birth through his childhood and public ministry.
- John's testimony emphasized the Spirit's dual role in the believer's life: securing future salvation and providing a present sense of abiding.

“The voice in the wilderness still cries out—not from the desert sands, but from the pages of Scripture—calling us to prepare our hearts for the Lamb who has come and is coming again.”

— Guy Mellott, *The Forerunner: Preparing the way for the Lamb*

Next: *The Spirit and Jesus' Early Years*