Lesson 1: The Announcement of John the Baptist

WHAT WE WANT STUDENTS TO LEARN: That Jesus' ministry was preceded by the very important message of repentance given by John the Baptist.

WHAT WE WANT STUDENTS TO DO WITH WHAT THEY'VE LEARNED: To understand why John the Baptist preached repentance and practice repentance in their own lives.

SCRIPTURE FOCUS: Isaiah 40:3-5; Matthew 3:1-12

KEY TAKEAWAY: John the Baptist prepared people for Jesus' ministry by calling them to repentance and pointing them toward Jesus the Messiah.

OVERVIEW:

John the Baptist's message was far from what the Jews might have expected from the first prophet in hundreds of years. John emphasized that only those who truly repented were spiritually prepared for the coming King (Jesus). In the same way that we make preparations and plans for big events like birthday parties, weddings, and graduations, John was sent to prepare the way for the greatest event of all: the ministry of Jesus. Foretold in Isaiah 40:3-5, John would be the voice crying out from the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord."

TEACHER PREP VIDEO:

Each *This Is Jesus* lesson comes with a Teacher Prep Video. These short videos are designed to help you grasp the lesson's main point as you prepare to teach.



BIBLE BACKGROUND

The Bible Background is designed to help you provide some context for the Scripture you'll be studying. *The Details* give you background info for each book. *The Setting* informs you of what's happening in and around the passage. *The Main Point* gives you an overview of how the passage will be used in the lesson.

- **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "CONTEXT"?** In every YM360 Bible Study lesson, you'll notice we make a point to encourage you to provide the context for the passages you study. By "context," we mean, at the very least, helping students know *who* wrote the book, *when* it was written, and *why* it was written.
- **WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?** When we teach the Bible without giving context, students don't get a "big picture" understanding of the story of the Bible. But this view is vital to grasping the story of God's plan of redemption for humankind. As you teach, use the Bible Background to help summarize the context.

THE DETAILS

Isaiah

- *Author*: Isaiah, son of Amoz wrote the book of Isaiah.
- *Time frame:* The events of Isaiah occurred between 740 and 681 B.C., though some parts of the book would have been constructed at a later date.
- *Purpose:* The purpose of this book was to call the nation of Judah back to God, to warn of coming judgment, and to tell of God's ultimate salvation through the Messiah.

Matthew

- *Author*: Matthew, a former tax collector, was a disciple of Jesus and a firsthand witness to the stories he relates in his gospel.
- *Time frame:* Most people hold to Matthew's gospel being written in the late 50's or 60's A.D., though there are some who think it was written after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D.
- *Purpose:* Matthew was writing to a primarily Jewish audience to convince them that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah. But he was probably aware of a Gentile audience, as his gospel makes the case that the saving truth of Christ is for all nations.

THE SETTING

As foretold in Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 40:3-5), John the Baptist prophesied to prepare people for Jesus' public ministry. Wearing the rough clothing of a prophet and existing on locusts and wild honey, he announced the Messiah's coming and preached repentance (a complete change of mind and redirection towards God) to those who would be ready for Jesus' harvest of followers. John baptized those who confessed and repented with the baptism of repentance.

THE MAIN POINT

John the Baptist was the prophet whom God promised would prepare the way for the Messiah. Like Jesus, John said salvation could not be acquired through ritual or even baptism, but only through belief in the One to come. John's reaction to the religious majority was only a taste of the truth Jesus would bring. Although his message of repentance was not always popular, it was the perfect precursor to Jesus' earthly ministry.

LESSON PLAN

The Lesson Plan contains three elements: an introductory activity called *The Lead In;* the Bible Study section called *The Main Event;* and an application-focused segment called *The Last Word.*

THE LEAD IN

- *Goal:* To introduce the idea of an announcer and their importance.
- *Set-Up:* Make sure students have a Bible or Bible App.

FIRST, welcome students. To get started, **ask students:**

- **Does anyone here have a favorite sports commentator?**
  - *Answers will vary.* It might be helpful to explain that this is a broad question, and they don't have to know the name of their favorite commentator, but to try and describe where they have heard them (at the local high school basketball game, for example).

- **What makes a great announcer?**
  - *Answers will vary.* Good answers may include their excitement, knowledge, or general voice.

THEN, **say something like:**

- **Today, it is difficult to imagine watching a sporting event without some sort of commentator or announcer. The closest you might get would be a local t-ball game, and odds are there are a few parents in the crowd who are very happy to loudly tell you what is going on. But before we had public announcement systems around sports fields, radio hosts giving play-by-play updates, and television studios dedicated to giving you clear coverage of an event, sporting events were mostly like those t-ball games. People participated, and people watched. That is, until Fred Burns.**

NEXT, explain to students that the first account we have of a sports announcer is from the Staten Island Athletic Club in May of 1884. Athletic clubs were known for hosting a variety of events, and at the end of each, the results were posted on bulletin boards outside. On one particular day, there were multiple results that a large crowd of people were in line to see. Seeing the problem of everyone fighting to see the same results, and having by all accounts a 'sharp piercing' voice, Fred stood up by the boards and began to yell out the results. (Other accounts say that he first announced plays from the sidelines of lacrosse games. It is said that many took this as a joke at first, so it spread with humor rather than sticking to the full facts.) **Say something like:**

- **Because this moment was unplanned, we don't have a fully factual account of the first time Fred Burns began announcing. However, it appears that he was generally believed to be the first to do something like this, and many came to know him as the first sports announcer. Throughout his life, he called many games and matches, and was referred to as 'silver-tongue Fred.'**

FINALLY, explain to students that today, you will be focusing on another special 'announcer.' In fact, there is a prophecy in Isaiah about this 'announcer' who would someday arrive on the scene. Read or have a student read Isaiah 40:3-5. **Ask:**

- **What are some characteristics of this announcer that stand out to you?**
  - *Answers will vary.*

Make sure there are no questions, and then transition to The Main Event.

THE MAIN EVENT

- *Goal:* To discover John the Baptist's role and message as he announced the coming of Jesus' ministry.
- *Set-Up:* Make sure students have a Bible or Bible App.

FIRST, explain to students that to talk about Jesus' ministry, we must first take a closer look at John the Baptist. Although there are many Old Testament prophecies about Jesus, John had his own prophecy in Isaiah 40:3-5. (Take a moment to read this with your students if you did not complete the Lead In Activity.) **Ask students:**

- **Why might it have been important to have someone dedicated as the "Announcer of the Messiah"?**
    - *Answers will vary.*

THEN, read or have a student read Matthew 3:1-6. **Say something like:**

- **John was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy about the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah. This wasn't a glamorous role by any means, but it was a very important one. John's ministry began in the Desert of Judea, a remote, rugged area east of Jerusalem in the lower part of the Dead Sea. Shepherds allowed their flocks to graze in areas like these, but few people would have made it their home. A chief characteristic of John's ministry was his dynamic preaching, empowered by God's Spirit. The people of Israel had not heard preaching like his since the time of Malachi, about 400 years earlier. John soon attracted a multitude to a place where few visited.**

Explain that John would have been considered the first prophet in several hundred years. **Ask students:**

- **Imagine that you are living in a town a day or so ride away from where John is. You get word that there is this guy out in the wilderness who is saying some pretty incredible things. In fact, it's been a few generations since anyone has seen a prophet of the Lord. You decide you have to go witness these things for yourself. What might you be expecting to hear when you arrive?**
    - *Answers will vary.*

NEXT, explain to students that John's message of repentance would have likely been typical of a prophet, but just like the many generations prior, those who heard his message would have found it off-putting. **Say something like:**

- **The word repent means to change one's mind or to turn completely. Imagine someone traveling in one direction and then making a 180-degree turn. Repentance goes far beyond feeling sorry about your sin; repentance involves actively changing your attitudes, priorities, and actions. It means turning away from sin and toward God.**

Ask students:

- **Why might John's message of repentance have been an important predecessor to Jesus' ministry?**
    - *Answers will vary.*

Say something like:

- **John preached his message of repentance because it was a crucial time in history: "the Kingdom of Heaven" would soon appear. The "Kingdom of Heaven" and the "Kingdom of God" are used interchangeably in the Gospels. John did not explain this phrase. Most Jews believed it referred to an earthly kingdom like King David's. However, John clearly referred to God's reign over human hearts. The coming of Jesus' public ministry was the coming of the King. Jesus' call to believe in Him and follow Him as Lord would inaugurate the Kingdom.**

THEN, read or have a student read Matthew 3:7-12. **Ask students:**

- **What did John say he was not worthy to carry?**
    - *Answer:* The sandals of the one who is coming

Say something like:

- **In a time when walking for miles on dirty roads was common, the sandal was often viewed as the very last thing you would want to carry for someone else. This is John's strange, yet incredibly humbling confession about how great Jesus really is. If he, John the Baptist, also known as the first prophet of God in hundreds of years, wasn't even fit to carry the next guy's sandals… this guy must be legendary. The entire crowd focused on John. Nevertheless, he tried to turn their attention to the greater One coming after him. John emphasized that in the midst of impending judgment, hope would come through Jesus, who was "more powerful" than him.**

Explain that John's reference to the wheat and the chaff would have been well understood by his crowd. In ancient times, farmers gathered their crop of grain (wheat or barley) and spread it out on a threshing floor. Then they would walk on it, or let animals tread on it. This separated the stalk and the "chaff" from the grain. The chaff was the hard, outer shell. The grain was the usable portion that they ground into flour and made into bread. After separation, the farmer used a "winnowing fork" (pitchfork) to throw the contents of the threshing floor up in the air on a windy time of day. The wind would blow away the lighter parts of the wheat but allow the heavier grain to drop back on the floor, eventually separating the good from the bad. The farmer stored the grain (wheat) in his barn and used the leftover chaff to start a fire for cooking.

Ask:

- **John took a moment to call out the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to see him. Both the Pharisees and Sadducees were religious leaders who believed their relation to Abraham and their commitment to religious rule made them right with God. What does he say to them?**
    - *Answer:* He calls them a brood of vipers, poisonous snakes leading people away from God rather than toward Him. Their rules, power, and influence would not get them anywhere with God.

NEXT, explain that before the Jewish leaders could speak, John emphasized that physical descent from Abraham had no bearing on their relationship with God. The Jewish leaders were wrong in believing that descendants of Abraham were automatically acceptable to God. The truth is that God accepts those who have a relationship with Him through faith. **Say something like:**

- **In other words, John was already pointing towards the truth that Jesus' ministry would be an outreach to the whole world, not something that was only for a select people group. Just as the wheat and chaff are separated on the threshing floor, there would be a separation of those who had a saving faith in Jesus and those who did not.**

Ask:

- **What did John the Baptist tell people they must do to prepare for the coming of Jesus?**
    - *Answer:* John commanded all to repent of their sins.

- **Does that mean that we have to be perfect before we come to Jesus?**
    - *Answer:* No.

FINALLY, **say something like:**

- **John the Baptist did not preach anything different from what Jesus preached. Both called for repentant hearts. Part of repenting is acknowledging that our sin is keeping us from God and admitting that we need forgiveness from Him. You don't have to master repentance or box yourself in with a ton of rules and regulations like the Pharisees and Sadducees did. In fact, believing that you can do this sort of work by yourself will keep you from following Jesus. John announced the coming of Jesus by calling people to show up with repentant hearts and the same humility that says, "I'm not even worthy to carry this guy's sandals!"**

Challenge students to consider John the Baptist's boldness in delivering his message and the faith that he must have had. Encourage students to be bold in their own faith. Challenge them to constantly evaluate the direction they are going: with God or away from God.

Allow for questions, and then transition into The Last Word.

THE LAST WORD

- *Goal:* To help students have a visual representation of sin and repentance.
- *Set-Up:* Clear a space in the middle of the room, or find some room outside where students can circle around you. If you do not have a compass function on your phone (most do), then make sure you have a compass on hand.

FIRST, ask students to form a large circle around you (large enough that you could take 8-10 steps in any direction). Remain in the center of the circle, and pull out your compass. Explain that to end your time, you will be giving a geometric representation of repentance. Check your compass and assign students based on their position in the circle. There should at least be a North and a South, but depending on numbers, you can assign multiple students.

THEN, point to your North student, and **say something like:**

- **Our North point is going to represent God. As followers of Jesus, we are all striving to walk towards God and to keep our focus fixed on Him. But sometimes…**

Turn towards the South student and **say something like:**

- **We can all turn our heads to the South, or what will represent sin.**

NEXT, take two steps towards the South. Make sure students understand that when we keep our focus on sin, it takes us further and further from God. **Say something like:**

- **Now, what John the Baptist wants all of us to do is repent and turn towards God. Notice that when I turn around, I'm facing the North fully. You can't go North and South at the same time. You have to go one way or the other.**

Take a moment to explain that although you started in the middle of the circle, that doesn't represent neutrality. Even in the middle of the circle, you are separated from the true North (God). However, even if you have walked all the way to the South end, there is still room for you to make that 180-degree turn around.

FINALLY, **say to students:**

- **So, let's say that some of us are here (stand a little closer to the North) and some of us are here (stand a little closer to the South). At the end of the day, both of us make the same motion to turn our attention away from sin and towards God. This is what John the Baptist desperately wanted the crowds to understand, as well as the religious leaders. Although the religious leaders of the day may have been standing closer to the North, they were still facing the South. They were still separated from God by sin. They needed to repent just**

as much as the people in the crowd who might have been standing so close to the South that they felt like they were about to leave the compass entirely.

Encourage students to think about what John the Baptist's message means to them. Challenge them to constantly evaluate the direction they are going — with God or away from God. Invite them to spend some time this week thinking about areas in their lives where they need to repent and live boldly for Jesus.

Allow Time For Any Closing Thoughts Or Questions From Your Students. Before Leaving, Close With A Prayer.

- Don't forget to remind students about their devotions this week. If you're posting them on Social Media or some other means of electronic distribution, make sure you inform students of when they will be receiving them.