

John The Baptist

About 18 years have passed since Jesus interacted with the teachers in the temple courts at the time of the Passover Feast when we are told that John the Baptist has started his ministry. John the Baptist was probably at least thirty years of age since he was six months older than Jesus, and Jesus started His ministry when He was at least thirty. It is not surprising that none of the gospels say anything of the early life of John the Baptist, except for his birth, since we were told about only one event in Jesus' early life. When John the Baptist does appear on the pages of scripture, he is already preaching, and the people are seeking and following him. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each introduce him as the one in the desert who is calling people to repent. At first we might think that John was just a desert hermit; but people were responding to him, and the religious leaders of the day wanted to associate themselves with him. He was powerful and prophetic. He was God's chosen man, and the Holy Spirit was using him. People were coming to hear his message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." His message was that of the forerunner of the Messiah.

TIME OF HIS MINISTRY. Only Luke tells us when John the Baptist started his ministry. He does not give us a calendar date but tells us that John began his ministry in the desert during the reigns of several individuals and at the time of two high priests.

Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. (NASB) Luke 3:1-2

If we count fifteen years after the start of Tiberius Caesar's reign, we discover that John's ministry began in A.D. 29, since Tiberius Caesar ruled from A.D. 14 to A.D. 37. The reigns of Pontius Pilate, Herod Antipas, and Herod Philip all overlap A.D. 29.¹ This helps us determine precisely the time when John started his ministry. Jesus' ministry started some time later - maybe as late as A.D. 30.

The major question is how could both Annas and Caiaphas be high priests of Israel at the same time? The

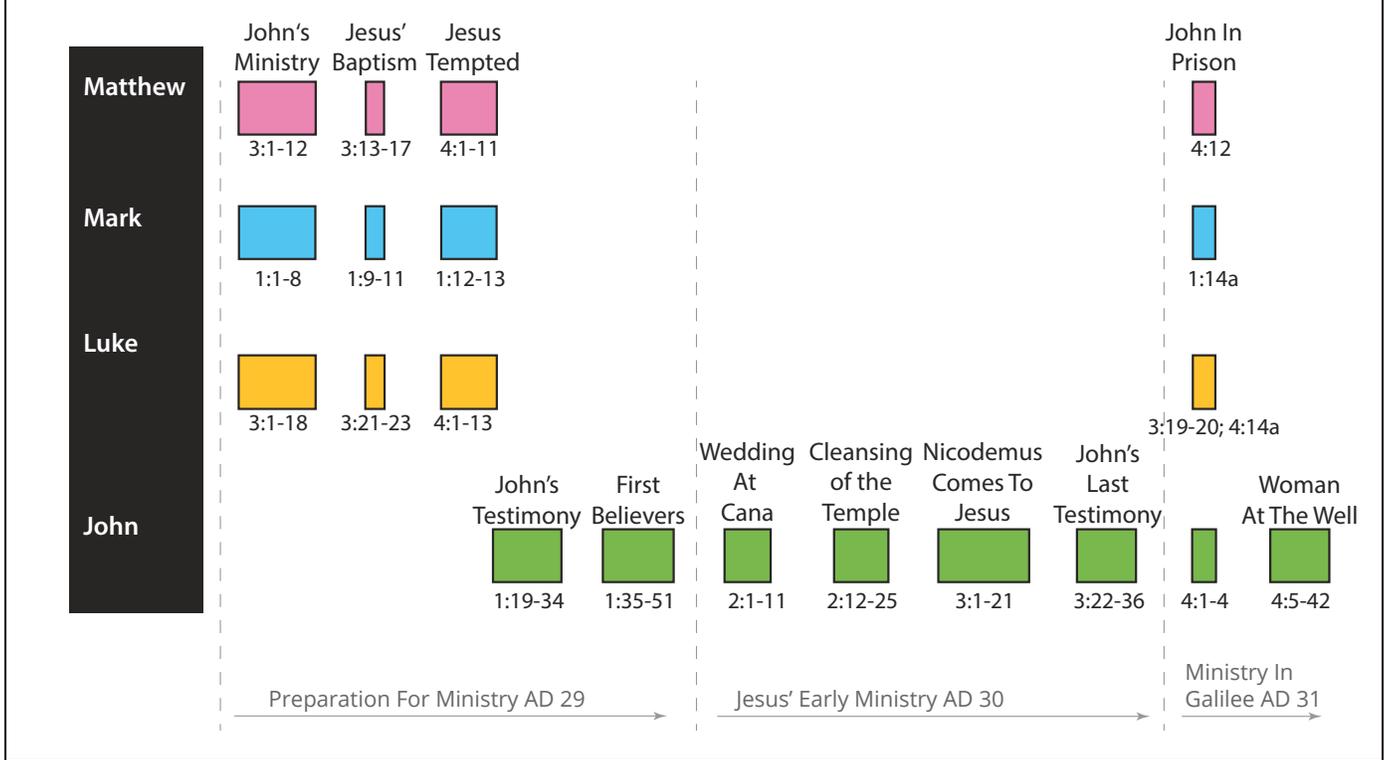
answer is found in the fact that Rome did not want Annas to be the chief priest and consequently replaced him with Caiaphas (A.D. 18 - 37). While Caiaphas was the official high priest, the Jews continued to consider Annas to be the real high priest. That is, Israel had one official high priest and one popular high priest.

So Luke has given us precise information. But why? Why tell us when John the Baptist started his ministry? Why provide all of this detail? The answer is simple. Luke does not consider John the Baptist to be a fictional character. Christians often talk about "the story of Adam and Eve," "the story of Moses," or the "story of Samson." Some consider these to be myths and stories for children. But the truth is these are not just stories. They represent real people, people who really existed. They did real things, and Luke believes that John the Baptist was a real person. Otherwise, why provide us with such details about the start of John's ministry? It is obvious that Luke considers John the Baptist to be a real person who did real things! We will see in the next few verses that Luke will provide us with more details. He is not finished.

LOCATION OF HIS MINISTRY. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke each also provide us with different clues as to the region where John did his ministry. Matthew says that

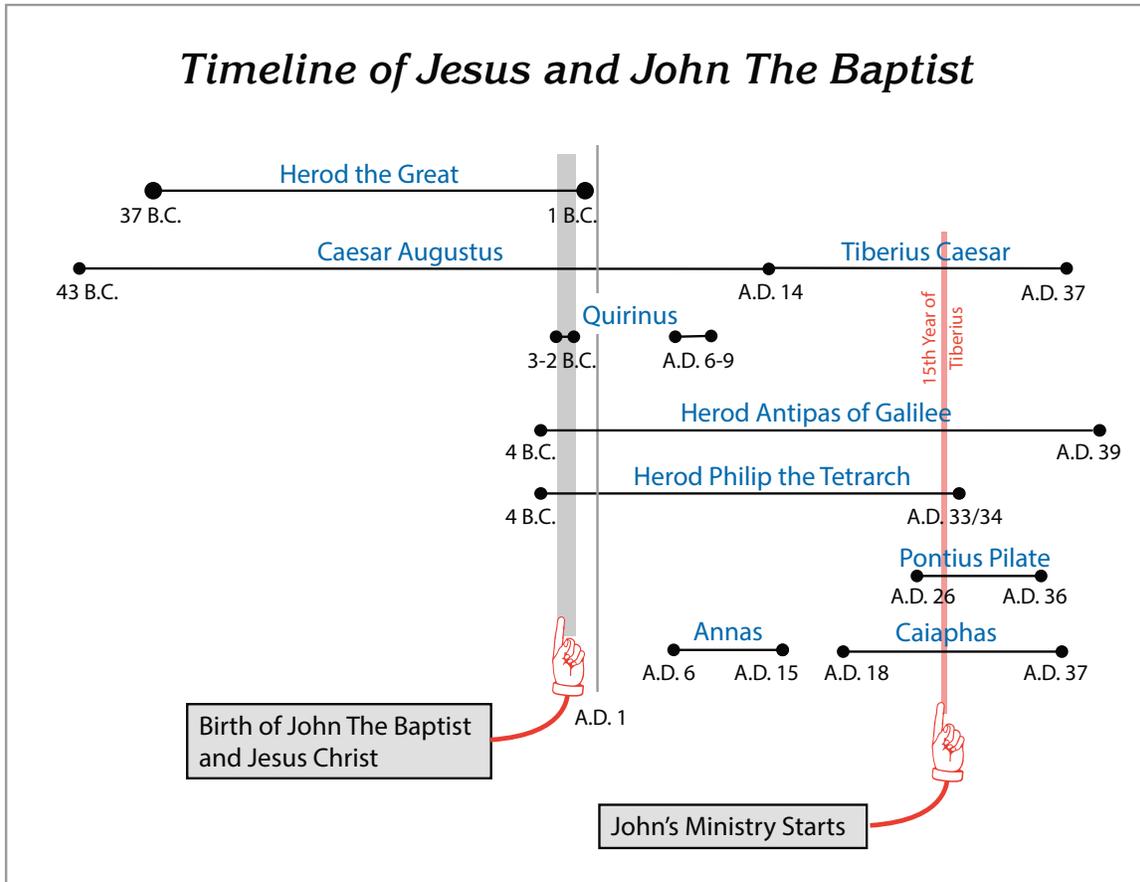
1. Jack Finegan. Handbook of Biblical Chronology. Hendrickson. 1964. pp. 330-344.

Life and Heart of Jesus



JESUS' PREPARATION FOR MINISTRY. The four gospels start with the births of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. It is amazing that we are told nothing about John the Baptist after his birth. We are told a little more about Jesus such as the visitors at His birth, His trip to Egypt, and then His return to Israel before remaining in Nazareth. After that we only catch a glimpse of Jesus at age twelve. Then we have at least eighteen years of silence before John the Baptist appears. The chart above outlines the events and people that God used to prepare Israel for their Messiah. The main focus of the next twelve studies is the preparation of Jesus for ministry. John the Baptist was the forerunner pointing the people to Jesus - the Messiah. This is the fulfillment of prophecy and of the hopes and dreams of the prophets. This is the real dynamic-duo. This is the first study in Jesus' preparation for ministry.

Timeline of Jesus and John The Baptist



he preached in the wilderness of Judea.

Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea . . . (NASB) Matt. 3:1

And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem . . . (NASB) Mark 1:5

And he came into all the district around the Jordan . . . (NASB) Luke 3:3

Mark adds that people from Jerusalem were visiting him, and Luke says that John was ministering near the Jordan River which flows from the Sea of Galilee down to the Dead Sea. This means that John was probably ministering near the northwest corner of the Dead Sea and near the Jordan River. The gospel writers believed that John really existed, and did real things. He was a real guy!

The gospels are based in historical fact and not fiction. God did this for a reason. Christianity is not based on “sto-

ries” or fanciful myth. Christianity is based on fact and from fact follows faith and then feeling. Because there is fact, we believe, and then the feeling follows. Too often Christians seek feelings and ignore facts. The gospel writers started with facts. There are no “feeling” statements here. Why? Because we must start with facts first. Then we believe, and the feeling comes last. Christianity is based on truth!

FULFILLED PROPHECY. All three gospels tell us that John the Baptist was an important man in history. He arrived in time and place for a purpose. He was the fulfillment of ancient prophecies.

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY; (NASB) Mark 1:2

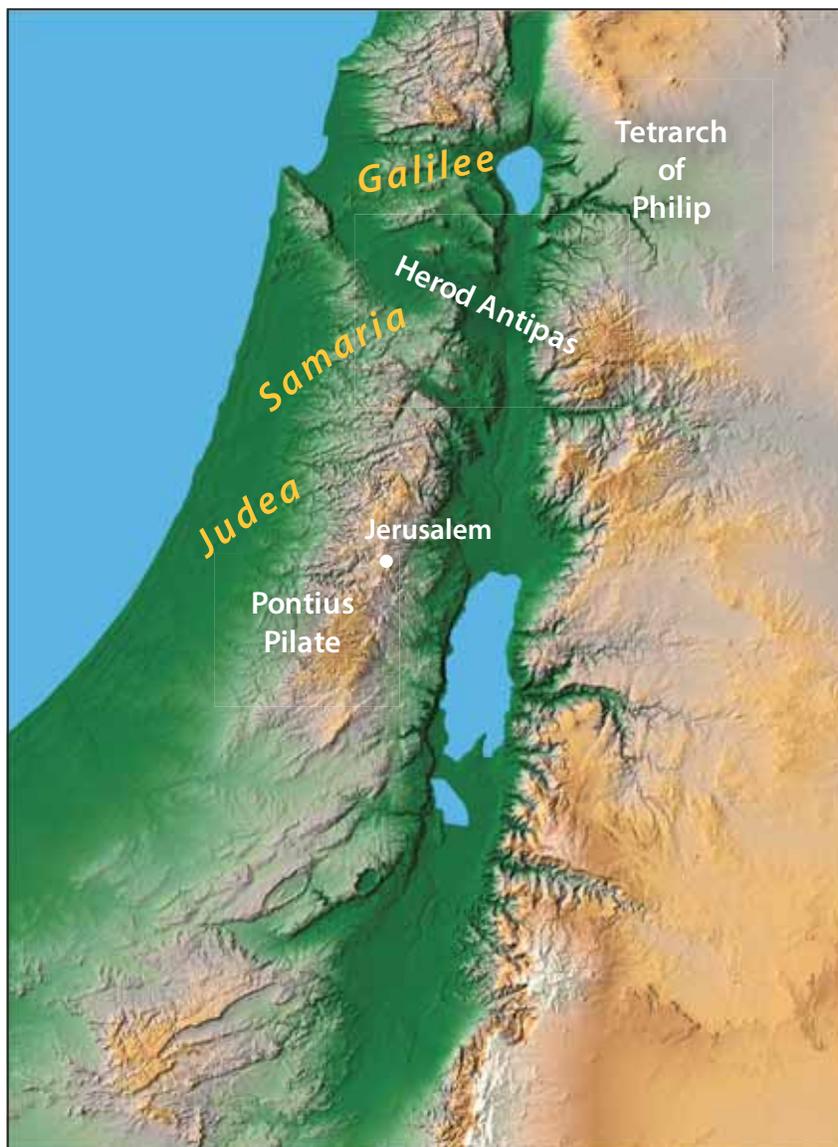
. . . “THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, ‘MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT. ‘EVERY RAVINE WILL BE FILLED, AND EVERY MOUNTAIN AND HILL WILL BE BROUGHT

LOW; THE CROOKED WILL BECOME STRAIGHT, AND THE ROUGH ROADS SMOOTH; AND ALL FLESH WILL SEE THE SALVATION OF GOD.” (NASB) Luke 3:4-6

Mark adds something that none of the other gospels include and Luke includes all of the other fulfillments quoted by Matthew and Mark. Mark quotes the prophecy from Mala-

preparing the Jewish people for Jesus - their Messiah.

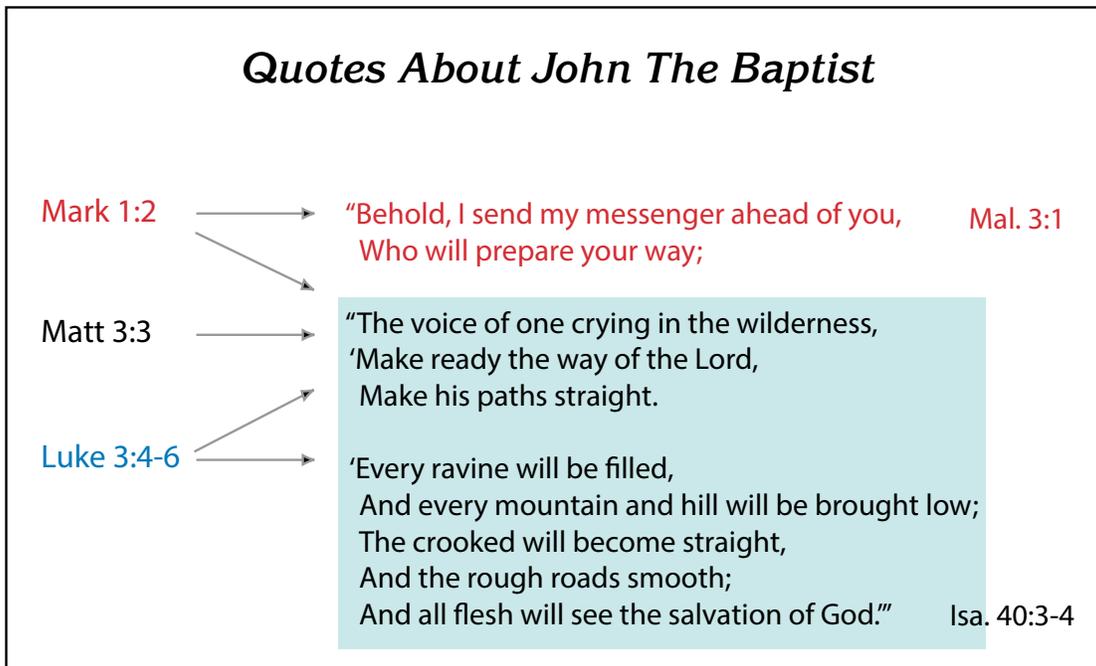
JOHN’S MESSAGE. But what is Isaiah 40:3-4 all about? At first the prophecy does not seem to have any special meaning. It appears to just be figurative language. The reason for this impression is that we are missing an important cultural fact. The emphasis of Isa. 40:3-4 is not just the “voice of one crying in the wilderness.” The emphasis includes what



chi 3:1, and Luke quotes Isaiah 40:3-4. Both prophecies predict the coming of one who will prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah. Malachi 3:1 says that Messiah will “suddenly come to His temple,” and Jesus did just that at the start of His own ministry. We will see shortly that John was

follows. Ancient history tells us that when a king, governor, or someone of importance came to visit, road crews were sent out to prepare the roads for his coming. The roads were literally straightened, potholes were filled, rocks and debris were removed, and the roads were smoothed. The message





of Isaiah 40 is that the forerunner would straighten the spiritual path. So John came preparing "the road" for Jesus. He was preparing the spiritual road. John was calling people to straighten out their spiritual lives. His message was a call to repentance - to stop sinning.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. (NASB) Matt. 3:2

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins . . . and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. (NASB) Mark 1:4-5

. . . preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (NASB) Luke 3:3

This illustration of preparing the road is a symbol of repentance. That is what John the Baptist called the people to do - repent!

CALL TO REPENTANCE. John used baptism as an external illustration of inward repentance. In Jesus' day baptism was for those Gentiles who desired to become converts to Judaism. The Qumran community used it in a ritual way, but John the Baptist used it as a symbol of a repentant heart. John's baptism was a sign of an inward change - a repentant

heart.

John was calling people to act differently: to flee from sin - to change their hearts and lives. So when some unrepentant Pharisees and Sadducees came to him, he responded with some harsh words,

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? (NASB) Matt. 3:7

Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to 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. Indeed the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (NASB) Luke 3:8-9

Their lives did not demonstrate repentant hearts; there was no fruit. These religious leaders thought that they would be able to enter heaven because they were descendants of Abraham. The "good old boy" network was all they needed. They assumed God worked that way. So John reminded them that God could make anyone His "children" - even stones; and unless they truly repented of their sins (changed their lives) God would destroy them too! That is the meaning of

John's figurative language about the tree being cut down and burned.

The crowds understood John's message and so they asked, "What shall we do?"

And the crowds were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?" And he would answer and say to them, "The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise." (NASB) Luke 3:10-11

John told them to share food and clothes with others. A truly repentant, godly heart will respond to the need of others. The unrepentant will not.

To the tax collectors, John encouraged them to collect only those taxes which were necessary.

And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to." (NASB) Luke 3:12-13

John the Baptist was simply God's man, doing God's ministry; and he recognized that the response of the people was only because God was working through him. Now that is humble.

In Jesus' day the tax collectors would contract with Rome to collect a certain amount of taxes. They would outbid one another for the job. If they won, then they had to fulfill their commitment to Rome. So the tax collectors would collect more than what was required to pay-off Rome and then keep the rest. So John was simply telling them to not take advantage of their positions. Those who are in positions of authority can take advantage of others. John's message is simple - a repentant heart will not do that.

Some soldiers also came and asked John what they should do. So he encouraged them not to take advantage of their positions either.

Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, "And what about

us, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages." (NASB) Luke 3:14

A heart that has been straightened out, whose potholes have been filled, and from whom the debris of sin has been removed will love others and not abuse people. These are the fruits of the good tree that John was preaching about.

HUMBLE RESPONSE. How did the people respond?

Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ . . . (NASB) Luke 3:15

The people wanted to know if John was the Christ or the Messiah. The Greek word for "was" is in the optative mood. This mood is rare in the New Testament, and it means that people were constantly wishing that John was the Christ. John was popular! Just think. How would you feel inside if a crowd of people were hoping and wishing that you were

someone important? How would you respond to their questions? After being repeatedly asked, might you want to say, "Yes!" John was a very humble man. He came dressed in garments of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey (Matt. 3:4). He did not appear as a wealthy man. He had given up the comforts of the priesthood and the opportunity to serve in the temple in Jerusalem. He did not follow in the footsteps of his father Zacharias. His home was the desert along with all of the wild animals. He was not part of the "name it and claim it" crowd. He was a humble man and so he said this.

John answered and said to them all, "As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am

not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people. (NASB) Luke 3:16-18

So John compares himself to the Messiah’s ministry and Messiah’s character. On both points, he says that he is inferior. He was not the Messiah.

First, John said that he only baptized with water, but the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Jesus has already accomplished the first part. He has sent the Holy Spirit when He left this world and ascended up into heaven. Today, the Holy Spirit “baptizes” believers into the spiritual church called the “body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:13). He will also bring fire and destroy the world when the end of time has arrived. Some day God will also put unbelievers or those who ultimately reject Him into the Lake of Fire. So John was correct.

Second, John says that he is not worthy to untie Jesus’ shoes. Here in the twentieth-first century we miss something. But at the time of Jesus, only slaves were expected to untie their master’s shoes. Such an act was considered beneath the dignity of others. So when John says that he is

not worthy to untie the Messiah’s shoes, he is saying that he is beneath a slave. Now that is humble!

CONCLUSION. Are you a sandal untier? John the Baptist was! He was the forerunner for the Messiah yet he acted like a poor man. He was not a proud man. He had a ministry to perform - a ministry that God had given him. He was not puffed up like a balloon because he was God’s man. He did not yield to the wishes of the people who wanted him to be something more than he was. John the Baptist was simply God’s man, doing God’s ministry. He knew that the response of the people was only because God was working through him. Now that is humble.

How about you? Are you a leader in the church? Are you a pastor, an elder, a teacher, a leader of men or women, or maybe a missionary? Recently, some individuals have talked about what they have done for the Lord, and added that it is okay to take credit. Not John! Psalm 127:1-2 reminds us that it is God who is at work. Without Him we can do nothing (John 15:5). John is an example of greatness in God’s kingdom. He was the forerunner with a humble heart!

St. Augustine was once asked what was the most important characteristic of a believer in the Christian religion. He replied, “Humility.” “And what was the second?” - “Humility.” “And what was the third?” - “Humility!” Therefore, let us ask ourselves, “Am I a sandal untier?”