

Yochanan the Immerser

11-Nov-2017

Shalom Chaverim! That means “Hello to you my friends!” My name is Andrew. I have heard that you would like to learn about a great man and a friend of mine named Yochanan the Immerser or, as you would say, John the Baptist.



Yochanan was an amazing person as well as a great prophet. You probably remember the story of his birth. (Luke 1:5-25) His father was a faithful priest named Zechariah. He and his wife Elizabeth were very old and, for some reason, they could never have children. That was a great grief to them and there was always whispering that they must have some hidden sin in their lives so Adonai made Elizabeth barren. The Father is not like that and Zechariah and Elizabeth were truly righteous people who loved the Lord. Well, one day Zechariah went into the temple to offer incense which represents the prayers of the people. As the smoke of the incense rose from the small golden altar, suddenly an angel appeared beside the altar. You can imagine how terrified Zechariah was! Yet the angel told him to not be afraid - For God had sent him to tell Zechariah that **HIS** prayers had been heard and were about to be answered! Decade after decade, Zechariah had prayed for a son to carry on his place in the priesthood. Why was God saying now, when it was impossible for them to have children, that he would not only have a son but that his son was to be a prophet of the coming messiah! God even specified that his name was to be Yochanan which means “Yahweh is gracious.”

Zechariah was stunned and, as many of us do when we don't know what to say, he said the wrong thing. He said, *“How shall I know this will happen?”* Angels are very patient with humans because they know how much the Father loves us. However, they don't like it when people doubt the message that God has sent them to deliver. As a gentle chastisement, the angel told him that he would not be able to speak again until the prophecy was fulfilled. And so it was! Elizabeth conceived and bore a son. Yet Zechariah remained totally mute. On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, they were going to name him Zechariah after his father but Elizabeth said *“No, his name is Yochanan.”* They argued with her until Zechariah wrote on a tablet, *“His Name is Yochanan!”* When he did, the words of the angel were completely fulfilled. Immediately, Zechariah's tongue was loosed and he exploded in praise and prophecy!

To really understand Yochanan, however, you have to understand the times in which we lived. The nation of Israel is an ancient people whom the Almighty chose to create from only one man, Abraham. His whole purpose of creating our people was to teach the world about who He is and to bring about His plan for the redemption of mankind from sin. When we, as a nation, obeyed, we prospered unlike any other nation. When we rebelled, our punishments have been severe. The Father's heart is not to destroy us but to purge the evil from among us so that we could walk in fellowship with Him once again.

As I was growing up, our nation was subject to the heavy oppression of the Romans. Their soldiers were everywhere and we had no rights. Their so-called “justice” was brutal

and you could not walk to town without seeing someone you know nailed to an execution stake. They left their bodies hanging there for weeks as a warning to the rest of us. The Romans let us have a king but they chose him. Herod wasn't even an Israelite... he was an Edomite. The Edomites knew about Yahweh since they were also descendants of Abraham, but they worshiped Baal and Asherah. Of course, Herod only worshipped himself! He was as brutal as the Romans and murdered anyone who displeased him. The Romans also allowed us to build a beautiful temple but they controlled who could be priests so everything looked right but it was all so wrong. It was a horrible time to live.

Yet through the desperation of those days, God was drawing our attention back to Himself. We began looking into the scriptures and there was a deep feeling that the Messiah would soon be revealed. Most people expected messiah to be a great military leader who would drive out the Romans and establish Israel as the center of the world once again. But Yochanan had a different vision.

Conceived by command of the archangel Gabriel and filled with the Holy Spirit, the Ruach Hakodesh from his mother's womb, Yochanan had a single-minded passion for Yahweh. His father instructed him in the teachings of the sages as well as the Torah and the Prophets so he could have followed in his father's footsteps as a priest. However, his intense love for God left him with no tolerance for the corruption and false worship in the temple. Instead, he withdrew to the wilderness seeking God's face and with each passing year the fire within him grew more intense.

I remember the day that Yochanan returned to Bethany. ^(Luke 3) It was like a meteor had struck beside the Jordan river. He thundered forth the truth of Torah without the slightest compromise. We thought we were righteous people living under the oppression of the Romans. But the blinding light of Yochanan's preaching showed us that we were filthy sinners living as slaves to our own sin. He didn't care whether someone was a servant, a priest or even the king. His message was simple... REPENT and live righteously. Many people thought that he might be the messiah, but he shouted back that he was not. When they pressed him about who he thought he was, he answered in the words of the prophet Isaiah, *"I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of YHWH!"* ^(Isa 40:3)

Those of us who longed to see Israel restored went to listen to Yochanan as often as we could. His teaching was so different than what we had heard growing up. We knew that we were hearing the voice of God and the more we heard the more our hearts longed for it. We became his "Talmidim" which means disciples. It was a great honor to be a disciple of a rabbi because you not only got to hear him speak publicly but you lived with him and he would share his inner thoughts with you. The goal of a disciple is not just to learn what the rabbi is teaching but to become like him in every way. And what a rabbi Yochanan was!

Thousands of people came to hear Yochanan. The roughest sinners of every kind repented of their sin and were baptized there in the Jordan. But when the pompous Pharisees and Sadducees came, he rejected them saying,"

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume 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. Even 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.” (Mat 3:7-10)

Needless to say, people who lived in rebellion to Yahweh hated Yochanan! Even a crooked rod looks straight when it is laying in pile of other crooked rods. But its crookedness is revealed when it is held up next to a straight rod. And Yochanan was as straight as you could get since he lived entirely according to Yahweh’s laws.

Yochanan often spoke of the coming messiah and we wondered what sort of man the messiah would really be. We asked how we would recognize him but Yochanan never answered us. He was wondering the same thing. Yet he knew that, if he obeyed Yahweh by preaching and baptizing, the messiah would be revealed. Adonai told Yochanan that he would know the messiah because the Spirit of God would descend on him like a dove and remain. But Yochanan could not imagine what that would be like.

One day we came to listen to Yochanan preach but he was very quiet. We asked him, “Rabbi, is anything wrong?” He told us that Yeshua had come to be baptized. We knew Yeshua. He was a carpenter in Nazareth. He was an honest and quiet man who lived faithfully by the scriptures. In fact, Yeshua lived such an exemplary life that when He came to be baptized, Yochanan said that Yeshua should baptize him. But Yeshua insisted that Yochanan must baptize Him. When he did, the heavens were opened and Yochanan saw the Spirit of God descend upon Yeshua. Then a voice from heaven said, *“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”* (Mat 3:13-17) It was just as the Spirit had told Yochanan it would be. Now, Yochanan gazed into the distance where Yeshua had walked away knowing that his life’s work was complete. The Messiah had come!

Several weeks later, Yochanan seemed to be very agitated and he was looking intently at the crowds of people. Suddenly he shouted, *“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”* John 1:29 The lamb of God? What could that possibly mean? Lambs were sacrificed in the temple as an atonement for sin. Yochanan explained that God had revealed to him that Yeshua was the Messiah for whom we had been waiting thousands of years. Yet He was not like the messiahs that everyone else was looking for, He was the very Son of God who would take away our sins! We looked again to see Him but he had disappeared in the crowd.

The next day, Yochanan again saw Yeshua walking through the crowd. I wasn’t about to let him disappear this time so I and another disciple quickly followed him. We asked him, *“Rabbi, where are you staying?”* Yeshua smiled and said, *“Come, and you will see.”* (Jn 1:39) That may not sound like much to you but our hearts leapt within us because that it was an invitation to be a disciple of a rabbi that our rabbi said was far greater than himself. I ran to get my brother, Simon and told him that we had found the Messiah! Over the next few days, Yeshua gathered nine other men to form his Talmidim and we traveled with Him from town to town as He taught.

Some people have asked me how I could change from being a disciple of Yochanan to be a disciple of Yeshua. They say that Yochanan was arrogant and abusive while Yeshua was humble and gentle. They say that Yochanan condemned people and beat them with the Law but Yeshua loved and affirmed people and set them free from the Law. Such people say these things because they have never been a disciple of either Yochanan or Yeshua. I have been both!

As I said before, the relationship between a disciple and his rabbi is very deep. It is nothing like the casual relationship between a student and a teacher. The student only wants to learn what a teacher knows about a certain subject. The disciple wants to become like his rabbi in every way. (Lk 6:40) So it was between us and Yochanan. Yes, many people accused Yochanan of being arrogant because he said that what he taught was the ONLY truth. Yet there was no pride or arrogance in him. A prideful man teaches his own ideas and exalts himself. But Yochanan strictly taught God's ways straight from the Torah with nothing added and nothing left out. After Yeshua began to teach, some of Yochanan's disciples were upset that the crowds were now following Yeshua. Yet Yochanan humbly said, *"You heard me say, 'I am not the Messiah'... He must increase, but I must decrease."* (John 3:28-30)

Yeshua was, in so many ways, just like Yochanan. He walked in the same powerful humility that Yochanan did. People were astounded because Yeshua stripped away all of the man-made rules that had buried the true Word of God. I remember how the crowds gasped when he thundered out over and over, *"You have heard that it was said to those of old... But I say unto you..."* (Mat 5) He taught the Law of Moses with an authority that had never been seen before (Mat 1:27)... And well He could... for it was He who had given the Law to Moses! And like Yochanan, Yeshua never added anything to the Law nor removed anything from it. I remember one of the first times He taught a huge crowd. He said,

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Mat 5:17-20)

Yeshua was, by far the most humble, loving and gentle man that I have ever met because there was absolutely no sin within Him. Yet those who say that Yeshua was just ONLY loving and accepting of sinners were not there the day that He confronted the Pharisees. *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So, you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."* (Mat 23:1-36) Or the time he confronted them right in the temple saying, *"If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but He sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It*

is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (John 8:42-44)

Do you see what I mean about Yeshua being so much like Yochanan? That is exactly how Yochanan addressed the religious hypocrites.

Yeshua's message was identical to Yochanan's, *"Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand."* (Mat 3:1 / 4:17) When sinners came to Yochanan, he did not make them feel good about their sin. He led them to repentance through the true word of God. Those who repented were baptized and assured that their salvation was certain. The only difference was, of course, that Yeshua was Himself, "the Way, the Truth and the Life." Yeshua quickly forgave those who came to Him in repentance. Yet to those who would not repent, His condemnation was scathing. *And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you."*

(Mat 11:20-24)

Just as in my day, the enemy of our God pretends to be the standard of spirituality. He twists even the words of Yeshua to say that you must not judge anyone and that you must accept everyone in their sin. He has gradually taught you to set aside the commandments of God as obsolete and to replace them with the empty traditions and philosophies of men.

As I said, I have been a disciple of both Yochanan and Yeshua. I have walked with them and learned their ways. I have seen their unfathomable love for the lost and their unquenchable fire against sin. It is not an easy thing to be a disciple but, apart from it, life has no meaning. As people began to realize that they could not manipulate Yeshua to get what they wanted, many turned away from Him. Yeshua then asked us, *"Do you want to go away as well?"* My brother Simon Peter answered him, *"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life..."* (John 6:67-68)

On behalf of Yochanan and Yeshua, I implore you to stop being students of religion and become disciples of Yeshua. Put aside everything that tells you what the scriptures say and read them for yourselves. Test everything you hear (1 Th 5:21) against the truth of the scriptures. Throw away everything that does not agree with the whole of scripture as unclean for the world is full of false prophets. (1 Jn 4:1) In matters that you do not understand, cry out to the Holy Spirit for wisdom and He will guide you into truth. (Jn 16:13)

My brothers and sisters, do not let anyone or anything hold you back from the heritage that the Almighty has set before you. Pursue it with all your heart regardless of the cost.

Shalom!