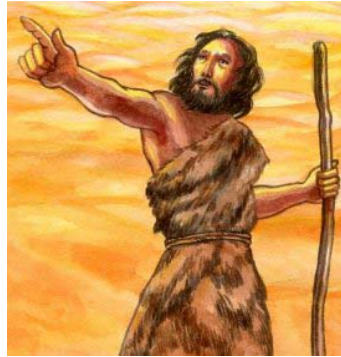


Someone Was Different

A long time ago, God gave His special people, the Israelites, rules to help them remember Him. God told them not to eat certain kinds of food so that they would be different from the people who didn't know about God. God told His people to pray to Him every day. He gave them rules about their clothing to help them to think about Him. God told the Israelites not to work on Saturday but to rest and learn about Him.

For years and years, everyone in Israel obeyed the rules. They got up in the morning and said a prayer that they had memorized. Everyone dressed in soft robes tied around the middle with a piece of fabric made from the same material. Everyone had bread and fruit and maybe some fish for breakfast, because all the mummies were careful to follow God's special rules about what kinds of food to serve. Then everyone went off to work. Daddies went to their jobs growing food, fishing or raising livestock. Mommies went to get water from the well and worked to take care of their families. Children went to school in the synagogue and helped with chores. Everyone did the same things every day except on Saturday. Then everyone did something different. On Saturday no one went to work. Everyone went to synagogue to hear about God, and especially about His rules.



The Israelites followed all of God's rules, but something was wrong. God gave the rules to help the Israelites remember Him, but instead they remembered the rules and forgot about God. They kept doing all the things that were supposed to help them remember God without thinking of God at all.

Every day went on the same for years and years and years, until one day, someone different came. God sent a man named John the Baptist to show the people of Israel that they weren't pleasing Him. God was not pleased when people said prayers they memorized without meaning the words they said. He was not pleased when people were careful about the food rules He gave them but were unkind to their neighbors or cheated others out of money, just like people who didn't know about God. God wanted His people to love Him and try to do *everything* to please Him, not just to follow some rules because everyone else in the town did.

So, when John the Baptist got up in the morning he didn't put on a soft robe. He put on a robe made of scratchy camel's hair. When he tied a belt around his middle, he used a piece of animal skin instead of a piece of fabric. When John said his morning prayers, he was really talking to God, not just saying words he had memorized. And you'll never believe what John ate for breakfast—bugs dipped in honey! Do you think you'd notice this man if he came to your church? I think you would! And that's exactly what happened in Israel.

People noticed John because he was different on the outside. But when he started preaching and teaching, they found out he was different on the inside, too. John showed the people what God really wanted from them, a changed heart. Many of the people who heard John preach were sorry for ignoring God and for the other wrong things they had done. They decided to change and do things differently, to ask God for His help and to trust Him to take away their sin. This new way of thinking about God was so different from the "same thing" they had been doing for years that most people realized that deep down, they were just like the other nations who hadn't heard about God. Those people decided to be baptized, or dipped in water, to show that they were ready to leave their old life behind and begin a new life serving God from the heart. John baptized many, many of these people in the Jordan River.

Did you know that the same thing that happened to Israel can happen to children and grown-ups today? God has given His church some rules about worshipping Him, but sometimes people go to church just because they always have. They don't think about the words in the songs they are singing. When the evangelist or the Sunday School teacher is praying, these people bow their heads, but they might be thinking about what's for dinner instead of talking to God. They listen to the teachers, but during the week they don't think about God very much and never try to please Him. Just like the Israelites, they are remembering the rules but forgetting God. Jesus says these kind of people "honor me with their words, but their heart is really far away from me" (Matt. 15:8). Just like the Israelites, they need to change and do things differently, to ask God for His help and to trust Him to take away their sin.

And if they do, God will take away their sin because of Jesus, God's Son. Jesus was born as a baby, just like you were. He grew up doing all the good things He was supposed to and never once doing anything wrong. He died on the cross to take away the punishment for the bad things we've done, like forgetting about God. Because of Jesus, people who used to *pretend* to love God can have a new heart, one that gladly obeys God.

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