Lesson 24 - John the Baptist & the Return of Elijah

Aim:
* To understand John’s mission and why he failed

Materials:
* coloured pictures of Elijah, John the Baptist and Jesus
* Visual aids: how people viewed John & Jesus
* A Bible for each child
* Bible verses
* Extracts from the Divine Principle
* Children’s worksheet

Lesson Outline
1. The Prophet Elijah
2. The Mission of John the Baptist
3. What did the people know John?
4. What did the people know Jesus?
5. Why John Failed his Mission
6. Activities - searching for Bible verses, worksheet
7. Review the aims
8. Prayer

1) The Prophet Elijah
In Malachi, the last book of prophecy in the Old Testament, it says,
- ‘Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. (Malachi 4:5).

Elijah was a great prophet of Israel who lived nine hundred years before Jesus. According to the Books of Kings, Elijah raised the dead, brought fire down from the sky, and ascended into heaven on a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11).

SHOW THE PICTURE

The "great and terrible day" that is referred to is the time when the Messiah comes, and thus this prophecy shows that before the Messiah comes, Elijah must first return. The Israelites' longing for the Messiah was actually intensely focused on the arrival of the historical prophet, Elijah. This was because the Old Testament did not clearly foretell when the Messiah would come, but did clearly indicate that Elijah would precede him.

For the Israelites to believe Jesus was the Messiah, Elijah had to return first.
2) The Mission of John the Baptist

* John was the returning Elijah. An angel told his father, Zechariah,

SHOW THE PICTURE

- *He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*(Luke 1: 16-17)

* John was a new person, but with the same mission as Elijah. His mission was to prepare people to receive the Messiah, and to be his main disciple. Jesus himself said that John was the Elijah.
- ‘*This is the one about whom it is written: " 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'*’ - *(Matthew 11:10)*

- *And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come* - *(Matthew 11:14)*

* Even though John was the returning Elijah, when he was asked he said he wasn’t Elijah.
- *They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not."* - *(John 1:21)*

Ask the children to find John 1:19-27, which gives a fuller account.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>19 Now this was John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. 20 He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, “I am not the Messiah.”</th>
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<td>21 They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No.” 22 Finally they said, “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” 23 John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’” 24 Now the Pharisees who had been sent 25 questioned him, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” 26 “I baptize with water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. 27 He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”</td>
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* Because Jesus said John was the Elijah, and John said he wasn’t, this confused the people. Who would the Israelites be more likely believe? It depended on what the people knew about them.

3) What did the people know about John?

1. He was from an important priest’s family - His father was a priest. He was well-educated.

2. He was a good example of spiritual life - He baptized people to wash away their sins. He said they should repent, because the kingdom of heaven was coming soon. He lived in the desert on honey and locusts,
3. There were miracles surrounding his birth. An angel told his father that John would become a very special person for God. His father was struck dumb because he disbelieved the angel. This story was well-known throughout the country.

4. Jewish leaders respected him very much. - John was held in such high regard that high priests, as well as the common people, even asked if he were the Messiah

- The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. (Luke 3:15)

4) What did the people know about Jesus?

1. He was from a humble carpenter’s family, - no education.

2. People thought he was a bad example of spiritual life, because was the friend of tax collectors and sinners, and known as a glutton (a greedy eater) and drunkard

- The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners."' (Matthew 11:19)

3. There were bad rumours about his birth. - Who was his father? Mary & Joseph were not married

4. Jewish leaders condemned him, because he said was very special

* He put himself equal with God

- Jesus said,"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? (John 14:9-10)

* He was was known as one who was abolishing the law

- "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. (Matthew 5:17)

* He told the people that they had to love him more than anyone else

- "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; (Matthew 10:37)

* Because of this, the Jewish leaders went so far as to claim that Jesus was working by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons.

- But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."(Matthew 12:24)

It is obvious from the above, that people were much more likely to believe John.

5) Why John Failed his Mission

* At first John did testify about Jesus.

- “I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.”(John 1:34)

SHOW THE PICTURE

Ask the children to find John 1:29-34, which gives fuller account.
The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”

Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.”

* John’s mission was to tell people that Jesus was the Messiah. In the beginning he did this, but later he doubted it. He didn’t follow Jesus. Instead he criticized the king and was put in jail. While in jail he sent a message to Jesus to ask if he were the Messiah or not.

- When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Matthew 11: 2-3).

Ask the children to find Matthew 2:2-11, which gives a fuller account.

2 When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples 3 to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”
4 Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: 5 The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. 6 Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”
7 As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? 8 If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. 9 Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.”

11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

* John should have been Jesus’ closest disciple, but this verse proves that John did not understand Jesus and failed to follow him. It also shows that Jesus was upset with John. Although John was born with the greatest mission, Jesus said he would be least in the Kingdom of heaven.

* One main reason he failed his mission is that he denied being Elijah. Because Jesus said John was Elijah it made Jesus look very bad. This blocked the Jewish people from coming to Jesus, and that is why Jesus was rejected and crucified.

* It is also the reason why John lost his life. He was chosen for the greatest mission to testify to the living Messiah. Because he failed he lost God’s protection and lost his life.

6) Activities
* Search bibles verses - John 1:19-27, John 1:29-34, Matthew 2:2-11
* Worksheet - Write down the words of John and Jesus from John 1:21 and Matthew 11:14
   - Write down what the people knew about Jesus and John the Baptist
7) Review the aims
To understand John’s mission and why he failed
a) As the returning Elijah, his mission was to tell everyone Jesus was the Messiah, but he didn’t.
b) He was meant be Jesus’ closest follower, but he didn’t follow him
c) Because John denied he was Elijah, it blocked people from coming to Jesus
d) The Israelites had a higher opinion of John than Jesus
   John - from an important family, good example of spiritual life, miracles surrounding his birth,
   respected by Jewish leaders
   Jesus - from a humble family, bad example of spiritual life, bad rumours about his birth,
   condemned by Jewish leaders

8) End with a prayer
IV. John the Baptist and the Return of Elijah

A. The Messiah and Elijah

At this point, there is one matter which we must look into regarding God's dispensation of having Jesus go the way of the cross. God had repeatedly prophesied to the chosen people about the coming of the Messiah, and the chosen people themselves longed for him and cherished the promise of his coming. How could God send the Messiah in such a way that the chosen people were unable to recognize him? Was it God's will that they not recognize and receive the Messiah? Or did the people fail to recognize him despite God's clearly showing them how he was to come?

In order to find the answers to these questions, let us first examine the second coming of Elijah. In Malachi, the last book of prophecy in the Old Testament, it says, "'Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes ... '" (Mal 4:5,6). The "great and terrible day" that is referred to is the time when the Messiah comes, and thus this prophecy shows that before the Messiah comes, Elijah must first return.

Elijah was a great prophet of Israel who lived nine hundred years before Jesus. There is record of his having ascended into heaven on a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11). The Israelites' longing for the Messiah was actually intensely focused on the arrival of the historical prophet, Elijah. This was because the Old Testament did not clearly foretell when the Messiah would come, but did clearly indicate that Elijah would precede him.

It was under these circumstances that Jesus appeared, proclaiming himself the Messiah. He told the Jewish people that he was the Son of God -- this to the very people who thought that he was simply a young man from Nazareth. they had not yet heard any news of Elijah's coming, so they asked, "How could Jesus of Nazareth be the Son of God?"

Thus, when Jesus' disciples went out among the people of Israel, testifying to Jesus', the people doubted that Jesus was the Messiah and challenged the disciples by asking where Elijah was, since Elijah was to precede the Messiah. So Jesus' disciples turned around and asked Jesus, "' ... then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?'" (Mt 17:10). Jesus replied, "' ... Elijah does come, and he is to restore all things; but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not know him, but did to him whatever they pleased ...'. Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist" (Mt 17:10-13).

Jesus understood the meaning of the scribes' important question and indicated that John the Baptist was the second coming of Elijah. Jesus' own disciples could easily believe this, but could the Israelites bring themselves to believe it? John the Baptist did not come directly from heaven, and he himself even denied he was Elijah (Kn 1:21). Jesus himself knew that the people would not easily accept it, saying, "' ... if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come'" (Mt 11:14).

Jesus said that John the Baptist was Elijah who the people had been long awaiting, but since John himself denied it, whom would the people of Israel believe? Naturally, it would depend on how these two men were viewed by the people of that time.

First, how did Jesus appear to the Israelites of the time? Jesus was an obscure young man raised in a humble carpenter's home and was not known to be experienced in spiritual disciplines. Yet, Jesus proclaimed himself "lord of the Sabbath" (Mt 12:8), was known as one who was abolishing the law (Mt 5:17), was the friend of tax collectors and
sinners, and was known as a glutton and a drunkard (Mt 11:19). He put himself on an equal footing with God (Jn 14:9-11) and told the people that they had to love him more than anyone else (Mt 10:37). Because of this, the Jewish leaders went so far as to claim that Jesus was working by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons (Mt 12:24).

On the other hand, how did the Israelites of that time see John the Baptist? He was the son of a prominent family, and the miracles surrounding his conception and birth were known throughout the country (Lk 1:5-66). When he was older, he lived on locusts and honey in the wilderness, and thus in their eyes, he led an exemplary life as a man of faith. In fact, John was held in such high regard that high priests, as well as the common people, even asked if he were the Messiah (Lk 3:15, Jn 1:20).

Under these circumstances, the people of Israel tended to believe more in John the Baptist, who asserted he was not Elijah, than in Jesus, who told them that John the Baptist was Elijah. The people decided that Jesus' view of John as Elijah was untrustworthy, thinking that Jesus said this only to make believable his claims about himself.

B. The Mission of John the Baptist

Then why did Jesus say that John the Baptist was Elijah? As Luke 1:17 indicates, John the Baptist came with the mission of Elijah. The people of Israel, who believed the words of the Old Testament literally, assumed that the original Elijah would actually come down from heaven. But God chose John and sent him with the mission of Elijah.

John the Baptist himself declared that he was "sent before" the Messiah (Jn 3:28), to "make strait the way of the Lord" (Jn 1:23). Being a man with such a unique and important mission, John, by his own wisdom, should have known that he himself was Elijah.

Many of the chief priests and the people of Israel who respected John the Baptist thought that he might even be the Messiah. Therefore, if John had proclaimed that he was Elijah and had testified that Jesus was the Messiah, the Jewish people of that time would have been able to recognize and receive Jesus, thereby obtaining salvation. Then Jesus' family background and seeming lack of experience in spiritual disciplines would not have mattered. However, because of his ignorance of God's dispensation, John insisted that he was not Elijah. This was the main factor that prevented the people of Israel from coming to Jesus.

In Matthew 3:11, John the Baptist said that he baptized with water, but that the one who came after him (the Messiah) would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire; he said that he was not even worthy to untie the thong of his sandal (Jn 1:27). In John 1:33, John said, "I myself did not know him; but he [God] who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit [Christ]." And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God." Thus God gave John the Baptist a direct revelation that Jesus was the Son of God. Although John did initially fulfill his mission to testify to Jesus Christ, regretfully he did not testify to Jesus throughout his life.

After meeting the Messiah, everyone should believe in him and serve him throughout their lives. This was especially true for John the Baptist, who came with the mission of Elijah, which was to prepare the Messiah's way (Lk 1:76). Therefore, John should have served and attended Jesus as one of his disciples. John's father was told of his son's mission when he was born and he prophesied, saying, "... 'And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to
give knowledge of salvation to his people ..." (Lk 1:76,77). However, we cannot find any instance in the Bible where John the Baptist actually served Jesus.

Just before John the Baptist died in prison, having lived without fulfilling his mission to serve Jesus, he began to have doubts concerning his life and Jesus and sent his disciples to Jesus to ask, "... 'Are you he is to come, or shall we look for another?'" (Mt 11:3). This verse proves beyond any shadow of a doubt that John did not believe in Jesus and failed to serve him.

Jesus was indignant at such a question and answered quite judgmentally, "... blessed is he who takes no offense at me" (Mt 11:6), indicating that despite Israel's great respect for John, John had already failed his mission.

Jesus also said, "... among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Mt 11:11). If one were the greatest born of women, surely he should be equally great in the Kingdom of Heaven. Then how could John the Baptist, who was born as the greatest in history, be less than the least in heaven?

God sent John the Baptist as the greatest of prophets, for he was to serve the Messiah and testify to him before all the people. But he was a dismal failure in fulfilling his responsibility. Matthew 11:12 also explains this, saying, "'From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven had suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force.'" If John the Baptist had served Jesus well, fulfilling his responsibility, he would have become Jesus' chief disciple; but because he failed, Peter, who made the greatest effort among Jesus' disciples, became the leader of the Twelve.

In order to prepare the people of Israel to have faith in Jesus, God gave many testimonies to John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who were representatives of the Judaism of that time. God continually worked miracles so that the people would accept that he was directly working in the conception and birth of John the Baptist. Undoubtedly, John was told by his parents about his being related to Jesus, and, as mentioned above, he must have received many revelations directly from God.

Yet, despite all of this preparation, John the Baptist failed because of his disbelief and ignorance. Moreover, his personal ignorance and disbelief led not only to his individual loss, but also to the disbelief of most of the people and ultimately to Jesus' crucifixion.
From a humble carpenter’s family
- no education

Bad example of spiritual life
- mixed with sinners
- known as a drunkard

Bad rumours about his birth
- who was his father?

Jewish leaders condemned him
- he said he was very special
From an important priest’s family - well-educated

Good example of spiritual life - lived in desert on honey & locusts

Miracles surrounding his birth - stories about him were well-known

Jewish leaders respected him very much - some thought he might be the Messiah
John the Baptist & the Return of Elijah

When John the Baptist baptized Jesus in the River Jordan he saw the spirit of God descend like a dove and heard a voice saying,

"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

(Matthew 3:16-17)

John’s mission was to tell people that Jesus was the Messiah and to be his main disciple, but he did not. This blocked the Jewish people from coming to Jesus and it is the main reason why Jesus was rejected and crucified. How could this happen?

We must understand about the prophet Elijah who lived 900 years before Jesus. The Jewish people expected Elijah to return before the Messiah came.

"Behold, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the great and terrible day of the Lord”

(Malachi 4:5-6)

But Jesus said that Elijah had already returned and this was John the Baptist: a new person with the same mission. John, however, said he was not Elijah. Who did the Jewish people believe more, Jesus or John?
How were John the Baptist and Jesus different?

Look in the Bible. Find John 1:21 and Matthew 11:14 and write down what each man said. Then write down four differences between John and Jesus.

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