

2. A Man Sent by God

John 1:19-34

The Gospel According to John

Today, we will read about a strange man who lived in the desert (Luke 1:80) and ate a much stranger diet than most of us have eaten. His diet was locusts and wild honey. Not only did he eat exotic food, but also, he looked strange, too, having long hair, and clothed with camel hair, and a leather belt around him (Mark 1:6). Yet, Jesus said of this man, John the Baptist, that there was none greater:

I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he (Matthew 11:11).

What was it about John the Baptist that earned him the high praise of Jesus, calling him the greatest man (apart from Christ) who had ever lived? Scripture tells us that John the Baptist never performed a miracle or sign (John 10:41), so when you think of the great prophets like Moses, Elijah, and Elisha, who all did various miracles, without mentioning Daniel, Jeremiah, and others, what was it that made him so great in the eyes of Jesus?

We read in Luke's Gospel that not only was John born of the tribe of Levi (Luke 1:5-9) but also, he was one of the descendants of Aaron, i.e., automatically making him a priest. His mother, Elizabeth, had been barren, plus his parents were both very old, and past the age to have children, so God moved supernaturally in their lives to give them John in their old age. John's father, Zacharias, the priest, had an encounter with an angel in the temple while he was offering incense in front of the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place, i.e., the two rooms inside the temple. The angel told Zacharias that his prayers were answered and that his wife would bear a son. Zacharias became dumb due to his unbelief at the angel's words (Luke 1:20). □

After being conceived by the Holy Spirit, Mary, the mother of Jesus, visited Elizabeth in her sixth month of pregnancy with John. Both Elizabeth and the unborn John were filled with the Spirit when the yet unborn Jesus came before them both. When John was born, His father's tongue was loosed, with Zachariah prophesying that John would be a prophet of the Lord (Luke 1:76). Zachariah's healing and testimony about the angel's message brought high expectations in the Jewish people because, up to that time, they had gone four hundred years with no prophet sent to them. The last prophet had been Malachi, who spoke of the coming of the forerunner of the Messiah (Malachi 4:5-6). □

Due to his supernatural birth, John's life was followed closely due to his being born into the priesthood and also being called to be separated to God at birth by taking a Nazarite vow (Luke 1:15). His hair could not be cut, nor could he touch anything dead, and he also could not eat or drink anything of the vine, e.g., no grapes, wine or raisins (Numbers 6:2-6). Something happened to John in his childhood, though, so that he didn't grow up in the luxury of the priestly class. As

far as we know, he did not go through yeshiva or seminary, but God led him to live in the desert regions from childhood:□

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel (Luke 1:80).

Question 1) Why would God lead this man to live in the desert wilderness in preparation for his ministry? Have you ever been or are going through a spiritual desert experience where everything seems dry and barren? What does God want to teach us in such experiences?

The greatest need for then and now is for God to raise up men and women who will listen and know the voice of God. That is not easy in our busy, goal-oriented, success-driven, workaholic lives. God is not hesitant to speak to us; the problem is our ability to slow down our busy lives and listen. Job said, “*For God does speak—now one way, now another—though man may not perceive it*” (Job 33:14). The problem is our perception. John the Baptist learned how to survive in the desert or wilderness of Judea, living off the land as he learned to listen to the voice of God. It is interesting that Jesus, Moses, Joshua, and Jacob spent much time in the desert or empty wilderness regions. Paul the Apostle said that after his conversion he went into Arabia, a very desert region (Galatians 1:17). When the two million or so Israelites left Egypt, God took them aside into desert places to teach them that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from God.

²Remember how the LORD your *God led you all the way in the desert* these forty years, to humble you and *to test you* in order *to know what was in your heart*, whether or not you would keep his commands. ³*He humbled you*, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that *man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD*. ⁴Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years (Deuteronomy 8:2-4).

I lived in Israel on and off for a year and a half in the late seventies and early eighties. While there, I was able to stay a week in Beersheba, the southernmost Israeli city on the edge of the Negev desert. One morning, I strolled out into the desert to experience what it was like to live in a barren wilderness. I was cautious not to go too far, in case I could not find my way back. What shook me was the solitude and quietness. There was no wind and only the occasional bird coming near. In the desert, everything else is stripped away. One is alone with only God to listen. It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word *midbar*, translated into English with our word *desert*, is the root of the word *to speak*, the Hebrew word being *medibear*. A desert is a place where nothing exists but God, His voice seeking to talk to us and give us His direction. □

God allows us to go through times in our lives where we are humbled and tested, where everything we seem to do is barren and unproductive. Why? Moses said that there were two reasons: 1) So that the Lord would get our attention and know what is in our hearts (Deuteronomy 8:2). The Lord calls those times a test. It’s not that God needs to know what is in your heart; He already knows everything about us. It is that we need to know what is in our hearts and turn to Him. We can only change when we see our hearts the way God sees us. 2) The

second reason he leads us into a desert experience is to learn to live on God's resources, i.e., to lean on Him by listening to every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (v. 3).

At the right time in the program of God, around the age of thirty, John the Baptist had started his ministry of calling people to repentance. God began bringing crowds of people out into the desert to listen to John the Baptist preaching about repentance and baptizing those who wanted to walk with God. Here below is the message he preached: □

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." ³This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him' " (Matthew 3:2-3).

Matthew's Gospel tells us that John the Baptist attracted crowds from "Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (Matthew 3:5-6). From Jerusalem, it is at least sixteen miles to the nearest part of the River Jordan to be baptized. Luke further tells us that he went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. If you were to be transported suddenly to the area right now, you would find it a barren wilderness. This place is just north of where the Dead Sea scrolls were found. It is a barren wilderness at the lowest place on earth at 1,300 feet below sea level. During the winter, it is frigid at night, but hot during the day, yet God brought the people to that barren place to be baptized by John. □

Up to that point in Israel's history, only Gentiles turning to Judaism were baptized. Because of this new religious rite of baptizing Jewish people without precedent, a delegation of priests and Levites were sent from the ruling seventy elders, the Sanhedrin, with questions for John. As we read chapter one, verse 19, of John's Gospel, we should understand that, when John the Apostle wrote his Gospel, he uses the name "Jews" seventy times, referring to the leading ruling religious elite of Sadducees and Pharisees and Scribes. The delegation of Jews asked John the Baptist as to who he was of three persons they were expecting.

¹⁹Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ." ²¹They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." ²²Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord'" (John 1:19-23).

Moses had spoken to the Israelites that God would send a prophet like himself to them: "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen" (Deuteronomy 18:15). This Prophet was the Messiah, Christ. God had also spoken through the last prophet, Malachi, four hundred years previously, that before the Messiah should come, they would be sent the prophet Elijah: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes" (Malachi 4:5). So, the delegation of Jews, asked John plainly, "Who are you? Which of the three are you? Are you the Messiah, the prophet Moses spoke about, or Elijah?"

His answer to their questions tells us a lot as to why Jesus said that, up to that time among those born of women, there was none greater than John the Baptist. When John could have pointed to himself and what he was doing, he replied that he was just a voice. What made John great was that he was small enough for God to use. He was a man of character totally dependent on God. Let's fish in that pond for a while; let's talk about character.

The Making of a Man of Character

Whenever God wants to start a new work of significant breakthrough, He prepares and then sends a man (or woman) of godly character. The greater the work, the greater the inner preparation of the person God chooses. A.W. Tozer once said, "God cannot use a man greatly until He has hurt him deeply." God's plan is never better methods, but better men. Some people send themselves to do ministry way before God does the sending. □

The Church at large would be wiser to prepare and equip the servants of God before hastily setting them apart for ministry. Paul, the Apostle, warned Timothy about this very thing. He said, **"Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands"** (1 Timothy 5:22). Do not give leadership and responsibility away to people who have not been proved worthy due to their godly character. Godly character must be formed within a leader's heart before a man or woman of God can be sent to do a groundbreaking mission. Every born-again believer can be used of God, but we are talking now about a position of responsibility in the Church, an equipping ministry (Ephesians 4:11). Dr. Lloyd-Jones once said, "The worst thing that can happen to a man is to succeed before he is ready." This training in learning to depend on God and listen to His voice was what prepared John the Baptist to be the forerunner of the Messiah.

Question 2) What do we mean by character, and what's the danger of sending a man or woman to accomplish God's work without God-shaped character?

Let's look at the essential character qualities needed for leadership in God's church and then examine John the Baptist's acquisition of those necessary qualities. The Greek word for the character of a man is *charasso*. Author Frank Demazio enlightens us about this word in his excellent book, *The Making of a Leader*. He says:

It means a notch, indentation, a sharpening, scratching or writing on stone, wood or metal. This word came to mean an embosser and a stamp for making coins. From this, it came to mean the embossed stamp made on the coin, or a character styled in writing. This Greek word appears in the New Testament only in Hebrews 1:3. Here, the writer states that Christ is the very character of God, the very stamp of God's nature, and the one in whom God stamped or imprinted His being. Consequently, we derive the meaning of our English word "character" as a distinctive mark impressed, or otherwise formed, by an outside (or internal) force upon an individual.¹

Whether or not we realize it, leaders are models. If you are a leader, someone is learning not so much from what you say, but from what you do. No man is an island to himself alone. We all

¹ Frank Demazio, *The Making of a Leader*. Bible Temple Publishing, 1988, Portland, Oregon. Page 107

influence someone else either for good or bad. We are accountable for the impression we leave on other people's lives. God sees all and knows all. **"Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account"** (Hebrews 4:13). He will reward us according to how much of the character of Christ is stamped on the inner core of our lives and on the lives of those we have influenced during our life in this world.

Character is not about the person you will be in the future, but the person you are now. It is about your heart, will, and motives. Life is a series of tests that God has prepared in advance and is working out in the present. These tests are designed by God to make you into the person God has called you to be. Each test that God allows us to experience builds our character. The famous evangelist D.L. Moody once said, "If I take care of my character, my reputation will take care of itself." A man on track to become a great man of God is someone who cares about the things that enter his mind and heart through the gates of the five senses. □

Make the tree good, and the fruit will be good (Matthew 12:33). Jesus said, **"For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks"** (Luke 6:45). Your ministry is the overflow of your inner nature that you have in your relationship with God. Cultivate your private life with God, and the fruit of your life will be abundant. You are a product of the sum total of your inner thought life, your mind, will, and heart. **"Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life"** (Proverbs 4:23).

John made no claim about himself other than being a voice calling in the desert to make straight the way of the Lord. Jesus told us in each of the other three Gospels that the Pharisees and leaders of the people did not believe John had been authorized by God to baptize (Matthew 21:26; Mark 11:31; Luke 20:5). The leaders of the Jews thought that they had cornered the market on religion in Israel, and they certainly had not authorized John to do something that was a foreign concept in Israel, i.e., baptizing Jews for repentance. The religious leaders and Pharisee's saw no need for the cleansing of baptism.

²⁴Now some Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶"I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing (John 1:24-28).

Character Traits of John the Baptist:

- 1) **No Compromise.** John the Baptist was no man-pleaser! There was no compromising of his moral standards. When King Herod Antipas took his brother Phillip's wife as his own, John the Baptist rebuked him and told him it was not lawful (Luke 3:19), even though he knew that Herod was a violent man and that John could be killed for his statement. John stood unshakable in his faith and did not compromise his core beliefs, even before an angry king. His uncompromising morality cost him his life. Herod had John beheaded.

- 2) John Gave Away his Congregation. When certain men came to John the Baptist telling him that Jesus' disciples were "baptizing, and everyone is going to him" (John 3:36), John's attitude was full of joy at such news. He said in response, "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30). This attitude is a great truth for us, too. Christ in us must have the pre-eminence, and our way must grow less and less important. The last thing John wanted was for people to look to him. They were to behold the Lamb. □
- 3) A Witness to the Substitutionary Lamb of God. The Jews believed and still teach that the Suffering Servant passage of Isaiah 53 referred to the nation of Israel. John the Baptist assured them that the Lamb of God, the Suffering Servant, was in their midst, the One who would take away the sin of the world. People stopped following John and began to follow Christ due to the witness of John. A true man of God points to the Savior and away from himself.
- 4) He was Humble. A person's words indicate where his heart is focused. John called himself just a voice in the desert, a servant that's not worthy of doing the most menial of tasks for his master, such as untying Jesus' shoes. All he wanted to do was to point to the Savior and then get out of the way. We would do well to imitate him. To do that, we needn't go to the desert. That's not where God has called us. He's called us to be a learner (disciple) and a witness to what God has done in us.

A Voice Calling for Repentance

More than five hundred years before John the Baptist appeared on the scene, the prophet Isaiah prophesied that John the Baptist's ministry would be to clear the path and soften the hearts of the people for when the promised Messiah (Christ) would come upon the scene. Isaiah said:

³A voice of one calling in the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain" (Isaiah 40:3-4).

Merrill Tenney in his commentary helps us here:

The imagery was taken from the days when there were no paved roads, only tracks across fields. If a king were to travel, the road must be built and smoothed out so that the royal chariot might not find the traveling unduly rough, nor swamped in the mire.²

Along with the Israelites in the days of John the Baptist, many of us have walked in a spiritual desert for too long. We go from valley to mountaintop in our experience of walking through this life. We are up and then down again. It's time for the path ahead of us to be leveled out. The valley must be raised, and the hills made lower, and our rough ground should be smooth. □

John's main message was for all people everywhere to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 3:2). Repentance does this for us. Many of us carry too much baggage with us

² Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Erdmann's Publishing, p.79.)

on the journey, and it's time to throw off every weight that causes us to stumble on the path before us.

Question 3) What is repentance and what value does it have in the Christian life?

Repentance means a change of mind, leading to a change of direction. Basilea Schlink said, "Repentance is the only gate through which the gospel is received." C.H. Spurgeon, the great British preacher, once said, "Sin and hell are married unless repentance proclaims the divorce. God has nowhere undertaken to forgive a sin that man is not prepared to forsake." A. W. Tozer used the analogy of breathing, saying, "Exhalation is as necessary to life as inhalation. To accept Christ, it is necessary that we reject whatever is contrary to Him." □

Repentance digs up the roots of things that hold us captive to our sins. There needs to be repentance accompanied by a deep hatred of the things that bring bitter poison to our spirit and thought life. I used to have a small garden in which I grew vegetables, strawberries, tomatoes, etc., but I soon learned that it was not enough to cut down the weeds, I had to pull up the roots as well; otherwise, my garden would still produce weeds. It is not enough to pull up the plants of sin; we have to pull up the roots as well. This uprooting is what repentance does. □

Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the LORD our God to go and worship the gods of those nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison (Deuteronomy 29:18).

Our enemy, Satan, seeks to hold us to our sins by a weak form of religion devoid of life-change where there is no need for repentance and old habits and sins not forsaken, a type of religion where we are still held in slavery to sin. In the Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist said that there is a fruit of repentance that God requires:

⁷John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ⁹The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." ¹⁰"What should we do then?" the crowd asked. ¹¹John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." ¹²Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" ¹³"Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. ¹⁴Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay" (Luke 3:7-14).

Perhaps, something you have done has hurt another; then, maybe, you need to go to the one that has been hurt and ask for forgiveness. You may also need to pay restitution. I remember as a young Christian not being able to get peace within my heart after I had unwittingly towed my trawl nets over the top of another fisherman's nets fixed at a particular place. I only realized that I had damaged them when the day dawned. I thought I had a legitimate reason because I was fishing at night and I couldn't see the buoys that marked the position of his nets. God had other

ideas! I didn't get peace until I went to the house of the owner of the nets and paid him cash for his lost nets. □

True repentance affects what you do. Your life will begin to change as the Spirit of God puts His finger on areas of your life that He wants you to correct. My advice is for you to ask God which areas of your life He would have you correct and create a strategy or habit that would bring that area under Christ's control.

²⁹The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" ³⁰This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' ³¹I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel." ³²Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God" (John 1:29-34).

Question 4) Why did John call Jesus the Lamb of God rather than the Lion of the Tribe of Judah? What was significant about Jesus' being called a Lamb?

The testimony of John the Baptist was that Jesus was and is the Messiah. He had witnessed the Holy Spirit come down from heaven and remain on Jesus. The Father told him that when he saw the Spirit come down on a person and remain, that One would be the Messiah (v. 33).

Are you in a dry, desert place in your spiritual walk at the moment? Share your present experience and pray for one another. Pray for those who especially felt that they were in a desert place and needed to hear God for something that they are experiencing. If God has spoken to you about an area of your life that you feel is still rooted in sin, then repent, turnaround from your sin, and ask God for His help.

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