

Series: "Encounters With Christ"
"John the Baptist"

Today I'm beginning a series of messages from the Gospel of John. We're going to be working our way through this gospel, and focusing on one-on-one encounters that various people had with Jesus. It's in these personal encounters people had with Jesus that we learn so much of the truth of the gospel!

The first person in John's gospel to meet up with Jesus is John the Baptist, or John the Baptizer. (He wasn't a modern day Baptist! He's called that because he baptized people)!

Before we look at the actual interaction between John and Jesus, let's examine a little background information on John the Baptist. John's father was a priest named Zechariah, and his mother's name was Elizabeth. Both were getting up in years, and had no children. (We've come across that before in the Bible, haven't we?). Apparently, they've been praying for a child, for one day an angel appears to Zechariah. The old priest is terrified! But the angel says don't be afraid, your prayers have been heard, your wife will bear a son, and you are to call him "John". So, right away, this is not your run-of-the-mill couple having a baby!

The angel says this child they're going to have will fulfill a special role and destiny. "You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:14-17).

So right from the start John the Baptist is set apart for a special God-task: he'll turn many people of Israel to the Lord. Filled with God's Spirit, and in the spirit and power of the prophet Elijah, he'll prepare people for the Lord's coming!

Even before he's conceived, John the Baptist is destined by God for a special mission in life. It reminds me of what God said about the prophet Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5). Just an aside: If God knows us and has plans for us even before we're born, then abortion isn't solely about "female reproductive justice". There's another important component that factors into the decision. A baby. John, even before birth, was appointed by God for a special, important task.

So, let's turn to the Gospel of John, chapter 1. The gospel writer John introduces John the Baptist to us. "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light" (John 1:6-8).

John begins to preach repentance, and baptize people, gaining quite a following. When Jews send some priests to ask John who he is – is he the Messiah? Is he Moses, or Elijah, come back

to life? He says he's not any of them. Rather: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said" (John 1:23). He is to level the ground, clear the road, for Messiah to come!

Then John describes Jesus and John the Baptist meeting up with each other. John 1:29: "The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'" Jesus is walking towards John, and John announces that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Chapter 1 continues: "This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel. And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Chosen One'" (John 1:30-34).

John says Jesus ranks ahead of him because Jesus came before him. That's an understatement! Jesus pre-existed with the Father even before creation! That was a little bit ahead of John's time!

Then John refers to the time he baptized Jesus. John's gospel doesn't describe Jesus' baptism. It just refers to it. We go to Matthew's gospel to get the details. As Jesus approaches John to be baptized, John says, "You should be baptizing me!" John baptizing Jesus is the first encounter John had with Jesus mentioned in the gospels. (We don't know if they had met before that).

Everything about John the Baptist indicates humility. He's always pointing away from himself to Jesus. He's not the main attraction. His calling and role is to clear the way for the Messiah to come! "I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God" (John 1:34). Once, when people mention that John's disciples are turning away from him and following Jesus, John says, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

An interesting sidelight to this story is where John the Baptist says "I myself did not know him". John says that 2 times: John 1:31, 33.

It's interesting because John the Baptist was in some way related to Jesus. The King James Version says John's mother Elizabeth and Jesus' mother Mary were "cousins". But the Greek word is more general. It means they were "related", or "kinswomen". We can't be sure of the exact relationship, but Mary and Elizabeth were of the same family; thus Jesus and John the Baptist were somehow related. Here are two of the most important people in history, somehow related to each other, but John says he didn't know Jesus!

Considering this information we've looked at regarding John the Baptist, we can say that *John was driven by a sense of God's calling. He was faithful to this "God-destiny". God*

chose him, *even before he was born*, for a task, a role, of utmost importance! John was faithful to that calling! Do you have a sense of calling from God? Something in life, some task, some role, that you believe God wants you to fulfill?

One of the sad things is that so often we only think this applies to those "called" to the ministry – pastors, priests, missionaries. But each of us has a God-destiny. No, probably not spectacular, like John the Baptist or the Apostle Paul. But some plan and purpose in life that's rooted in God, and God's will. It may be to be the best Christian mom or grandmom we can be. To fulfill that calling in our job as a teacher, or accountant, or factory worker – just to be God's person in that place. Perhaps our calling is to be a compassionate caregiver, or a community leader. And this calling may change over the years, as our life situation changes.

John the Baptist was faithful to God's call on his life. It didn't make his life any easier, but his life counted for something eternal.

John mentions that the next day, a similar thing happened: "The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!'" (John 1:35-36). Again, John points to Jesus!

How much is my life pointing to Jesus? Do people see Jesus in me? If I'm successful in any way, am I humble about it, because I realize that everything I have comes from God? I sometimes think of Christians in the spotlight – well known Christians in the music ministry, noted Christian authors, TV preachers, pastors and church leaders – how the spotlight sometimes seems to be on them, and not Jesus! Not so with John the Baptist. I love it when John said of Jesus, "He must increase, but I must decrease." Can that be our life motto!

Let me say this also about John the Baptist. *Although he was humble, and always pointed to Jesus, he had guts!* He was a rough and tumble guy – out there in the wilderness, dressed in camel's hair clothing, eating grasshoppers and honey! Preaching repentance and judgment!

Religious leaders in their finery come to him and he says you brood of snakes, who warned you to flee from God's wrath. Whew! Imagine that! He says, "Don't think just because you can trace your ancestry back to Abraham that your relationship with God is secure! You have to repent and change your ways!" John the Baptist even had the guts to go to Herod, the ruler, and blast him for having his brother Philip's wife. That got him in prison, and eventually, got him beheaded.

Can you imagine how John would fit into our culture that is so hyper-sensitive to using the proper pronouns, and not saying anything that might in any way offend any certain group! He'd probably be banned on Facebook and YouTube!

Every generation, every culture, desperately needs John the Baptist types who will have the courage to tell the truth, and to call out sin. We are so worried about being politically correct, about being accused of being judgmental, that we often allow evil to go unchallenged.

Here's something to think about: Who are the John the Baptists in our American culture today? Who is rightfully challenging the evil that plagues today's culture? Who are the people bold enough to tell the honest to goodness truth?

Not much more is recorded in John's gospel, or in any of the gospels, about Jesus and John the Baptist directly interacting. It's surprising, given how important these men are. Giants in human history! There is the instance where John is in jail, and he sends messengers to Jesus asking if Jesus is really the Messiah, or not. Apparently he goes through a period of doubt.

The New Testament does tell us that it was only after John was arrested, that Jesus began His preaching ministry. "Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested he withdrew to Galilee...from that time on Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near' (Matthew 4:12, 17). You get the feeling that John's arrest must have touched Jesus deeply, and Jesus realized that John's time to serve was coming to a close, and His just beginning.

So, while there is surprising little description of Jesus and John the Baptist interacting, we do know *how Jesus summed up John's life*. He refers to him as "a burning and shining lamp" (John 5:35), as one who "testified to the truth" (John 5:33).

And Jesus says more about John: "As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What, then, did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What, then, did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist, yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he'" (Matthew 11:7-11).

This rough and tumble, unsophisticated man, who always put Jesus ahead of himself, who offended people with his bluntness...but had a passion to fulfill his God-given destiny...no one ever was or ever will be greater than him!

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