

Transcript

The Jesus Story - John the Baptist - Part 2

The more we look at the life of Jesus the more we realise just how much He cares about people.

In the last session in Luke chapter seven we saw Jesus heal a Roman Centurions Servant. The next thing that we find is. They meet a funeral procession. A broken hearted woman who had just lost her son. Luke tells us in verse:

13 When the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep."

14 Then He came and touched the open coffin, and those who carried him stood still. And He said, "Young man, I say to you, arise."

15 So he who was dead sat up and began to speak. And He presented him to his mother.

We pick the story up again in the next verse, Luke 7:16:

16 Then fear came upon all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen up among us"; and, "God has visited His people."

17 And this report about Him went throughout all Judea and all the surrounding region.

18 Then the disciples of John reported to him concerning all these things. And John, calling two of his disciples to him,

19 sent them to Jesus, saying, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?"

What I would like to do is just pause here and take a closer look at John's question "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?"

From a man of John's spiritual stature, this is an amazing question; and perhaps the most disturbing thing is that John the Baptist himself at this time suffered certain doubts and felt uneasy about Jesus.

But to really understand the significance of this question we need to take a closer look at the one asking the question - John the Baptist. What we really need to find out is just what was it that caused him to ask this question?

The only way that we can get the true story concerning John is by looking at just what the bible tells us about him, and there is so much that we find out about John even before he was born - a priest called Zachariah and his wife Elizabeth who were both well passed child-bearing age.

In fact the bible clearly states, Luke 1:7:

7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.

But, they had been praying for a baby. Luke tells us in his gospel that while Zachariah the priest was serving in the temple an angel appeared with this message, Luke 1:13:

13 Zachariah. Your prayer has been heard. Elizabeth, your wife, will bear a son by you. You are to name him John.

Luke then goes on to tell us what the angel said about John:

15 He will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.

That is a powerful start to any life.

It was around this time that we read how Mary the mother of Jesus was visited by an angel. She too received a promise from the angel:

30 Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

31 "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS.

Mary is so excited at this news she just can't wait to share it with her cousin Elizabeth:

39 Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah,

40 and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth.

41 And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Then, Elizabeth told Mary just what had just happened to her:

44 "For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.

What a testimony, and John has not even been born yet. Still he was having a great impact on everything around him.

There are a good many stories told about the birth and childhood of John, and there may be a little truth in some of them. But, if we are to find the true life of John the Baptist, then we need to find out just what the bible has to say.

This is all that the bible tells us about his childhood, Luke 1:80:

80 So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel.

Luke tells us where John received the word from God, Luke 3:2:

2 The word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.

Matthew is the one who goes on to describe John's ministry, dress and diet, Matthew 3:1:

1 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,

2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

3 For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight."

4 And John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.

5 Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him

6 and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.

John was sent to bear witness to the Son of God, John 1:6:

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

7 This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe.

John certainly made a great job of pointing Jesus out:

29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

Not only was John's birth and life extraordinary, but even his death was shocking. John the Baptist was a fearless and fiery preacher. He told the truth to whoever would listen. He preached scathingly frank messages to Religious Pharisees, Government Leaders, and Roman Soldiers.

Because he was uncompromising about sin, Herod the king had him thrown into jail because John had accused Herod of adultery for taking his brother's wife. From his conception to his death, John had given his all for the glory of God.

He lived most of his thirty short years in obscurity, denying himself even the basic pleasures of life. Although Herod feared to put John to death, through the beguilement of his wife, he reluctantly had John beheaded.

John was possibly one of the most unselfish people to ever have lived; and when we think back upon all the dedicated saints in the Bible - Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Elijah, and all the others, John the Baptist would be the one that Jesus would call the greatest.

So, just who was John the Baptist? Very briefly, from his conception to his death, John was a wholly dedicated Servant of God. God's hand was upon him "even from his mother's womb," until he died a martyr's death.

John is introduced in John's gospel, 1:6:

6 *There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.*

Then there was the description given by the angel to Zacharias, Luke 1:15:

15 *"For he will be great in the sight of the Lord,*

But what must be the greatest endorsement of them all was made by Jesus Himself, in Matthew 11:11:

11 *"Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist;*

When the Bible makes statements to describe someone like those that we read of concerning John, a man sent from God, to be great in the sight of the Lord, there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; how, can this be the same John the Baptist who sends his disciples to ask the question: "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?"

So, Just what do we really know concerning the life of John the Baptist? Well, John was a man sent from God. On a mission for God. With a message from God. John faithfully and fearlessly fulfilled his mission.

The angel had prophesied of John: "He will be great in the sight of the Lord." And John proved to be just as great as the angel had said in his preparation. Nothing that the world had to offer attracted John. His life was one of total separation to God.

As a man John was great in the sight of the Lord filled with the Holy Ghost from birth. The way that John rebuked men for their sin, it mattered not to John who they were. Kings. Religious Leaders. Great Crowds. John faithfully and fearlessly delivered the word of God.

As a minister of God's word John was great in the sight of the Lord. When telling the crowds of the coming Messiah John makes this statement: "I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, The latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose." In his humility, John was great in the sight of the Lord.

Nowhere do we see the greatness of John displayed better than when he knew that his ministry was finished. In just a couple of sentences we see this great man at his absolute greatest. This is John speaking in John 3:29:

29 *"Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled.*

30 *He must increase, but I must decrease."*

31 *"He who comes from above is above all;"*

We can see that there was something very special about John.

So, how do we square what we know about John with the question we find John asking in verse nineteen?:

19 "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?"

What a contrast between the one who we know John to be, and that sorrowful cry: "Are You the Coming One?" The only explanation must be that John was for a short time under a cloud. It involved doubt - for some days at least; John's mind was overcast, his faith lost its foothold. He sent to Jesus saying: "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?"

The reason why John the Baptist sent this message to Jesus is explained by different commentators in widely different ways. Some think that John sent this message, not from unbelief, but from a desire just to obtain information. It was not because his own faith was failing, but because he wanted those he was leaving behind him to believe in Jesus as the Messiah.

One argument in favour of this view is that John had been used by God in such a mighty way to demonstrate who Jesus was and just what His mission was (John 1:29). They say that the chances of someone who had been used in such a powerful way as John had been, to forget that experience and doubt who Jesus was would be impossible.

But others think that John sent this message at a time when his faith was failing. They think that like many other saints in the Bible, he had his moments of weakness and that his imprisonment, together with the fact that Jesus did nothing to deliver him, had made him begin to doubt whether Jesus was the Messiah.

This statement provides a glimpse of John's human side. He had baptized Jesus, he had seen the heavens open, and had heard the voice of God (3:21-22), yet something caused him to doubt.

This passage has been a mystery to bible students for a long time. They find it very difficult to understand how John the Baptist, being a great inspired prophet, could give way to sceptical doubts. The simple truth is at this time John's faith wavered.

The Bible does not show us saints who are perfect. It does not say that inspiration is all knowing, or that visions and miracles will remove all doubts.

You could ask what was it with Peter? He witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus, he beheld the glory of God, and heard the voice of the Father. He witnessed the ministry and miracles of Jesus first hand. And yet when put under pressure Peter denies that he ever knew Jesus. This is what Mark tells us about Peter, Mark 14:71:

71 Then he began to curse and swear, "I do not know this Man of whom you speak!"

Elijah the prophet did amazing things for God. He commanded the rain to stop for years (1Ki 17:1). He raised a child from death (1Ki 17:22). He did battle with four hundred and fifty men, Baal's prophets and defeated them (1Ki 18:40). But this same Elijah flees and asks God to take his life when Jezebel threatens him.

All these who can only be described as Great Men of God. All had times when they failed or doubted God. The great lesson that we can learn from this incident is that Failure is Not Final.

John went on to be described by Jesus Himself as: "Of those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist".

Peter became a tower of strength in the early church, preached and saw 3,000 souls saved on the day of Pentecost. He just spoke to a lame man, and watched him enter the Temple walking and leaping and praising God.

Elijah continued to serve God, (2Ki 2:11) and then enjoyed a great chariot ride:

11 Then it happened, as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

There is a great lesson here for all of us, that we find with all these men. They had a second chance. We serve a God of second chances - we need to remember that Failure is Not Final.

It does not matter just how badly you think you may have failed. Think about this, you may be that lost sheep that Jesus left the other ninety nine to go and find.

I love this verse, Luke 15:7:

7 "I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.

Part of John the Baptist's doubt came from a lack of knowledge. The problem with John was that he did not see the full picture. He did not realise that Jesus was both the one who was to come, he was also the one who was to come again.

And that Jesus would only be fulfilling the first part of His mission at this time. John did not know that the first and the second coming of Jesus would be two separate events.

This is what Isaiah prophesied the mission of Jesus would be, Isaiah 61:1:

1 "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor. He has sent Me to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;

2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God.

When in the synagogue, this is how Jesus described His mission, and we need to listen carefully to this, Luke 4:17:

17 And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Isaiah and when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written,

18 The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised,

19 To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

Now listen to this:

20 And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down.

21 And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus closed the book before we read and the day of vengeance of our God. Jesus was the promised Messiah He was the One to Come, but he had only come to fulfil the first part of His mission.

Perhaps one of the best known texts in the whole of the bible is John 3:17:

17 "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

These two events are divided and they are still being separated, even today! God is stretching out this gospel era in order to gather in the whole number of his elect. In His first coming, Jesus Christ came to earth as a baby in a manger in Bethlehem.

Just as it was prophesied, Jesus fulfilled many of the prophecies of the Messiah during His birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection. However, there are some prophecies regarding The Messiah that Jesus has not yet fulfilled. The second coming of Jesus Christ will be His return to fulfil these remaining prophecies.

In His first coming, Jesus was the suffering Servant. In His second coming, Jesus will be the conquering King.

In His first coming, Jesus arrived in the most humble of circumstances. In His second coming, Jesus will arrive with the armies of heaven at His side.

The Old Testament prophets did not make clearly this distinction between the two comings. Jesus fulfilled the role of the suffering servant In His first coming. Isaiah 53:3:

3 He is despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

Jesus will fulfil the role of Israel's deliverer and King in His second coming.

When Jesus ascended back to heaven we hear what the angels said, Acts 1:10:

10 And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven."

We have this confirmed in the first chapter of Revelation, 1:7:

7 Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him.

It would perhaps help just to find out what it was that caused John to ask such a question. Try to imagine how John felt as he lay there in that prison, knowing that he had nothing to look forward to but death. He heard the amazing accounts of what his cousin Jesus was doing in Galilee.

We need to try to understand just what pressure John is under; the physical, mental, and spiritual stress.

He is under physical stress because if you have lived in the open air all your life, out under the clear blue sky, and slept in the fresh air, and suddenly you are in a tiny cell, that is a physical strain: no exercise, little food, and John is suffering.

As to mental strain, there must have been one question torturing his mind: Jesus was raising the dead, doing all kinds of things, so, why doesn't he get me out of here? Can you imagine the pain a thought like that would bring? Did John expect that Jesus in some way would deliver him? Surely Jesus would not let His faithful follower lie in despair in that dark dungeon! But weeks grew into months, and still no help came.

This is a pitfall that we all fall into at times. We sometimes have a fixed idea of what we think God should be doing; and when God does not fit our impression of what we think He should be, then we begin to doubt.

When the messengers of John were departed, Jesus was concerned in case the people who had been standing by and listening to the question which John the Baptist had put, and the answer that Jesus gave. Should get the wrong impression of this great and sorely tried servant of God, so Jesus gave this testimony of John.

This has been described as the funeral address of John for not long after it had been spoken John was put to death by Herod. I believe it was because John was such a majestic soul, "The greatest born of women" is how Jesus described him. His nature was capable of the best results.

Think about this: John could be kept waiting, while others went away blessed. Only three months remained of John's life and in these three months the discipline of patience and doubt had to do their perfect work.

Do you notice, while the disciples of John were standing there, Jesus said nothing in his praise? But, as soon as they had departed. Jesus began to speak to the multitudes concerning His faithful servant John.

There is something very wonderful about the timing of this commendation that Jesus makes. It was when John was at his lowest ebb. John had fallen far below his usual level. When John was at his lowest point Jesus makes this profound statement:

Verily I say unto you, among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist.

John the Baptist's total ministry only lasted about eighteen months. Once he had prepared the way for Jesus and revealed Him to Israel, his job had been completed.

This was the reason that he had come. He had fulfilled the task. John's messengers returned to John with Jesus' words. When they had gone, Jesus turned to speak to the crowd in case anyone got the wrong impression of John or thought that Jesus was rebuking him.

Jesus set the record straight by explaining John's ministry. Of all people, no one fulfilled his God-given purpose better than John the Baptist. His role as forerunner of the Messiah was a position of great privilege and now to make perfectly clear his assessment of John, Jesus praises him in the strongest terms.

There was no rebuke of John the Baptist from Jesus. Jesus knew John, He loved John and understood the trial John was enduring. As John suffers fears and doubts, Jesus' own heart goes out to him. John is more than a flesh and blood relative; John is his colleague in ministry. Jesus himself has seen John in action.

An honest and brave outspoken spoken prophet of God who has fought the fight, John has run the race and now he was in prison for faithfully preaching the truth Jesus knew, would soon be martyred for the exact same cause that Jesus served.

Jesus loved that man even though John didn't quite understand fully just what the ministry of Jesus was all about. In the eyes of Jesus, John was number one and Jesus wasn't afraid of saying so publicly though not for John's ears. Jesus waited to say this until the messengers had left.

Jesus' assessment of John is not critical of his current discouragement, but appreciative of his faith and deeds in his heyday. There are times when we are weak. When we have taken a blow. When we are still reeling. We need to understand that Jesus is not there to hound us when we are struggling for air; he is there to help us.

He does not push us down, He pulls us back to the surface. Doubt will always be a possibility in this life. God sometimes stretches us and makes us stronger in Him.

Blessed is he who takes no offence at me. John has been troubled by something about Jesus that he does not understand. When we have doubts and difficulties about Jesus this is always a good thing to take them to Jesus himself and let Jesus himself answer them. Jesus' reply is there is blessing on the person who goes on believing despite a few unanswered questions. We do not need to know the answer to every question in order to trust in Jesus.

All of this leads Jesus to say some things about John the Baptist and his greatness, Luke 7:24:

24 When the messengers of John had departed, He began to speak to the multitudes concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?"

25 "But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed those who are gorgeously apparelled and live in luxury are in kings' courts.

26 "But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet.

27 "This is he of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'

28 "For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist;

John, though his faith failed him for a moment perhaps, but he was no wavering reed. What a commendation from Jesus Himself:

28 “For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist;

When we began I said the more we look at the life of Jesus, the more we realise just how much He cares about people. Jesus really cared about John the Baptist. This is what we read after the death of John:

12 Then his disciples came and took away the body and buried it, and went and told Jesus.

13 When Jesus heard it, He departed from there by boat to a deserted place by Himself.

I believe that Jesus wanted to be alone so that He could grieve for His friend John who he had just lost.