

JESUS, JOHN, AND ME
One on One: Drawing Nearer to Jesus
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The transfer from the old life to the new life marked in waters of baptism. As I look at John out there in the wilderness preaching, I'm struck by what had to be, the content of his message. I want this content to be the core of my life as well. A prophetic movement only arises when a religious institution is dead. One of the things that always concerns me in my own life and ministry and in the life of the church where we have an "institution" as such, is we can be so busy keeping the system going and the ministry going and the organization going that we lose the core meaning of why we've been called and who has called us and what it is that God has called us to do. Religious institutions whether they be Christian have this way of picking up through time, incrustation like a ship picking up barnacles and becoming laden down with so much religious paraphernalia and weightiness that they have missed their reason for being no longer vitality serve the God who called them and a new generation coming along has to find somewhere an authentic voice from God.

Looking at the institutions of Jesus' day it's obvious in seeing John the Baptist's ministry that he had a sense that it was not with the Pharisees that grew out of the revival movement that had become legalistic. Much of what I have seen in the history of the Pentecostal movement that began with a fresh wind of the Spirit and degenerated into legalism is epitomized by Pharisees who were quick to point out somebody else's failings and quick to forget the grace of God which saved us. John was saying I don't identify with them. I don't identify with the Sadducees who've thrown out the reality of God and the angels and the resurrection and scriptures. I don't identify with the Essenes who are off kind of doing their own thing and in their enclosed world, their conclave of religiosity.

I don't agree with that. I don't agree with the zealots who are for the violent overthrow of the government. Instead what was he out there in the desert agreeing with? He was agreeing with the prophets. The Messiah is coming, prepare the way of the Lord.

His being out there and people coming to hear him, he was attracting a crowd and he was doing it without miracles. I believe that sometimes we misread people's hunger for God. Without being disrespectful of what God may be doing through miraculous ministries, I think something we can assume that the only motivation for an audience to be drawn is that there is a miracle happening. John had no miracles happening in his ministry. In fact the epitaph in the wind up of his life is he loses his head. God doesn't intervene to save him. But he has such an authentic message from God. And people's hunger for God within religious institutions was so great that they moved out of where they were into the arena of the desert to hear a man preparing a highway for the Lord.

I submit that that's still the case. More than we are hungry for the manifestations of God, we are hungry for God. More than the works of God we are hungry for the person of God. More than the deeds of God we want union with God.

So John is out there. I think he's making some statements. I think for one thing he's talking against religion without repentance. It's very clear his cardinal message was "Repent!" *Metanoia*. Change your mind. Not just set down and cry a while. But change your mind,

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reorder your priorities. Change your living. The perspective of his day was so often try harder, do better, burn a few more candles, kill another sacrifice. Do some religious deed. John was saying it's all over. Repent. Change your heart. God is not interested in your looking more religious in an external way. He's interested in radical change.

I think John out there in the desert was saying something against worship without real salvation. Worship without an awareness and a sense of God's presence. I always say this when I worship, "Lord, whenever I'm in worship, whether it's personal worship or when we gather together as a congregation, Lord, help me to keep my worship vital and alive." I think we start learning this from John the Baptist. Lord, help me to worship you in Spirit and in truth. When I pick up a hymnal help me not to just humbly through the words because it's in the liturgy. Every song I have to sing, let me sing it with meaning and with power and with conviction and become aware of your presence in the service. Lord, let me go through no mumbo jumbo in my worship. Let me go through no ritualistic mass. No deadening Pentecostal liturgy. Make me alive.

I think John was saying that. He was saying just because you go to the temple, just because you worship in synagogue does not mean that you are in fellowship with God. Just because you know how to use the prayer book or the hymnbook does not mean that you have an authentic relationship with the Almighty. Think of what you're doing and put your heart into worship. Let there be no worship without meaning.

Then I think John was also speaking against a profession of faith without moral evidence. I may have a one stringed guitar on this point. But if I have any burden for the Christian community it is that we clean up our act. And clean up our name. It grieves me in my heart when people come to me and say, I wouldn't do business with a Christian. That ought not to be.

John was saying to tax collectors who were coming to him and saying, What should we do? He was saying, Don't charge more than you ought to. To soldiers who said, What should we do? He was saying, Don't extort from people. He was telling the people get your moral act in line with your external profession and don't be pretending that you're something you're not.

So the Lord has us through the ministry of John become aware of that. That's part of preparing the way for the Lord. Becoming convicted and sensing that there is a gap between our outer life and our inner life. Between our church presence and our presence in the work a day world. John was drawing it together and he was saying in modern psychological terms, You must be an actualized person. He was holistic preacher in the modern sense of the word holistic where we gather a person all together and we don't split him up into a dichotomy or schizophrenia and say part of you is here and part of you is there. John is saying everything comes together in your faith.

Then another thing that John was doing out there in the wilderness is I think protesting a view of history without a sense of fulfillment.

What do I mean by that? To me a lack of fulfillment in human history would be to just live life and say I punched the time card at 8:00 and I punch it again at 12:00 and I punch in again at 1:00 and I punch out at 4:30. Today is like tomorrow. Tomorrow's like yesterday. So will go the cycle of my life and I really don't know where it's all headed and I'm not sure it's headed anywhere. Life is to be lived just to get through. I heard it said once, "Life is a 60-yard dash

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with a brick wall for a finish line.” History without fulfillment. And saying life doesn’t go anywhere.

Up in Jerusalem the Pharisees had been talking about the Messianic age may someday be coming. The Saducees has said, It’s all fiction; the prophets spoke wrongly. And the Essenes were saying, We’re going to wrestle with the sons of darkness. And the zealots were saying, We’ve got to kill them all before the Messiah comes.

John was out there saying The Messiah is at the door. History is going to be filled and fulfilled in the presence of the anointed one of God.

I visited Ireland this summer. I was thinking back to the famine in the early 1800s in Ireland. I remember a play I read an exert from called The Black Stranger by Gerald Healy. He talks about how during that time of famine in the early 1800s when thousands of Irishmen came to America and thousands who stayed died in the famine the government desperately tried to do something about the situation. So they finally created a government work program. They were a 100 or more years ahead of FDR and the government work programs of the Great Depression in America. They put men out to work making roads. Only the government was so anxious to get this work program underway they had not always plotted the reason for the existence of the road or if it was going anywhere. They were just saying, Men need ht dignity to work and we’ll give them something to do so they can earn the basic essentials of having enough food for themselves and their family. We’ll put them to work making roads. A moment of revelation comes in the play where the two central characters, the father and son, are talking to one another. They have labored another long hard day. Finally the adult son looks to the father and says with a kind of blankness in his face, a blankness that comes from work that is drudgery and work that is purposeless and hard. He says, “Father, we’re building roads that lead to nowhere.”

To me that statement represents the despair and the alienation of man from God. The sense of not knowing where is life going, what is purpose, what am I here for, are we just building roads that lead to nowhere. Are we building individual lives that lead to nowhere, careers that lead nowhere. Are we making roads that lead no where?

John the Baptist is out in the wilderness saying, Don’t kid yourself. The road that God builds is going somewhere. I am the forerunner on that road. I am the way prepare-er of the Messiah. Every valley shall be exalted and every high place shall be brought low that the glory of the Lord may be revealed and all flesh will see it together.

It’s that kind of faith today that matters. John out there in the wilderness didn’t see everything as clearly as we do today. One thing I’m sure that John did not see out there in the wilderness was the distinction between the age when Jesus baptizes in the Spirit and where he baptizes in fire. John has said in Matthew 3 “When the Messiah comes he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and he will baptize you with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand. He will take the wheat and lift it up into the air and the chaff will be blown away and burned with unquenchable fire. It’s clear from John’s preaching that he expected with Messiah came he would bring in the age of goodness. The age of a spirit. But he would also bring the age of judgment. The baptism of fire.

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That's why later in Matthew 11 he is confused because Jesus hasn't been doing these acts of judgment. So he sends messengers from his prison and says to Jesus, Shall we look for another? And Jesus sends back, Tell John the blind have their sight, the lame walk, and the poor have the good news preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended of me. Jesus is saying to John, the works of Messiah I'm doing. I'm not doing yet the age of judgment.

John is a prophet looking at the hills in the distance. He did not see that the two hill peaks in the distance, which looked like they were so close to one another were really separated by a valley. He looked prophetically down through time and saw that God was building a highway and thought that when Jesus the Messiah would come it would happen all at once and he would bring the age of the blessing and the age of the Spirit together with the age of judgment. Jesus divides it into two comings.

Jesus finally turns around and when these messengers of John leave and says Truly I say to you there is no one born under heaven of women that is greater than John but the least in the kingdom is greater than he.

I looked at the statement for many years wondering what in the world could Jesus be meaning of John. It finally dawned on me one day as I studied that scripture and consulted the best of commentaries on it. Jesus was saying John lived and died in the era before Jesus brought the kingdom and therefore no one can ever be greater morally and ethically and in stature with God than John the Baptist. But the greater privilege that we have, the greater than John that we are is that we have been given not greater position but greater privilege because we have born witness through the scriptures that God sent Jesus who died for our sins, physically rose again from the dead, ascended into heaven and is coming again. John knew none of those things. And the least in the kingdom in that sense is greater than John, greater in terms of the privilege of what we possess than John himself.

John's message became picked up by Jesus and amplified and, of course, extended since Jesus was the Messiah and John himself said, I'm not worthy to stoop down and until his sandals. He is greater than I. He must increase but I must decrease. May we all say it!

But that basic element, Repent and be baptized, constituted the first words of Jesus' public ministry. Constituted the first words of the apostles' public ministry in the book of Acts. It constituted the first words of Paul's preaching. It was the theme sounded again and again that whenever we come into relationship with God we begin by changing out of the old life into the new life. We change our heart and our mind. We reject a view that we can profess a faith without manifesting it. That we can work through a liturgy without owning it and putting our hearts and our souls into it. We reject a view that you can worship God in form and not worship him in Spirit and in truth. We reject any kind of view that history is just a meaningless collection of dates and isn't headed somewhere. We know where we are headed and we know who headed us in that direction. Jesus the Lord of glory. King of earth and the king of heaven.

So Lord, we want to thank you for an authentic message that began in that Judean wilderness. A message that announced the day of the Lord is at hand. It is possible, Lord, that there are some here that the words of John may be equally true. "One stands among you whom you do not know." If there be one here this evening for whom those words apply then reveal yourself to that heart. It is not the intention of your messenger that anyone

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should be in doubt as to who you are. Lord Jesus, give us a faith that has shoe leather. Give us a faith that works. Give us a faith that's real and authentic. Thank you for including us in your plan for all the ages. Thank you for coming to us. Thank you for the good news of the gospel, which announces that we're not destined for the grave, but destined for the throne. Not appointed unto death as the last end but appointed unto life. Not appointed to meaninglessness and purposelessness in our life. But appointed to hope and reality. Thank you, Lord, for what you're doing in our life as we gather together this evening. And we worship you and we acknowledge you. We confess you as did John, the one who has come. We praise You.

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