

## *The Last Prophet—Part 2*

### *Luke 3:15-20*

The Jericho Road began at Jerusalem's eastern gate. It dipped down to cross the Kidron, then arced up and over the Mount of Olives. It slipped by the sugar cube houses of Bethany. Then the beaten path plunged down the high ridge past rocks and ravines.

The road was steep, snaking around overhanging cliffs where bandits waited in the shadows. The sun was fierce and unforgiving. And the land was bleached and barren.

It was a long, weary walk down the mountain ridge to the Jordan Valley. Nevertheless, that road was crowded with people. And they all walked the Jericho Road for the same reason. They wanted to see and hear the desert prophet named John for themselves.

*Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; Matthew 3:5*

He was not, the Savior said, a man in soft, stylish clothing. Neither was he a diplomat who spoke sweet, soothing words.

Jesus' ministry lasted but a few years. John's ministry lasted but a few months. He was a blazing comet that silvered the spiritual landscape, then was gone.

He never wrote a book or started a school. And he had no power to heal or work miracles. But the Savior Himself said that John was not merely good; he was the best.

*Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Matthew 11:11*

Our Lord insisted that John the Baptist was greater than Daniel and David, Isaiah and Elijah, Joshua and Jeremiah. He was even greater than Moses, the great lawgiver. He stands second only to the Savior Himself.

So surely, he is a man worth imitating.

## *The Man*

John never bothered to send out messengers or tack up posters to announce that he would be preaching beside the Jordan. He simply walked down to the river and started speaking.

At first, a few people came out of curiosity. But within a few weeks the crowds were so enormous, the Baptist had to shout his message, so those in back could hear him.

And each day the excitement grew. From the temple courtyards to the marketplace, everyone was talking about John.

*...the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, Vs. 15*

The shopkeepers and soldiers, the farmers and housewives who came to hear John did not dare to say anything about it to him. But the same question was on everyone's mind. Might this be the Messiah?

The ruling Jews were not so subtle. As the excitement grew about a man in camel's hair who preached beside the Jordan, they sent some temple priests and Levites down the Jericho Road. Robed and bearded, they cornered John and questioned him.

*...the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." John 1:19-20*

John flatly denied that he was the promised Messiah. But that did nothing to throw a wet blanket on the excitement that buzzed about him. People still whispered that perhaps he really was the Promised One after all. And his denial was merely a ruse to fool the Romans.

Finally, John knew he could not ignore the talk any longer. So he interrupted his sermon and spoke simply about both himself and the righteous Redeemer who would be revealed in but a few days.

*John answered and said to them all, "As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals;" Verse 16*

The Mediterranean was a Roman lake. Everywhere the waters lapped on the shore, it was a Roman world. And Romans were served by slaves.

Slaves built aqueducts to bring fresh water, so Romans could bathe. Slaves built covered porticoes to shade Romans from the sun. In Roman homes, slaves cooked and cleaned, scrubbed and scoured.

The lowest rung of Roman slavery was reserved for house slaves. They emptied chamber pots and washed dirty feet.

John the Baptist was a spiritual Elijah: a holy herald who announced Christ's coming and prepared the people to receive Him. And that was an eternally important position any prophet would prize.

But John knew he did not occupy that position because of any personal merit. He knew he was not even worthy to serve as a humble house slave for God's Son.

It seems backward to us. The desert prophet did not spend his life trying to advance himself and enhance his importance. Instead he spent his life trying to make himself less important and more insignificant.

*He must increase, but I must decrease. John 3:30*

John never lost sight of the greatness and grandeur of God. And the closer the desert prophet got to his Lord, the more John realized how glorious the Redeemer really was.

At the same time, John always saw himself in comparison to Christ. Christ was and is the fullness, the all in all, the first and the last. And in His Light, even this greatest of all men born of women was less than nothing. He was not even worthy to take off the Savior's shoes.

It is a formula, of sorts. The closer we get to God, the clearer we see Him. The clearer we see Him, the greater He becomes. And the greater God is in our estimation, the more clearly we realize how little we are.

But the reverse is also true. The farther we are from God, the smaller He becomes. And the smaller our God is, the greater we imagine we are.

Nothing mattered more to John the Baptist than being close to his God. And in that light, he could clearly see how great and glorious God is. At the same time, he could see how small and insignificant he was.

That was why God was able to use him in so great and wonderful a way. He lived in the blinding light of God's presence.

Maybe that is why our loving Lord is not able to use many of us for anything but small and insignificant tasks. We live so far from His light, reality is warped and perspective is skewed.

God is so far away from us, He seems small. We are so full of ourselves, we believe that we are the ones who really matter, and the Lord is lucky to have such splendid servants.

When we are like that, Christ cannot risk giving us important things to do. Neither does He dare to pour the fullness of His power into us. If He did, we would be ruined by overweening pride.

John knew he was not worthy to serve the Lord he loved. And if the greatest of all men was not worthy to serve God, surely we are not either.

One preacher declared that before any Christian can get a BS (be something) Degree, he must first earn his BN (be nothing) Degree. We do that by learning what John knew deep down in his bones.

Serving God is neither a responsibility nor a duty.

It is an honor and a privilege.

## *The Message*

John knew he was not worthy to serve as the Savior's house slave. But serve he did. And not as a house slave. Instead, the desert prophet was allowed to proclaim the Lord's righteousness as God's prophet.

Without really trying to, John not only drew great crowds of people when he preached. He also built up a following of faithful disciples.

Thirty years later, the Baptist still had a following. Far to the north in the pagan city of Ephesus, Paul found a pocket of Jews who were still loyal disciples who faithfully followed the long-departed desert prophet. That would have irritated and maybe even enraged the fierce desert preacher. Yes, he had some disciples early on. But once he pointed out Jesus as the Messiah, all of that ended.

He not only refused to encourage disciples. He actively pointed them to Jesus, urging his followers to leave him behind and serve the Savior.

That is how both Andrew and John started out. They were numbered among the Baptist's followers. But then the prophet identified Jesus as the Messiah and urged the two fishermen to follow Him.

One thing is clear in the Bible's brief glimpse of John the Baptist. His desire that Christ be magnified was almost an obsession. Christ was his mission in life.

But that is not all. Christ was also John's one and only message. The central theme of everything the Baptist preached was the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.

John did not preach a lop-sided, out of focus Christ, either. With a few carefully chosen words, he described the full range of the Redeemer's role here on earth.

*He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. Verses 16-17*

John painted a picture that was familiar to the country people in his congregation. High on a hilltop, wheat and barley farmers flattened out a circle for a threshing floor.

When harvest time came, oxen pulled cartloads of cut grain up that hill. The sheaves were spread out on the flat earth of the hilltop. Then oxen or donkeys plodded over the straw, or a farmhand beat and flailed the wheat.

Last of all, the farmer would take a wooden pitchfork, called a winnowing fork. With it, he would throw the wheat up into the air. Then hot desert winds would blow all the straw and chaff away. And the kernels of wheat or barley would fall to the ground.

In John's metaphor, Jesus is the farmer. He separates wheat from chaff, sheep from goats, the saved from the damned. The chaff is burned, and the wheat is gathered into His heavenly barn.

There are, John proclaimed, two baptisms which the Messiah came to bring. One is a spiritual baptism: an immersion in the precious and powerful presence of God's Holy Spirit.

God Himself makes His home within the physical bodies and minds of those who choose to trust in Jesus. And He is not within believers in measure, either. His presence is limitless. Jesus said so.

*"He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'" But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. John 7:38-39*

But not everyone is willing to lay their lives, along with all their hopes and dreams, in the holy hands of God's Son. But that does not mean no baptism remains for them.

They will also be baptized. They will be forever immersed in the fire of God's holy wrath. And there will be no escape.

Luke used a familiar word to summarize what John the Baptist preached.

*So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people. Verse 18*

Like Peter and Paul, John preached the Gospel. That word means Good News. And that is just what John proclaimed.

Yes, the Baptist did tell people that Christ would come as a judge. And those who refuse to repent and rely upon Christ as their Redeemer would suffer the arching agony of a fiery Hell.

But John also proclaimed that God loves sinful human beings. He loves us so much He sent His Son to be what John called, the sacrificial lamb of God. By shedding His blood and giving His life, the Messiah finally, fully and forever paid the penalty for our sins.

That is Good News! And it was all John preached. It was his one and only message.

And if we belong to Christ, it must also be ours.

## *The Mystery*

Tax collectors and prostitutes, soldiers and shopkeepers stood on the banks of the Jordan River and listened to John preach. But they were not the only ones who came to him.

A king came too. Like his power-mad father, Herod Antipas was an Idumean by birth and a Jew by choice.

He was a direct descendant of Jacob's brother, Esau. And like his self-centered, sensual ancestor, Herod had an unholy habit of taking whatever he wanted.

So when he saw Herodias gliding across the room, he wooed her and won her. It did not matter to Herod that the woman was his own niece. Neither did it bother Antipas that she was his brother Philip's wife.

Herod wanted her. That was all that mattered to him. So he did whatever it took to get her. That was the pattern Herod Antipas lived by. He freely fulfilled his every lust.

Jesus proclaimed that John the Baptist was indeed a prophet: a prophet in the Old Testament mold. And like Isaiah and Jeremiah, John obeyed God. So when God told him to speak out against all of Herod's sins, that is just what the Baptist did.

*...Herod the tetrarch was reprimanded by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the wicked things which Herod had done, Verse 19*

The word reprimand means to expose or show someone their faults. That is what John did. He exposed Herod's sins by openly proclaiming God's wrath against all such wickedness.

When Herod's new wife heard that, she was filled with rage. And she demanded that the prophet's voice be stilled. So Herod sent soldiers to arrest John.

*Herod also added this to them all: he locked John up in prison. Verse 20*

On the eastern shores of the neon blue waters of the Dead Sea, Herod built a fortress at the high end of mountain ridge. It was called the Machaerus, the Black Fortress.

And it was indeed a fortress. But it was also both a palace and prison.

That is where Herod had John the Baptist taken. He was led across the desert sands to Herod's Black Fortress in chains. There, he was cast into a small cell in the darkness of an underground dungeon.

John was kept there for long months. Finally, to satisfy Herodias' hatred, a drunken, sex-crazed Herod had John beheaded.

That story is full of sin and sorrow, of tragedy and tears. But it also leaves a question hanging in the air. Why?

If God is as great and glorious, as power and present as John believed He is, why did He allow His prophet to be cast into prison by a willful, wicked king?

It was not that God was unable to help His servant. With God nothing is impossible. He can do all things.

We do know some things for sure. God was not taken by surprise. He knew all about Herod's plot to arrest and imprison John. And yes, the Lord was more than able to stop it. But He did not.

That much we know. What we do not and cannot know is why. That same problem haunted Job's wife.

She was almost mad with grief over the death of her children and dark fears that her husband's health was so bad he would be next. Deep in despair, she bitterly asked Job why he did not curse God and die.

Job answered her question with a question of his own. It is a question that acknowledges God's sovereignty over our lives. But that is not all. It also shows us what real faith and commitment to God demand.

*Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity? Job 2:10*

There is not the slightest hint in the biblical record that John the Baptist ever complained or asked God why he was taken from preaching to prison.

Instead, John glorified his God and did what he could. Herod would wander down into the dungeon. There in the flickering flame of lamplight, he would listen to John preach.

No, Herod did not respond. But he had the right to hear God's Word. And he did.

John's preaching was so complete, even Jesus did not feel Herod needed to hear more. So, in the shadow of the cross when Jesus stood before Herod, our Savior was silent.

Herod had heard the gospel. He had been winnowed by the Word. And there was nothing left for him but the fires of God's wrath.

There will come dark nights and difficult days for us, too. And in those hours, John is our model. We might not know why someone we loved dies, why our health is taken from us, or why our dreams are left in ashes.

But then, if we love Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we do not have to know why. It is enough that our God is in control. Our lives are in His hands. And He is guiding us through thickets and thorns, just as He did during sunny days and peaceful nights.

Someday when this life is less than a memory, we will sit down in the halls of Heaven. And our Lord will tell us why.

Until then, it is enough to know that we can trust Him.