

Adventuring with God

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The Reason

I love to read about John the Baptist. Bold and fearless, and obviously unconcerned about how others viewed him (who else in that day was wearing a coat of camel's hair and eating locusts for meat?), John was one of a kind. Jesus said of him, *"Among those born of women there is no one greater than John"* (Luke 7:28).

John's birth was extraordinary in many ways. From the angelic announcement in the temple to his father to the assignment of a name unlike any in his birth family, most everything about his entrance caused many to be "filled with awe." Because of their ages, his parents had given up on the idea of ever having children. Yet, here they were, recipients of God's grace, and wondering, along with all their friends and neighbors who had gathered to celebrate John's circumcision, *"What then is this child going to be?"* (Luke 1:65).

His father, Zechariah, who had been struck dumb by an angel because he doubted the word brought to him about having a child, was on this occasion finally able to speak. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he prophesied concerning his son: *"You will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him"* (v. 76).

We know little of John's childhood, but once he emerged from obscurity into the Spirit-filled ministry detailed in Scripture, there's no doubt about his divine calling. Through no-holds-barred preaching, he challenged everyone to be baptized as an outward sign of repentance for sin. His unusual style commanded attention, drawing everyone to come out and hear him. And many responded with faith and were baptized. It was the first significant spiritual awakening in Israel for four hundred years! No

wonder he created such a stir. No wonder so many disciples attached themselves to him.

John's ministry continued to build steam until one momentous day. In the first chapter of John's gospel we read of the encounter between John and his cousin, the One who would eclipse him. *"The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ... This is the Son of God'"* (John 1:29, 34). At that moment everything changed. John was perceptive enough to not miss the significance of the meeting.

I wonder how willing I would have been, after being used so mightily by the Lord in such a public manner, to just let it all go ... the fame, the honor, the personal significance. You would think that John the Baptist (his name says it all, doesn't it?) would have a hard time stepping back and fading into the background. After all, what would he *do* once his services for baptism were no longer needed?

I'm humbled by his response to the situation. He was okay with being a brilliant light for a relatively short time. He didn't see himself as so unique and invaluable that the Kingdom needed him around to "do his thing." To his credit, he saw the *reason* for his calling as more about the King than about his own place in the Kingdom. When Jesus comes to be baptized, along with all the others seeking God, John sees in a flash what his ministry had been about all along. *"The reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel"* (John 1:31).

As disciples of Jesus, we can learn a lot from John. Our gifts and callings are not about us—that we might have a significant place in the Kingdom from which

we can find glory for ourselves and enjoy the acclaim of other men. Whatever we have been called to do, it is for one reason: so others can come to know Him, that He might be revealed to them, as He was to Israel.

When I was a fairly new Christian I was full of spiritual ambition. I wanted to do great things for God and to make my mark in His kingdom. I'm sure a lot of my ambition was fueled by reading the biographies of people like Smith Wigglesworth, George Mueller, C.T. Studd, and Hudson Taylor. I wanted to be a person of great faith like them, able to move spiritual mountains and drive back the forces of darkness.

One day I remember being challenged about something, and my reaction was not as Christlike as it should have been. It was the words of John the Baptist that brought me back to my senses and helped me gain perspective about who I was in comparison to the all-surpassing importance of Jesus Christ. John said to the crowds, *"I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire"* (Luke 3:16). In a flash the Holy Spirit showed me my sinful attitude and spiritual pride. Who did I think I was, if a great prophet like John the Baptist didn't consider himself worthy to stoop down and merely untie the shoes of Jesus?

This mark of humility is what impresses me most about John. It wasn't a false humility. He was bold in all that he did for God, but he always understood it wasn't his own power or goodness that made his ministry successful. He was merely obeying what the Lord had called him to do. The results and consequences of his obedience were in God's hands. Along the same lines, in his March 4th devotional, Oswald Chambers advised: "Never consider whether you are of use; but ever consider that you are not your own but His."

When his disciples came to report to him that people were turning their attention away from them and were attaching themselves to Jesus and His followers, John the Baptist didn't see his change in fortune as anything surprising or disappointing. His response to them proved how keenly he understood his role in the Kingdom: *"You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am*

not the Christ but am sent ahead of him. The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less'" (John 3:28-30).

Can I remember this when I feel like I've been overlooked or set aside in God's arena of service? Can I respond with the same sense of joy when Jesus receives His bride, even if it means personal sacrifice for me as His servant? John got it: In the kingdom of heaven, it's not about us—it's about Him. We give lip service to this idea, of course, but when our spiritual fortunes take a turn for the worse, we are quick to object and seek rectification. We are often put out when our service to God isn't appreciated, recognized, or rewarded in some way. How much easier it would be on everyone (including ourselves) if we could embrace John's attitude as we seek to serve the King.

John's circumstances changed dramatically in a very short period of time. He didn't just go from being in the spotlight to a time of obscurity. He was sent to prison for his bold witness against Herod's sin. How strong would we be, if our fortunes shifted so profoundly—from spiritual darling of the nation to common criminal? It was the ultimate humiliation for a prophet to have his powerful voice silenced. But even there in prison John continued to bring glory to God.

Some of us are called to background roles in the Kingdom that will ruffle few feathers, while others are asked to do really difficult things that put us at odds with our culture and the people around us. Whatever our assignment or calling may be, we must remember the *reason* for our service: that the One greater than any of us might be introduced to those He came to save.

John the Baptist's life and witness was cut short by the wicked wife of Herod, while the apostle John's life and witness continued to shine even into his old age. The years we are given to serve Him aren't as important as the passion and abandonment we display towards Him. If we can remember that it's not about us, we'll be able to accept the changes in our circumstances with grace and humility, as the Baptist did.

Our light may bless the world for a short time or a long time, but what's important is that it points to the

Lord Jesus Christ, the One who changes everything when He appears.

“O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise,
The glories of my God and King, the triumphs of His grace!

My gracious Master and my God, assist me to proclaim,
To spread thro' all the earth abroad the honors of Thy name.

Jesus! The name that charms our fears, that bids our sorrows cease,
Tis music in the sinners' ears; tis life, and health, and peace.

He breaks the power of canceled sin, He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean; His blood availed for me.

Hear Him, ye deaf; His praise, ye dumb, your loosened tongues employ;
Ye blind, behold your Savior come, and leap, ye lame, for joy.”

“O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing” by Charles Wesley (1707-1788)