

## A GREAT MAN

If you were asked who the oldest man in the Bible was, you would rightly say Methuselah. If you were asked who was the wisest, you would say Solomon. If you were asked who was the strongest, you would say Samson. But if you were asked who was the greatest, whom would you say? Jesus provides one answer in Matthew 11:11— “Verily I say unto you, among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” What does this mean? Wherein lies his greatness? We often think of him as an eccentric, remembering his clothes and his diet more than his work. But we have to reevaluate that based on Jesus’ compliment.

### Opening Act

If I were to present John’s life in a play, the opening act would begin with Malachi 3:1 where the prophet prophesies the coming of John the Baptist. “Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me.” Then I would talk about the inspired prediction given his father in Luke 1:15-17-

For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

The Bible indicates that John was six months older than his cousin Jesus. We have a beautiful story in Luke 1:39-45 where Mary went to see John’s mother Elizabeth after Mary learned she was to give birth to Jesus. “And it came to pass, that, when Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb” (Lk. 1:41). Even before birth there was something special about this child. (There is a lesson in this story for those who think a child does not become a person till birth. John was only six months in the womb, but he felt joy.)

In Luke 1:57-66, we have the account of John’s circumcision and naming. As was the custom, the relatives gathered on this occasion. They all thought his name should be Zacharias, after his father. Elizabeth said, “Not so; but he shall be called John” (Lk. 1:60). The relatives objected, saying that none of their kinsmen had that name. They motioned to Zacharias to get his opinion. Zacharias, who had been mute since the announcement of John’s birth, wrote, “His name shall be called John.” This was in obedience to the angel’s command. Immediately, his tongue was loosed and he presented a wonderful prophecy from the Lord. The people were amazed, saying, “What manner of child shall this be?” (Lk. 1:66).

It is easy to see that John had godly parents. In fact, the Bible says, “And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless” (Lk. 1:6). It is further seen in their obedience to the angel’s directions in everything. How wonderful it is to have the blessing of parents who are righteous, who pray for you, who teach you the way of God and bring you up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. John had such parents.

### Act Two: John in the Desert

The story of John’s childhood and youth is told in one sentence in Luke 1:80. “And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel.” In the deserts, John lived in view of Mount Nebo where Moses looked over into the promised land and then died. He lived in the area of the Jordan River through which Joshua and the children passed into Canaan’s land. He lived close to Jericho around which the children of Israel marched for seven days and seven times on the seventh day, blew the trumpet, “and the walls came tumbling down.”

He walked in the land where Amos the prophet shepherded his flock and looked longingly for the coming of the Messiah. He no doubt drank from the Brook Cherith where Elijah waited for the people of Israel to be brought to their knees before God. Ah, yes, it was here that John communed with his Lord in deep meditation and prayer as he prepared to fulfill his mission as the forerunner of Jesus Christ.

Why was he in the desert? We do not really know. Maybe he was there in the spirit of Elijah, in whose spirit was to come, so that he could separate himself from the pressures and sins of the people. Possibly he was there to prepare himself for his great mission as the forerunner of our Lord. Was this the reason he was so powerful in his preaching? Conceivably, it was here he learned to stand alone, for he was to eventually stand alone against the sins of men in high places.

We know one thing, it certainly affected his appearance. Matthew tells us, "And John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey" (3:4). What a preacher! Clothed in rugged clothes made of camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey as his daily diet. (We are told that eating locusts was not so rare in those days. They were parched or sun-baked and eaten like parched grain. It is said that they tasted like shrimp. Not too bad, huh?)

Desert life must have affected his manner, too. Matthew says further,

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire (3:7-10).

John saw their sins and hypocrisy for what they were, and he spared no punches.

### **At 30 Years of Age**

Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins (Lk. 3:1-3).

Thus began his preaching career. And what a preacher he was! His was fearless preaching. John saw how the religionists of the day had departed from the Lord's way, and he told them so. Perhaps this is the hardest preaching of all—the preaching of damnation for those who transgress and do not repent.

Large crowds came out to see him and hear him preach. This nation which was groaning under the cruelties of Roman domination was electrified by the stentorian voice of this strange, rugged hermit preaching in the desert. "Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins" (Mk. 1:5). As Jesus asked, "What did they go to see?" Not the ordinary. It takes something to attract the attention of the multitudes. The novel, new, and powerful attract us, not the ordinary, common or insipid. The burden of his cry was "Repent!" And repent they did. The whole land was stirred by his mighty preaching. Josephus, who was no friend of Christianity, said about John that he was so influential that the people were "ready to do anything he advised"

The Bible says "John baptized" Baptism was not all that common in those days. For Jews to be baptized for repentance was powerfully new. "John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Mk. 1:4).

"Who are you," they asked. "And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No. Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias. And they which were sent were of the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet? John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose. These things were done in Bethabara beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing. The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me" (Jn. 1:19—28).

John was no pretender. He knew who he was.

At the height of his popularity, he baptized Jesus whom he had declared to be "the Lamb of God." This was his crowning moment.

Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. But John forbad him, saying, "I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?" And Jesus answering said unto him, "Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." Then he suffered him. And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mt. 3:13-17).

What an experience! There could be no doubt in John's mind now that this was the Christ. There could be no doubt about the validity of his mission to proclaim Him.

Then there arose a question between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purifying. And they came unto John, and said unto him, Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him. John answered and said, A man can receive nothing except it be given him from heaven. Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease"(Jn. 3:25-30).

John made clear what his place was in the great scheme of things.

### Final Act

We come now to the final act in our story about a gnat man. Herod heard about John and was anxious to see and hear him. However, when he did, he was not so pleased. John did not tickle his ears. He laid the cards on the table" and condemned the sins of the king. Because of his fearless preaching, John was arrested and put in prison. "For Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife for he had married her. For John had said unto Herod, it is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife" (Mk. 6:17-18).

This was a terrible thing to do to John who was raised in the wilderness. How did it affect the heart and soul of John to be locked up in a small cell in Machaerus on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea, with a small slit for a window to see a little bit of sky? I leave it to your imagination. While John was in prison he sent word to Jesus. "Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, and said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" (Mt. 11:2-3).

Why did he ask this question? He was the one who had first seen the Lord for who He was. Perhaps it was because of the long enforced idleness in prison. (They say "idleness is the devil's workshop.") Maybe Jesus was not all he had expected. Perhaps he, like the disciples, expected him to "restore the kingdom to Israel" and set up an earthly empire. Note Jesus' reply:

Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me" (Mt. 11:4-6).

Jesus often refused to give answers or signs to those who doubted Him, but to John He gave a kind and reasonable answer. Perhaps His strong defense of John is awakened by His strong feelings of sympathy for John because he was locked away in a prison cell far from his beloved desert.

Then Jesus issued the compliment we started with in the beginning of this article.

And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Mt. 11:7-11).

If praise is measured by the worth of the one who pronounces it then John was wonderfully praised indeed.

Herod often talked with John while he was in prison. He knew he was a prophet and that he was telling the truth. "Therefore Herodias had a quarrel against him, and would have killed him; but she could not: For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly" (Mk. 6:19-20). Then one day a big birthday party was thrown for Herod, and all the dignitaries of the land were invited. As the wine flowed freely and the party got wilder, Salome, the daughter of Herodias, was invited to dance. She danced such a lewd dance and Herod was so carried away with it that he offered her anything her heart desired, even to half his kingdom. Salome went immediately to her mother for advice, and without hesitation, Herodias said, "Ask for John the Baptist's head." Herod was sorry he made a rash promise, but he kept his word. John was executed and his head was presented to Salome on a "charger." Thus ends the life of a great man.

### **The Greatness of John**

Jesus did not say that John was the greatest man who ever lived, but he did say that there was none greater. Many things contributed to his greatness. For one thing, he was the last *great prophet* of the Old Testament system. He was a kind of bridge between the Old and the New.

Then there was his *great preaching*. His preaching drew multitudes to hear him even in the desert. It is difficult enough to hold the attention of an audience in a confined area, but to hold the attention of people in the great out-of-doors is a tremendous feat indeed. Such a preacher was John. Consider some of the truths he preached:

And the people asked him, saying, What shall we do then? He answereth and saith unto them, He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise. Then came also publicans to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, what shall we do? And he said unto them, Exact no more than that which is appointed you. And the soldiers likewise demanded of him, saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages (Lk. 3:10-14).

The preaching of John was both powerful and practical.

John was possessed of *great power*. The Bible says that he was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. John was always under the direction of the Spirit in his life and teachings.

He was a preacher who got *great results* in repentance and baptisms. Many listened and many obeyed. "Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins" (Mk. 1:5). (Someone has remarked that Peter preached one sermon and got three thousand converts; we preach three thousand sermons and get one convert!) John was a mighty preacher who moved people to obey their Lord.

John was a preacher of *great courage*. He feared no man—only God. When he faced the powerful religious leaders of his day, he called them a "brood of vipers" (Mt. 3:7-8). It takes courage to denounce sin in little people and at a distance, but to denounce the hypocrisy of the "powers that be" in religion and politics takes courage of the highest measure. What kind of courage did it take to march into the palace of the king himself and denounce his sins! *Courage is the strength of will to make right choices regardless of the consequences*. It is the strength to be true to the best in us. John had that courage, and so must we. Courage is a mark of greatness.

John was *great in service*. He had a mission and he fulfilled it. "Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Mk. 1:2-4). This was his mission. We have a mission, too—a mission to live like Christ, to preach Christ to others, to put the church first in our lives (Mt. 6:33).

A preacher visited the office of a Christian man who was the CEO of a large company. The preacher knew the man was incredibly organized in everything. As he sat alone in the man's office, he wondered what he might find in the top drawer of the executive's desk. He opened the drawer and much to his surprise and delight he saw these words, "the church." The church occupied the "top drawer" in this man's desk and in his life. Does Christ and the church occupy first place in your life? so, it is an indication of greatness.

John was a man of *great conviction*. He stood by his convictions regardless of the cost. It cost him a normal life, and finally cost him the life he had. Folks, we must stand by our convictions in the midst of a "crooked and perverse" world. Matters not what the world may say or do, we must "earnestly contend for the faith" (Jude 3).

He was a man of *great humility*. Jesus taught that greatness comes through humility—"He that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Lk. 18:14). We do not often connect courage and humility, but it was so in John; and it is so in the lives of all truly great men. John said to the people who followed him and listened so eagerly to his messages,

Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease. He that cometh from above is above all: he that is of the earth is earthly, and speaketh of the earth: he that cometh from heaven is above all (Jn. 3:28-30).

Although multitudes were drawn to him, he never turned his popularity to a selfish purpose. He was not the bridegroom. He knew his place. His place was not in the spotlight, but his place was to hold the light on Jesus. What a lesson or us! Our place is to give God the glory in all things and think in terms of His work, not our own.

John was a great preacher with a *great message*. His message was given a title the first day he looked into the face of Jesus, "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." If any preacher would be great today, his message will be the same, "Behold the Lamb!" Our task is to preach "Christ and Him crucified" to a lost and dying world (1 Cor. 2:1).

### **Are We Greater Than John?**

In view of John's greatness, please explain the words of Jesus, "He that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." Are we greater than this great man? Yes, in a sense we are. In the first place, we are in the kingdom (Col. 1:13); John was not. John was not in the kingdom because the kingdom was not established until after John's death. After John's death (Mt. 14:10-12), Jesus announced, "Upon this rock I will build my church...and I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom" (Mt. 16:18-19). The kingdom was yet future when John died. Therefore, he was not in the kingdom; we are.

In the second place, we have access to the greater wisdom and blessings of the Lord's kingdom. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:9-12, the full revelation of God makes it possible for us to see the will of God "face to face." We clearly see what John saw dimly. We have a greater message to preach. John preached the coming Messiah; we preach the Messiah who has come. We have a greater service to perform. We live under a better covenant than he did. We have "better promises" (Heb. 8:6).

In view of the fact that we are in a sense greater than John, we ask with Paul, "Who is adequate for such things?" (2 Cor. 2:16-17). Will we rise to the task? Will we live up to our great position in the Lord?

### **Learn How to Be Great**

What lessons on true greatness we learn from the life of John! We learn from him that we must be totally committed to our mission. We learn the virtue of self-sacrifice. We especially learn the greatness of humility. Great people are humble people. Queen Mary once visited a hospital in London. She found herself at the bedside of a little girl. She asked the little girl where she was from. She said she was from Battersea, a poor district in London. The little girl, not knowing she was talking to the Queen of England, asked, "Where do you live?" The Queen very humbly said, "Oh, just behind Gorrings Department Store." That, my friends, is A city boy was visiting his country cousin on the farm. He noticed that some of the ripening wheat stood tall and some was bent over. He remarked to his cousin, "The wheat that stands straight and tall must be the best. It seems proud of what it is doing." The country boy replied, "I see you don't know much about wheat." He then showed his city cousin that the wheat which was bent over contained the fullest heads of wheat. Is this not what Jesus taught and John practiced? The humble are the greatest and the most productive servants of the Lord.

John teaches us in glowing colors the greatness of courage, conviction, and above all, servanthood. John was great because he served in the greatest cause. A missionary who was serving in a foreign land was approached by the head of a great company and offered a high-paying job. The executive said, "You know the people, the language, and the culture. You would be perfect for the job." He then offered him a high salary. The missionary turned him down. He then doubled the salary, and he turned him down again. After doubling it again, and being turned down, the man said, "What will it take to get you?" The missionary said, "The first offer was high enough. It's not that the salary is too small; the job is too small." There you have it. Our job of being servants of the Lord is the greatest work on earth. No salary is big enough to take us away from it. When we learn that, we will be truly great. Yes, even greater than John. Humility in greatness. If we are to be truly great in the fullest sense of the term, we must exhibit greatness in great humility.

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