

God Sent a Man

John 1:19-34

The Life and Teaching of Christ

Warm-up Question: Share with one another the story behind the most disgusting, horrible, or interesting thing you have ever eaten?

In 1976, while on a spiritual quest to find the truth, I traveled across Europe into Asia by what is known as the Magic Bus (so called because of the rock and roll group Who, in their Live at Leeds album), a bus that started out in London and went all the way to India. While in Afghanistan (long before all the present troubles in that part of the world) I went to a restaurant. We sat on the luxuriously carpeted floor cross-legged, as all the Afghans did, putting our legs under coffee tables whereupon we ate. I looked at the menu and there, wonder of wonders, was the most appetizing thing I had ever seen in my life—oatmeal porridge! Before you castigate me as a tasteless Brit, let me remind you that by this time I had been away from my roast beef and Yorkshire pud's, shepherd's pie and fish and chips for some time. I was 26 years of age and Asian food was difficult for my bland taste buds to get used to. Upon receiving a large bowl of porridge oats I hastily tucked into it. I got halfway through when a friend I was with asked me about the lumps I had been eating. Upon closer inspection I realized that the lumps were maggots. It helped me to understand that it was wiser for me to eat the Asian food rather than food that had been laying there for how long I do not know.

Today we will read about a strange man who lived in the desert (Luke 1:80) and ate a much stranger diet than any of us have eaten. His diet was locusts and wild honey. Not only did he eat strange food, but he looked strange too, being clothed with camel hair and a leather belt around him (Mark 1:6). Yet of this man, John the Baptist, Jesus said:

¹¹ I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he (Matthew 11:11).

What was it about John the Baptist that earned him the high praise of Jesus calling him the greatest man (apart

from Christ) that had ever lived? Did He forget about Moses, Abraham, Daniel and Jeremiah? Scripture tells us that: "Though John never performed a miraculous sign, all that John said about this man was true" (John 10:41). Did you get that? John never did a miraculous sign, but Jesus said that there was not anyone greater than this man. If it wasn't his giftedness in the miraculous perhaps it was something about his character that we can learn from. Let's read our passage in the Gospel of John before taking a deeper look into the life of a man that greatly pleased His God:

¹⁹ Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰ He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ." ²¹ They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." ²² Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" ²⁴ Now some Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵ questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶ "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷ He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸ This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing. ²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' ³¹ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel." ³² Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³ I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God." (John 1:19-34)

John the Evangelist, the writer of this gospel, brings before us key testimony from John the Baptist to prove his

key thought that runs throughout the book, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. John the Baptist is introduced to us in verse 6 of John's gospel as, "a man who was sent from God; his name was John." Whenever God wants to start a new work of significant breakthrough, He prepares and then sends a man (or woman) of godly character. The greater the work to be done, the greater must be the inner preparation of the person God chooses. I think it was A.W. Tozer who said, "God cannot use a man greatly until He has hurt him deeply." God's plan is never better methods, but better men. I believe that too many people get sent to do some ministry way before God does the sending. The Church at large would be wiser to prepare and equip the servants of God before hastily setting them apart for the ministry. Paul, the apostle, warned Timothy about this very thing. He said, "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands (1 Timothy 5:22). Godly character must be formed within a leader's heart before a man or woman of God is sent to do a groundbreaking mission. Dr Lloyd-Jones once said, "The worst thing that can happen to a man is to succeed before he is ready." Let's look at the essential character qualities needed for leadership in God's church and then examine John the Baptist's acquisition of those necessary qualities.

What do we mean by character and what's the danger of sending a man or woman to accomplish a work without God-shaped character?

The Greek word for character is *charasso*. Frank Demazio enlightens us about this word in his excellent book, *The Making of a Leader*. He says:

"It means a notch, indentation, a sharpening, scratching or writing on stone, wood or metal. This word came to mean an embosser and a stamp for making coins. From this, it came to mean the embossed stamp made on the coin, or a character styled in writing. This Greek word appears in the New Testament only in Hebrews 1:3. Here, the writer states that Christ is the very character of God, the very stamp of God's nature, and the one in whom God stamped or imprinted His being. Consequently, we derive the meaning of our English word "character" as a distinctive mark impressed, or otherwise formed, by an outside (or internal) force upon an individual."¹

Whether or not we realize it, leaders are models. If you are a leader, someone is learning not so much from what you say, but by what you do. No man is an island to

themselves alone. We all influence someone else either for good or bad. We are all accountable for the impression we leave on other people's lives. God sees all and knows all. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account (Hebrews 4:13). He will reward us according to how much of the character of Christ is stamped on our lives and on the lives of others we have influenced in this world. Character is not about the person you will be in the future but the person you are now. It is about your heart, will and motives. Life is a series of tests that God has prepared in advance and is working out in the present. These tests are designed of God to make you into the person God has called you to be. The correct response to the test builds our character. D.L. Moody, the famous evangelist once said, "If I take care of my character, my reputation will take care of itself." A man on track to become a great man of God is someone that is careful about the things that go on inside his mind and heart. Jesus said, "For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45). Your ministry is the overflow of your inner nature that you have in your relationship to God. Cultivate your private life with God and the fruit of your life will be abundant. You are a product of the sum total of your inner thought life, your mind, will and heart. "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (Proverbs 4:23).

How was John the Baptist prepared before he was sent of God?

We don't know at what time it happened, but we are told:

⁸⁰ "And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel" (Luke 1:80).

Scripture does not tell us of any religious training in the seminaries of the day. There is a distinct possibility that happened for we know he was raised as the son of a priestly family. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth, John's parents, were both descendants of Aaron (Luke 1:5). We are told that at some point he went to live in the desert. The intimation with the above passage is that he was young when he went to live in the desert, perhaps at the time of the death of his aged parents.

¹ Frank Demazio, *The Making of a Leader*, Page 107, Bible Temple Publishing, Portland, Oregon.

Why was this man of God led to live in the desert in preparation for his ministry? What can a man learn in the desert that he cannot learn in the city?

The greatest need of today is for men and women to listen to the voice of God. That is not easy in our busy, goal-oriented, success-driven, workaholic lives. God is not quiet; the problem is our ability to slow down our busy lives and listen. Job said, “For God does speak—now one way, now another—though man may not perceive it” (Job 33:14). John the Baptist learned how to survive in the desert or wilderness of Judea, living off the land as he learned to listen to the voice of God. It seems interesting that Jesus, Moses, Joshua, and Jacob spent much time in desert or empty wilderness regions. Paul, the apostle said that after his conversion he went into Arabia, a very desert region (Galatians 1:17). When the 2 million or so Israelites left Egypt, God took them aside into desert places to teach them that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God.

² Remember how the LORD your **God led you all the way in the desert** these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. ³ **He humbled you**, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that **man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD**. ⁴ Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years (Deuteronomy 8:2-4).

What would you experience being in a dry, barren wilderness or desert?

I lived in Israel for several months in the 70’s. While there I was able to stay a week in Beersheba, an Israeli city on the edge of the Negev desert. One morning I strolled out into the desert just to experience what it was like. I was very careful not to go too far, in case I could not find my way back. What shook me was the solitude and quietness. There was no wind and only the occasional bird coming near. Everything else is stripped away. One is alone with only God to talk to. It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word *midbar*, translated into English with our word *desert*, is the root of the word to speak, the Hebrew word being *medibear*. The desert is a place where nothing exists but God and His voice seeking to stop us in our tracks. God allows us

to go through times in our lives where we are humbled and tested, where everything we seem to do is barren and unproductive. Why? So that He may get our attention! It’s not that God needs to know what’s in your heart; He knows everything about us already. It’s that we need to know what is in our hearts and turn to Him, learning to lean on His resources. We can only change when we see our hearts the way God sees us.

The Overflow of John the Baptist’s Heart.

At the right time in the program of God, around the age of 30, John the Baptist started his ministry of calling the people to repentance. How God did it I don’t know, but God began bringing crowds of people out into the desert to hear John the Baptist speak of a baptism of repentance. His message began in the desert of Judea and was:

² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” ³ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him’” (Matthew 3:2-3).

Luke tells us that Jews came from Jerusalem, a distance of at least 16 miles to the nearest part of the River Jordan, if indeed that was the place where he baptized. Luke further tells us that he went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. If you were to suddenly be transported to the area right now you would find it a barren wilderness. This is the area just north of where the Dead Sea scrolls were found. It is a barren wilderness at the lowest place on earth at 1300 feet below sea level. Even during the winter it is very cold at night, but terribly hot during the day. Yet God brought the people to be baptized by John.

Luke mentions that there were crowds of people being baptized by him (Luke 3:7). How did John the Baptist take this popularity? A man’s words reveal where his heart is, but we do not find John enamored with his success at all. He points away from himself at every opportunity. When the leading Jews sent priests and Levites to check out if he was Elijah, John was quick to say, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” The Prophet was a man that God promised would come. He would be like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15) and God said that He would hold everyone accountable who would not listen to His words (Deuteronomy 18:18-19). Jesus is

the Prophet that God would send, the initiator of a covenant between God and Man. John was quick to admit that he was not the Prophet. “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” (John 1:22).

What would be your confession about your Christian life so far? Who are you? Does your manner of life reflect what God is making you to be? What do you say about yourself? Where have you come from and what is your purpose?

John makes no claim other than being a voice calling in the desert; to make straight the way of the Lord. Jesus tells us in each of the other three gospels that the Pharisees and leaders of the people did not believe John had been authorized by God to baptize (Matthew 21:26; Mark 11:31; Luke 20:5). The leaders of the Jews thought that they had cornered the market on religion in Israel, and they certainly had not authorized John to do something that was unheard of in Israel, baptizing Jews for repentance. The only people that were baptized at that time were those Gentiles wanting to convert to Judaism. The religious leaders and Pharisee’s saw no need for the cleansing of baptism. The overflow of John’s heart was the statement that he wasn’t worthy to perform the most menial of tasks such as loosing the Messiah’s sandal thongs, a task no disciple was ever expected to perform for their Rabbi.

Are you in a dry, desert place in your spiritual walk at the moment? Share your present experience with one another. We will pray for one another at the end of our time.

What is the need for a forerunner before Christ comes?

More than five hundred years before John the Baptist appeared on the scene, the prophet Isaiah prophesied that his ministry would be to clear the path and soften the hearts of the people for when the promised Messiah (Christ) would show up. Isaiah said:

³ A voice of one calling in the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain” (Isaiah 40:3-5).

Merrill Tenney in his commentary helps us here:

“The Imagery was taken from the days when there were no paved roads, only tracks across fields. If a king were to travel, the road must be built and smoothed out that the royal chariot might not find the travelling unduly rough, nor be swamped in mire.” ²

Many of us, along with the Israelites in the days of John the Baptist, have walked in the desert too long. We go from valley to mountain tops in our experience of walking through this life. We are up and then down again. It’s time for the path ahead of us to be leveled out, the valley raised up and the hills made lower, that our rough ground should be smooth. John’s main message was for all men everywhere to: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matthew 3:2). Repentance does this for us. Many of us carry too much baggage with us on the journey, and it’s time to throw off every weight that causes us to stumble on the path before us.

What is repentance and what value does it have in the Christian life?

Repentance literally means a change of mind, leading to a change of direction. C.H. Spurgeon, the great British preacher, once said, “Sin and hell are married unless repentance proclaims the divorce. God has nowhere undertaken to forgive a sin that man is not prepared to forsake.” Repentance digs up the roots of things that hold us captive to our sins. Often there needs to be repentance accompanied with a heart felt hatred of the things that bring bitter poison to our spirit and thought life.

¹⁸ Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the LORD our God to go and worship the gods of those nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison (Deuteronomy 29:18).

Our enemy, Satan, seeks to hold us to our sins by a Christianity that has never truly repented and forsaken things that have held us fast to our sin. Sometimes it may require you to do like what John the Baptist said:

⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ **Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.** And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We

² Merril C. Tenney, John: The Gospel of Belief (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Erdmans Publishing, p.79.)

have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” ¹⁰ “What should we do then?” the crowd asked. ¹¹ John answered, “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.” ¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?” ¹³ “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them. ¹⁴ Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay” (Luke 3:7-13).

Perhaps something you have done has hurt another—then maybe you need to go to the one that has been hurt and ask for forgiveness. You also may need to pay restitution. I remember as a young Christian not being able to get peace within my heart after I had unwittingly towed my trawl nets over the top of another fisherman’s nets that were fixed at a certain place. I only realized I had damaged them when the dawn came. I thought I had a legitimate reason because I was fishing at night and I couldn’t see them. God had other ideas! He had me go to the house of the owner of the nets and pay cash for brand new nets. True repentance is of the will and not just of the heart. Your life will begin to change as the Spirit of God puts His finger on areas of your life that He wants for you to deal with. My advice is for you to ask God which areas of your life He would have you deal with and create a strategy or habit that would bring that area under Christ’s control.

Character traits of John the Baptist:

1. No Compromise. John the Baptist was no man pleaser! There was no compromising of his faith. When King Herod took his brother Phillip’s wife as his own, John the Baptist rebuked him and told him it was not lawful, even though he knew what kind of man Herod was. John stood unshakable in his

faith and did not compromise his core beliefs, even before an angry king, telling him it was not lawful for him to have his brother’s wife. His uncompromising faith cost him his life.

- 2. He gave away his congregation.** When certain men came to John the Baptist telling him that Jesus’ disciples were baptizing, and everyone is going to him (John 3:36), John’s attitude was full of joy at such news. He said in response, “He must become greater; I must become less” (John 3:30). This is a great truth for us too. Christ in us must have the preeminence and our way must grow less and less important.
- 3. A witness to the substitutionary Lamb of God.** The Jews believed and still teach that the suffering servant passage of Isaiah 53, referred to the nation of Israel. John the Baptist assured them that the Lamb of God was in their midst, the one who would take away the sin of the world. People stopped following John and began to follow Christ due to the witness of John. A true man of God points to the Savior and away from himself.
- 4. His Humility.** A person’s words indicate where his heart is. John called himself just a voice in the desert, a servant that’s not worthy to untie his master’s shoes, and one that is committed to pointing to the Savior and getting out of the way. We would do well to imitate him. To do that we don’t need to go to the desert. That’s not where God has called us. He’s called us to be a learner (disciple) and a witness to what God has done in us.

Pray for one another towards the end of your time. Especially pray for those who especially felt that they were in a desert place and needed to hear God for something that they are going through. If God has spoken to you about an area of your life that you feel is still rooted to sin, repent, turn around from your sin and ask God for His help.

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